Historic Christianity and the Redevelopment of the 21st Century Academic Library

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“I think it is now clear that Christian liberal arts colleges have turned out to be more liberal than Christian. It is not my particular interest in this essay to try to understand why the Christian liberal arts college has failed to sustain itself as Christian; rather, I begin to explore what a Christian university might look like.” (Hauerwas, 2009, p. 15)

Expanding on Hauerwas, but not inappropriately so, I believe, I have no interest in this essay to try to understand why the Christian liberal arts college library, like its sponsoring institution, has failed to sustain itself as Christian. Indeed, I expect to show that the Christian liberal arts college library, unlike what many Christian colleges have attempted, has never been much concerned with establishing itself, let alone sustaining itself, as Christian except, perhaps, in some personally-focused behavioristic ways.

To be sure, there have been, historically, many Christian influences on the library. An especially useful summary of these influences is in Tucker (2000). However, my concern here is to look at some aspects of the historic Christian *weltanschauung*, or world-life view, and to consider the ways in which they could, in theory, affect the redevelopment of the academic library, whether in Christian or non Christian institutions. A Christian theoretical perspective is useful and important. By itself, however, it does not mean that those professing it will take responsible action. Christianity has always been about right belief *and* right action. And so I will attempt to connect Christian theory with library design and student learning, actions informed by that theory, which enlarge and enrich their learning or, increasingly, make it possible.

The reader will immediately ask, no doubt, why does the library need to be redesigned? Indeed, is higher education not about to abandon the academic library as it now exists? The long answer is found in McDonald (2011). A (much) shorter version follows.

The future of the academic library is increasingly in question. A cursory review of relevant literature reveals mounting efforts to predict this future and to shape library activities to respond to various imagined futures. Many of the discussions on the library-in-the-future presume a foundation for this library on various elaborations of information technology and information literacy.

In contrast, I maintain that the future of the library is unknowable and, in any event, information technologies and information literacy are an inadequate foundation on which to establish a library, especially in an academic institution. Rather than trying to predict an unknowable future for their libraries, students and teachers are much better served by libraries reestablished on student learning and on related activities that serve student learning at the intersection of information and learning, especially, reading, writing, and critical thinking. In my view, these are the three most important information-seeking skills, which many students cannot do well, for which they are not prepared in their secondary education, and which colleges do little to remedy.

Among the latest pieces of evidence for this is in Arum and Roksa, *Academically Adrift*, (2011). The key finding in their study is that in the first two years of college, forty-five percent of students surveyed showed no improvement in a widely used measure of learning achievement, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). As the authors state, “Growing numbers of students are sent to college at increasingly higher costs, but for a large proportion of them the gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication are either exceedingly small or empirically nonexistent.” (p. 121)

Alcohol, sex, and parties notwithstanding, students do not attend college to gather information and to become information literate. They come to learn, to make sense of their

experiences, to prepare for living well, which requires knowledge and skills and insight. And it is as learners that libraries should address them, seeking to give them the insights and skills required to learn well, a set of activities and processes the library necessarily shares with “classroom” instructors, and which is formed and guided by the institution’s curricula.

These professional assumptions and conditions, of course, are arguable. However, given this set of circumstances, how do we get from historic Christianity to libraries established on “real” student learning needs and the related needs of their teachers? What is there in or about Christianity that leads us to this? Is it a necessary conclusion? Would it be possible to argue from a Christian world-life view to the present model of academic libraries (admittedly in decline) or to a “future” model anchored in technology and the “literacies” associated with this model? Before this discussion, I need to describe and define some words I will use throughout the remainder of the paper.

The expression “historic Christianity” is sometimes used as shorthand, meaning the liturgical churches which preceded the Reformation and which, in most cases, continue today, in parallel with the church bodies that grew out of the Reformation. Thus the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and the various churches and denominations of the Saint Thomas Christians in India, for example, are considered “historic Christian” ones. My concern, however, is not with denominations or churches, but with a broad and common set of thought, convictions, and actions that have typified Christians and have been taught by them from the beginning (tradition) and which are rooted in and cluster around the Bible: the Old Testament (the Jewish *Tanach*), and the New Testament, both *Tanach* and New Testament being equally authoritative, divinely inspired, and in tandem with “Creation,” or the physical world, are “God’s Word.”

At the risk of oversimplification, the content of Christian thought and that which constitutes a Christian world-life view comes from the Bible—scripture—and, just as importantly, from Creation, the natural world. In Christian teaching, neither stands independent of the other and neither contradicts the other, because both together are God’s creative and interpretative Word: the word that brought everything into being and the word that gives creation its meaning and significance. And, that word is not ink on papyrus or a voice. It is a person, the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ.

So far, then, God created the world and all forms of life, including its human inhabitants. However, we do not need to get mired in a discussion on the processes God used to create or how long it might have taken God to create the world or whether creation is ongoing. The relevant points for my argument are that for the “historic” Christian, God created, he is sovereign over all he has created, and that he created human beings, male and female, to be his representative “rulers” in the world he made, to learn it, to manage it, to discover what lies latent in it, to be creative with what he has made, and because he is a spirit and “has not a body like man” to be those through whom he accomplishes his work on earth. God creates and gives his creation to men and women to manage. The biblical image for this management is that of a gardener caring for a garden and extends to every aspect of life. Nothing is excluded, not even 21st Century academic libraries.

God’s rule over all his creation is also called the “Kingdom of God,” a concept with multiple and layered meanings, with roots well into ancient Israelite history, and over which Christians have argued since the time of Jesus. For our purposes, I will use the expression, Kingdom of God as Christians have typically thought of it: God’s sovereign rule over every aspect of life. Accordingly, all human beings, by virtue of their creation, are “tasked” with

discovering, uncovering, God's way in every aspect of life, no detail omitted. Greatly simplified, it means learning creation, learning the ways that God has created for life to move forward and succeed.

Abraham Kuyper, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands at the turn of the Twentieth Century, founder of the Free University of Amsterdam, and an outstanding educator, politician, trade unionist, newspaper editor, and Protestant Reformed clergyman and theologian, on the occasion of the opening of the Free University, remarked, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine!" Which in one sentence establishes the starting point for historical Christian thought and from which and within which I will argue for an academic library established for student learning success.

However, and this next observation is critical for a Christian understanding of how the Kingdom might extend into academic libraries, the Kingdom—God's rule on earth—has been and continues to be challenged and rejected by men and women who do not want God's rule for their lives. The consequence of this has been widespread injustice on earth, injustice for all aspects of God's creation: human, animal, plant, the earth itself, and all relationships among these, including students and teachers and librarians. At the risk of getting overly theological, God's response to this human rejection of his ways (which also affects all of creation, animal, vegetable, and mineral) was and is to address the core spiritual reasons for this rejection and consequent injustice, and to renew his kingdom on earth. Perfect justice is the foundation of this renewed kingdom, God's Kingdom (also referred to by Christians as Christ's Kingdom).

Anything less, any disorder or irregularity in the administration of this justice means a greater or lesser loss of God's created goodness for the various dimensions of creation. This goodness is frequently referred to as shalom, the Hebrew word for peace-as-flourishing, a state of being or existence when everything "works" in the way the Creator established, or is tending toward this state. When Christians pray, "Thy Kingdom come," they are praying for the justice and shalom that will both bring the renewed Kingdom more and more fully into being and which will be the main conditions under which the Kingdom will prosper, partly so in this life and fully so in the "new heavens and new earth," which, in the Christian story, will follow when God has ended all "rebellion" against his rule.

Shalom is established on justice and is accomplished, imperfectly but in a real way through the work of humans, Christian and non Christian, for example, Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi. Or, in college libraries, it is sought by teachers and librarians (one hopes in very real and practical ways) who seek justice and shalom for their students, in their learning and preparation for life. These twin and interlocking constructs, justice and shalom, and how they can be applied in college and university libraries, will form the rest of my discussion in this paper.

At it simplest, justice means giving someone what he or she deserves or has a right to. And it is in this uncomplicated sense that I use "justice," here. To enter into a discussion on a broader meaning of justice is beyond the scope of this paper. Likewise with "shalom." I use shalom to mean a condition of human flourishing that is anchored to the way God created people, things, and relationships to function. Both constructs, "shalom" and "justice," have a large literature associated with them and, in my view, the best guide to them within the Christian tradition, and especially within higher education, is Nicholas Wolterstorff, a Yale professor

emeritus of philosophy, but also long associated with the Reformed Protestant tradition embodied in Calvin College. Especially noteworthy is his recent title, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2008).

How, then, might we think of shalom for students at the intersection of their learning and formal information, that is, in the library? Several conditions, it seems to me, need to be in place for this to happen. One, the library must be (re)established on a foundation of a well-informed understanding of student learning. Librarians (especially) and teachers and institutional administrators need to accept that the library should be designed and function as an essential, integral, and empirically demonstrable element in student learning. A student, especially the undergraduate, comes to the university to learn (leaving aside the contemporary anomaly of the student as a consumer collecting a credential) and has a right to all that the university offers to support and inform his or her learning. The Christian student, furthermore, is being formed as whole person in God's image, by his or her learning. Similarly, non Christian students are being formed as persons who reflect their deepest convictions about what is important and valuable in their lives.

Two, the library's mission, accordingly, is to create conditions and circumstances at the intersection of learning and information, which will privilege students' academic success, and not that of the library's "collections", systems, technologies and their "literacies." Three, as they relate to information, the library must address student learning needs as they are, not what the library thinks they should be. The most important and basic information seeking and handling competencies are reading, writing, and critical thinking. If students cannot read, write, and think well, it is unjust to expect them to find, evaluate, and apply information well in their various assignments. Four, the library must understand that it is the other half of the "classroom," and

that its “collections” and teaching- and learning-related activities should be guided by the institution’s curricula and teachers’ pedagogies. This requires a very close relationship between information professional and classroom instructor. Five, the library must be assessed in terms of its contribution to how well students learn in the context of their courses and other learning experiences in the college.

Given these five conditions, what might the 21st Century academic library look like? In the paragraphs below, I will attempt to sketch the lines of my vision of an academic organization and its services that can help secure “information” justice for the student and contribute to shalom at the intersection of learning and information. For a more detailed description, I refer the reader to my paper (McDonald, 2011).

The library is envisioned as the laboratory for the entire curriculum. It is no longer the campus bookshelf or the access point for electronic information and it is no longer *sui generis*, that is, its own reason for existence. Instead, it sustains a relationship to the “classroom” that is analogous to the relationship between laboratory science “lecture” sections and the laboratory.

The library is no longer called the “library.” Although I hope a more apt and imaginative name may emerge, I call the redesigned and redeveloped library, the information and learning center (ILC), and its mission, working closely with “classroom” instructors, is to connect student learning with information within the context of the students learning and as an extension of the teacher’s pedagogy. The mission is also to teach information seeking skills: reading, writing, and critical thinking, but always in the context of the disciplines and always aware of and responsive to individual teacher’s methodologies and objectives. Thus, the ILC becomes the locus for reading and writing instruction, but not as a remedial program. Students are taught the protocols

of discipline-based reading and writing, instruction now largely absent from a college's curricula.

However, and most importantly, the ILC is also the center for the development of a student's critical thinking skills, again, in the context of the "classroom" and an instructor's objectives for his or her students' learning. Information is not a "neutral" or "objective" commodity "out there" in the intellectual "cloud." Information is always associated with created entities and, for the Christian as well as the non Christian, can never be value-free or "neutral" in a world, which as Abraham Kuyper asserted for Christians, Jesus claims every square inch, or, as the Psalmist expresses it, "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Successful learning depends on recognizing and evaluating the perspectives and biases in information and also depends on learners recognizing the perspectives and biases they bring to their search for information. Students need to be taught this, again, in the context of their curriculum-directed learning. There is no such thing as merely finding information.

Staffing the ILC will require creating a new kind of instructional faculty, the information and learning specialist (ILS), who will replace the librarian with a master's degree. Some library-like activities will necessarily remain part of the ILC, but, these can be accomplished by staff with undergraduate degrees in "information" or by paraprofessionals with specific training in various aspects of what is now known as library or "academic" information science. The ILS will be educated through the doctorate and will focus on teaching reading, writing, and high order information and knowledge handling and application skills in the various disciplines. They will also teach the skills required for students to critique information technology. These instructors can come from a variety of backgrounds, including master's degree-credentialed academic

librarians, unemployed and underemployed liberal arts graduates with doctorates, and the large numbers of contingent faculty.

The overarching objective of the ILC and its staff is to create a full set of opportunities and experiences for students at the intersection of their learning and “information,” and to do so in ways that will help form the student’s insight and character, which will lead to his or her flourishing as a learner and a person. In so doing, the library, now the information and learning center, and the librarian, now the information and learning specialist, will continue the long Christian tradition of enabling and enhancing learning as an essential element for the shalom that God desires for his creation.

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Biography

In his immediate past position, Dr. McDonald served as director of library services and professor of information systems in Malone University, Canton, Ohio. Earlier, he held appointments as director of libraries in Pepperdine and Long Island Universities, and in several liberal arts colleges, including Sheldon Jackson College, an historic Alaska institution organized for service to Alaska Natives. His graduate training was taken in Drexel University, and with Lynda Basney Micikas, a developmental biologist, is the author of *Academic libraries: the dimensions of their effectiveness* (Greenwood, 1994). He lives with his family on a small farm in northwest Tennessee. Electronic correspondence may be addressed to 57.1n135.3w@gmail.com