Institute for Christian Teaching

Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

DIMENSIONS OF THE INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND LEARNING: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

Lionel Matthews

Andrews University

Berrien Springs, Michigan

Prepared for the

24th International Faith and Learning Seminar

held at

Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, U.S.A.

June 20 - July 2, 1999

376-99 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA

There is a considerable yet growing literature on the integration of faith and learning. Though the documentation of this literature is fairly recent, the application of the faith/learning concept (in so far as this term is taken to mean the interfacing of the sacred and the secular) is recognizable in educational practice of a much earlier time. Before the Middle Ages, religion and learning seemed inseparable, with the focus of education being on the impartation of literacy skills to enable students to document, among other things, the principles of their faith (see Badley, 1994).

But this close union between the formal process of learning and religion was to be somewhat derailed upon the Enlightenment project which emphasized the distinction between empirical rationality and faith. The Enlightenment project demonstrated a clear preference for empirical rationality, and thus for the secularization of the educative process. One consequence of this emphasis was the strong secular orientation that characterized higher education during the 18th and 19th centuries. Consequently, in the early years of the 20th century many universities in the United States of America and Canada were opting for totally secular curricula. This had the effect of undermining the confidence of fundamentalists in the education system, and in their calling for a sharp separation between secular learning and religion.

However, following the second World War, the advent of the evangelical movement with its more inclusive theological posture and benign view of higher education, paved the way for the current surge of interest in the integration of faith and learning. Evangelicals, unlike their fundamentalists counterparts, were interested in the interplay between religion and the rest of the

society. As a result of their efforts new seminaries and liberal arts colleges came into being. (Carpenter and Shipps, 1984). These schools sought neither to isolate themselves from the then extant academic issues, nor to have their identity buried in these issues, but they rather strove to encourage dialogue, while maintaining their conservative theological stance.

It was during this period, and subsequently, that serious attempts have been made to articulate the meaning, both conceptually and operationally, of the integration of faith and learning. Beginning with Blamires 1950, a number of scholars (Ryan 1950; Gaebelein 1954; Holmes 1975; Heil and Wolf; 1963, 1987; Sikora 1966; Wilkes 1981; Beck 1991; etc.) have attempted, in various ways, to delineate the parameters of the concept. Yet, I believe, Badley (1994) echoes the position of many, when he notes that this concept represents "a slogan in serious need of unpacking". (p.17).

This paper responds to the need for greater clarity in the meaning of the integration of faith and learning. The purpose is to advance the discourse on the meaning of faith/learning integration by looking at this concept through the lens of the sociologist, delineating three ways in which we may fruitfully talk about the concept. My sociological lens will impose an interactional focus on the discussion which will be attempted against the overarching conceptual backdrop of the redemptive process.

Conceptual Background

Conceptualized within the framework of the Christian worldview, education responds to the challenge of the human condition. The Bible describes our condition as sinful, short of the glory of God, and fruitless of good works (Rom. 3:25). It paints a picture of brokenness and

fractured relationships, not only in terms of our estrangement from God but also in our adversarial relationship with one another.

The Genesis account (Gen 3:10) captures this disconnect in its depiction of Adam and Eve, fearful and conscious of their nakedness, hiding from God; and of the first human offspring, Cain, having killed his brother, Abel, remonstrating with God over his responsibility as his brother's keeper (Gen 4:9). The first human family has thus been plunged into an existential crisis in which each is isolated, both vertically (from God) and horizontally (from each other), from the interactional media only through which the human person experiences the essence of his/her being. The death knell for the human family has thus been sounded; for outside of the God/human interactional process, the human person perishes. The apostle Paul, indeed, has pointed out that it is in "Him [God] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). But it is within the flow of the human/human interactional context that this God/human interaction becomes meaningful, plausible and demonstrable.

This is the story of the incarnation. It was to reestablish this God/human connection and to set in motion the process of de-alienated human/human interchange that Christ became incarnated (the God/human reconnect) and dwelt (became a part of the human/human interactional process) among us (John 1:14). His was the mission of addressing the brokenness of the human condition; of, as the apostle pointed out, "reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:14). This divine initiative aimed at the restoration of the human family to oneness with God and to each other "has been committed to us", teachers, (2 Cor. 5:19) for perpetuity. Ellen White (1903) is clear in her characterization of the work of education when she notes that 'the

work of education and the work of redemption are one' (p.30). It is within this context and against this conceptual overview that I wish to engage this discussion on the "Dimensions of the Integration of Faith and Learning from a Sociological Perspective".

For the purpose of the discussion, the integration of faith and learning will refer to any activity or phenomenon in the teaching/learning situation, including concept/process deconstruction, teaching strategy, curriculum content, or personal influence, that promotes and facilitates the growth of faith in the human/divine interactional process. Faith/learning integration is here viewed as a process outcome and focuses on the teaching/learning dynamic in so far as it impacts upon students attitude towards the redemptive process. In this light, integration will be deemed to have taken place if the interplay of forces attendant upon the teaching/learning situation results in behaviors and attitudes that facilitate the God/human and human/human reconnect, the restorative process.

Given the foregoing backdrop, I wish to suggest three ways by which we may approach the integration of faith and learning in the teaching/learning situation.

(i) The integration of faith and learning as institution building through values transmission and the facilitating of faith commitments.

(ii) The integration of faith and learning as deconstruction of dichotomous constructs.

(iii) The integration of faith and learning as the integration of knowing and doing.

The Integration of Faith and Learning as Institution Building, through Value Transmission and The Securing of Faith Commitments

One of the more obvious connotations of the integration of faith and learning is the view regarding the subsumption of the curricular content and methodology under the Christian worldview. Teachers, according to this perspective, integrate faith and learning when they include biblical ideas about the world and phenomena therein in the teaching of the various areas of the curriculum. More specifically, this model of the integration of faith and learning, as I understand it, requires that the doctrinal beliefs and practices of particular religious institutions be taught as the legitimate, practical and true way to know God and to receive salvation. This process results in, and indeed has as its ultimate objective, the facilitating of faith commitments to a particular worldview - a process referred to in this paper as institution building. Though some may disagree with this position, its usefulness in a pluralistic, post-modern era cannot be overemphasized.

The plethora of perspectives that now present themselves to the individual in modern society easily thrusts one without an anchoring position into a situation of anomie and the concomitant state of unease and meaninglessness. But it is not the mere preference of one perspective over others that is of critical moment here, it is rather how that perspective is "passed on"; how students are guided and facilitated in their adoption of that perspective.

While we should not underestimate the importance of the communicated content, the centrality of the method of its communication to the receptivity of, and subsequent effect on, the recipient should be noted. Communicated ideas by themselves can be cold and meaningless. It

is the context of their communication that makes the difference. How ideas are received and evaluated (whether they are received and treasured or listened to and discarded) is largely a function of the interactional medium through which they become known. The end state of ideas are thus critically contingent upon the means of their communication. Accordingly, if teachers will succeed in passing on the Christian worldview and its associated values then the strategies employed for their transmission must take a cue from this principle.

Towards this end respect for the individual as a free moral agent is paramount, and requires the adoption of teaching strategies that empower the agency of the student and remove the possibility of him/her becoming a "mere reflector of other men's thoughts" (White 1903, p.12). Compliance with this approach helps the teacher steer clear of the much maligned brainwashing, a process that utilizes the one-sided, banking concept of education and thus encourages the unreflecting and indiscriminate imbibing of ideas by the student. In this connection I find Palmer's (1983) characterization of teaching as the creation "of a space in which obedience to truth is practiced" (p. 69) to be most instructive. Obedience to truth cannot be coerced or dictated; it must be negotiated and agreed upon within an open interactional milieu. Thus the learning space for Palmer is appropriately characterized by openness, boundaries, and hospitality.

Teachers who utilize this view of teaching demonstrate openness in the care exercised in examining and removing personal and situational barriers to learning. Related efforts in this vein target areas such as students' motivation, teachers' perception and expectations of student performance, institutional policies, etc. When learning is open, students and teachers experience

a sense of freedom and are motivated to continue in the teaching/learning relationship. Boundaries, on the other hand, ensure that the sense of freedom to act and think does not descend to realms of confusion and chaos. Finally, Palmer posits that the hospitality dimension of the created learning space will make for classrooms "where every stranger and every strange utterance is met with welcome" (p. 24) and where the necessarily painful aspects of teaching, such as the exposing of ignorance, the challenging of false or partial information, among others, is borne with pleasure. A teaching/learning environment of this sort, whatever the content communicated, truly hallmarks the kind of interactional milieu that forges the human/divine reconnect and advances the dealienation process between people indicative of this reconnect.

Institution building through value transmission and the facilitating of faith commitments when attempted in this way is not only defensible but commendable as well. In such a learning space the following features are easily recognizable.

1. Teachers are as teachable as much as they expect their charges to be.
2. There is mutual respect between teachers and students.
3. Teachers are sensitive to individual peculiarities including learning styles and adopts appropriate measures to meet each need.
4. Teachers demonstrate a loving, caring, non-judgmental attitude towards students.
5. Collaborative rather than competitive efforts are emphasized.
6. Teachers create an environment sufficiently flexible to allow for creativity but which has enough structure to engender a sense of safety;

7. Teachers are patient, thoughtful, forbearing, and accepting of each other (This is of special significance since it set the pace for such interaction between students.
8. Students are cooperative, respectful, caring, and forgiving;
9. Love pervades the entire atmosphere.

Faith/learning Integration as Deconstruction of Dichotomous Construct

The challenge of the human condition is evident not only in the human/God and the human/human relational disconnect discussed earlier, but also in the constructs and categories that we have generated and employ as tools in our understanding of the world about us. It is through words that the reality of our spiritual and social alienation is conveyed. And it is also through words that that reality is subtly perpetuated through encoded messages. Words are not phenomena neutral; they illuminate the meaning of some phenomena while masking the properties of others. This is especially true of certain categories and dichotomies.

The use of dichotomies and dualities to describe phenomena not only obscures our understanding of these phenomena but also obstructs the interactional process in so far as this process draws on these ideas. My own discipline, sociology, is riddled with a full share of these dichotomies: the individual and society; agency and structure; the micro and macro; to name only a few. Despite attempts to de-emphasize the socially imposed lines of demarcation between these constructs and efforts aimed at pointing out their dialectical nature, notions of their distinctiveness still persists. The truth is that once we have given meanings to and imposed boundaries around dichotomous constructs, the process of social sedimentation sets in to ensure

their permanence. In other words, once meanings have been constructed and are in usage, attitudes tend to become ossified around them. Hence we come to treat constructed categories as if they existed on their own and independent of us. Such rigid views of dichotomies and categories ignore their socially constructed nature and impose upon them a false permanence. Indeed, to treat ideas as if they were self-perpetuating and as if they existed outside the confines of time and circumstance is to attribute to them divine qualities. This is why I believe it to be most important that Christian teachers be able to deal with dichotomies and categories in a constructive way, with a touch of the sociological imagination, if you please. A grasp of the sociological imagination enables one to appreciate that social interaction and the associated processes (for example category generation, etc.) flow from the interplay between the particular circumstances of individuals' lives and the wider social context in which these individuals live. (see Mills 1953). In other words the ways in which people act, the things they make and preserve, destroy or remake, whether tangible or non-tangible, are all influenced by their personal background and the larger socio-cultural milieu in which they transact.

The ability to make this connection, I wish to argue, is germane to the reconciliatory role to which teachers have been called. A major feature of that role has to do with disabusing the mind of notions and ideas that distort the human/divine relationship. An accurate account of that relationship will present humans as "co-creators", in the social sense. But this relationship is denied by the subject/object dichotomy, and to that extent, a true understanding of the reconciliation process in which God seeks to return humankind to their original relationship with Him is blurred.

Let us now examine this subject/object dichotomous category and point out where it both limits our understanding of phenomena and impedes the interaction process. These terms have split academe right down the middle. They represent two "visions" of reality, with the inherent presupposition that these visions are mutually exclusive. Those of the objectivist vision, positivists, posit a reality that is "out there" and independent of our doing, while those of the subjectivist orientation, constructivists, contend that reality is not independent of the subject. Positivists therefore advocate a method of knowing that is detached and impersonal, arguing that, since what is to be known lies outside the inquiring mind, deliberate efforts must be exercised to keep the subjectivity (feelings, emotions, and biases) of the inquirer from contaminating the knowing process. The constructivists have rejected this formula of knowing, pointing out that what becomes known cannot be independent of the characteristics of the knowing mind and is therefore partly a function of that mind. What is of interest is the view that knowledge that emerges from the application of the positivist approach should be accepted as legitimate and scientifically valid, whereas knowledge arrived at outside of this process should not be so deemed.

That the logic that informs this dichotomous treatment of the process of knowing is flawed is a point not too difficult to grasp. This is especially true in the case of the social world. In particular, the separateness imposed by the positivist upon the relationship between the known and the knower is of such that it denies any creative interaction between the two. The knower simply takes in an already completely created meaning order, with its ready-made categories, constructs and all.

From this perspective, the world was so complete after God created it that Adam, the first of our kind, had nothing to do but accept its completeness. He did not even name the animals as the Bible suggests (Genesis 2:20) nor was he given the task to keep (maintain) and dress (improve on) the garden (Genesis 2:15). Or even if he was so assigned, the names (and may I add here that the naming of the world is an eminently creative process) for the animals were already provided by God. Adam had merely to read them aloud. Or in the case of dressing the garden, God had a full list of "things to do" for Adam, which he merely implemented. In this way he, Adam, would have been the perfect reflector of the mind of God, a sort of divine-oriented robot, with faculties to reflect but not to think. This of course is quite the opposite of what it means to reflect the mind, and act in the image, of God. God's is, among other things, a creative mind, a mind that originates, and restoration in the image of God does imply a restoration of our capacity to be creative and original. Hence knowledge of the restoration of God's image in humankind involves not only recognition of the co-creative role of humans in this divine initiative, but also identification of the divine/human collaborative interchange in progress. But the object/subject divide does not allow for an appreciation of this phenomenon and certainly denies its reality.

Whereas positivists present a reality that implies the non-participation of humans in its construction, constructivists blunder in the opposite extreme in positing a reality that is the mere construction of humans. From the viewpoint of the latter position, God and other extraterrestrial life forms, such as angels, are but social creations; figments of the imagination, and therefore have no existence independent of the subjective construction of social actors. Thus, while the

objectivist view denies our participatory role in the creative/recreative process, the subjectivist vision leaves us without the empowering and transforming power of an objective God whose existence remains separate and independent of our doings.

Teachers facilitate clarity of understanding of, and faith in the restorative process when they utilize collaborative teaching/learning techniques and identify and deconstruct (point out the social nature of their constituents) dichotomies that deny and obscure understanding of this process. It is my contention therefore that when teachers teach in this way, it leads to learning outcomes that nourish faith in the ongoing restorative process that reconnects humankind to God and to one another.

The Integration of Faith and Learning as the Integration of Ideals and Deeds

The ultimate test of our capacity to integrate faith and learning relates to the degree to which we are able to allow the principles and the truths we have internalized to inform our daily practice. This is why I believe that the transfer gap that now exists between theory and action; between the prescriptive norms and values and the real norms and values we embrace, constitutes one of the most serious indictment of the Christian worldview. Indeed, confidence in the efficacy of the restorative plan put in motion for our reconnection to God and to each other stands critically challenged in the face of this divide. Much of the institution building we effect and the conceptual gaps righted will presently come to nought without the confirming evidence of genuine praxis. What therefore appears as the quintessential role of Christian teachers is that of demonstrating evidence and identifying ways of action that underscore the possibility of

authentic Christian praxis; of bridging the gap between the ideals of the Christian faith and the lived experience of Christians. It is upon this 'stuff' (you would pardon the contemporary vulgarism) that commitment grows, disbelief disappears and faith takes a leap. Younger Christians suffocate in its absence, while those of more mature years take solace in cold rationality. We must bridge the gap. But how do we effect this most desirable end? I wish to suggest two ways by which we may fruitfully approach this ideal.

1. Have students apply the theories and principles they have learned to solve/alleviate community problems. Too often learning takes place in a theory tight atmosphere. Not only is the teaching of abstract principles attempted in an abstract manner, without concrete examples, but their relevance to real life situations is veiled by the absence of appropriate projects that address the needs of the surrounding community.

I recall the experience of one school where I taught. Once a year, in our outreach efforts to the community, we sought to apply the principles of thoughtfulness and helpfulness learned in our Bible lessons. Students, as well as teachers, participated in taking flowers and singing for the sick; and in mailing poems, letters, postcards and "thank you" notes to parents, grandparents, and other significant others. Needless to say, this brought a profound sense of fulfillment to the school community, as reports of the feeling of joy and goodwill generated in the community came back. Of course the ways in which this community-outreach action can be expanded and refined are legion, but it represents one simple way in which we sought to translate our 'theories' into practice.

2. Students learn of the possibility of authentic Christian praxis and find fulfillment therein, not only from their own experience of applied theory, as discussed above, but also from the lives of role models. The eagerness and the fixity with which we all attend and listen to others tell their stories of faith in action attest to the value of this vicarious means of faith/learning integration. It is truly a prime means by which the efficaciousness of the empowering capacity of the redemptive process can be demonstrated.

Indeed not only through their stories but also through the lived examples of role models, students come to embrace the possibility of the integration of ideals and deeds. Of especial importance in this regard is the individual and corporate life of the faculty in particular teaching/learning situations. Among the factors that Garber (1996) observed in those students who were able to connect their ideals and their lived experience were (a) their interaction with a teacher who incarnated their worldview, that is, lived what they preached, and (b) their forging of links with others whose lives were embedded in their worldview (p. 111). While I do not wish to suggest that the motivation to live a coherent life of faith derives exclusively from the lived experiences of others, this factor, given the social nature of behavior, emerges as a potent impact variable in this regard.

When teachers propagate values and ideals that are absent in the repertoire of their own conduct, they not only contribute to the cynicism spawned by what Berger (1974) calls the "homeless mind", they undermine faith in the restorative process as well. Often though, it is not the individual lives of teachers that prove disappointing to students who search for real life examples upon which to base their faith; it is rather the corporate life of the institution.

Institutions that come under this fault line are most likely to be those that have succumbed to the bureaucratic spirit, where the rational pursuit of set goals are valued more highly than human relationships. One explanation for this outcome may be attributed to the tendency on the part of human beings to reify socially created objects, i.e. treat them as if they have an existence independent of those who created and maintained them, even at the expense of their human 'creators'. For example, we who administer the operation of social institutions tend to loose sight of the fact that institutional policies and regulatory norms have been generated by institutions (us) to facilitate service to people and not the other way round. Couched within the biblical parallel: we often forget that institutional policies were made for people and not people for institutional policies.

Recognition of this tendency may prove helpful in identifying and eliminating the variables that make for the lack of consistency between ideals and practice at the institutional level. This is especially important given the powerful impact institutions tend to have on those who come under their operation. Because of this impact, people generally take their cue for action from institutional patterns and thus to unconsciously reproduce, sometimes unconsciously, those patterns even when they are not consistent with the worldview of the institution. When this happens students come to loose faith not only in the institution per se but also in the 'vision' for which the institution stands. On the other hand, when the lives of Christian teachers and the dominant patterns of Christian institutions in which those students transact are consistent with the ideals communicated to them, faith flourishes as doubt in the possibility of a coherent life of

faith disappears. Needless to say, such an outcome is generative of faith in the restorative process.

Conclusion

I have sought in this paper to describe three ways in which we may meaningfully speak of the integration of faith and learning. Viewing this concept as institution building through value transmission and the facilitating of faith commitments, I have argued that it is the interactional milieu, rather than the communicated content of this process, that holds the strongest potential for its effectiveness. The second major section of the paper discussed the integration of faith and learning as a deconstruction of dichotomous constructs. Here the object/subject dichotomy was examined and its limitations in aiding our appreciation of social phenomena were pointed out. It was noted that by imposing a rigid division between the knower and the known the positivist model of knowing not only veils our God-given, creative capacity but distorts understanding of our true role in the restorative process. On the other hand it was pointed out that constructuvists in their over emphasis on the socially constructed nature of reality tend towards a denial of a God independent of human construction. It was argued that teachers aid the exercise of faith in the restorative process when they deconstruct and decode dichotomies to reveal ways in which they limit our understanding of and deny our role in that process as well as our view of God.

In the final section of the paper I advanced the view that the integration of faith and learning as a bridging of the ideal and real is the pre-eminent role of Christian teachers. When they fail to meet this challenge, confidence of students in the restorative process is undermined.

The trajectory of this effect was detailed. It is my view that the three approaches to the integration of faith and learning as discussed in this paper represent a meaningful portrayal of some aspects of the parameters of this interactive process.

References

Beck, W. D. (Ed.). 1991. Opening the American Mind. Grand Rapids: Baker.

Berger, Peter, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner. 1974. The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness. NY: Random House/Vintage.

Bhamires, H. 1963. The Christian Mind. NY: Seabury.

Bhamires, H. 1988. Recovering the Christian Mind: Meeting the Challenge of Secularism. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Carpenter, J. A. and K. W. Shipps. (Eds.). 1987. Making Higher Education Christian. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Gaebelein, F. E. 1954. The Pattern of God's Truth: Problems of Integration in Christian Education. NY: Oxford University Press.

Gangel, K. O. (Ed.). 1983. Toward a Harmony of Faith and Learning. Detroit: William Tyndale College Press.

Garber, Steven. 1996. The Fabric of Faithfulness. IL: InterVarsity Press.

Holmes, A. F. 1975. The Idea of a Christian College. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Journal of Research on Christian Education 3(1), Spring 1994.

Mills, C. W. 1959. The Sociological Imagination. London: Oxford University Press.

Nelson, R. R. 1987. Faith-discipline integration: Compatibilist, Reconstructionalist, and Transformationalist Strategies. In Harold Heie and David L. Wolfe (Eds.), The Reality of Christian Learning (pp. 317-39). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Palmer. P. J. 1993. To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey. San Francisco: Harper.

Ryan, J. J. 1950. On the Meaning of Integration. In Roy J. Deferrari (Ed.). 1952. Integration in Catholic Colleges and Universities (pp. 10-25). Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press.

The Bible - King James Version

White, E. G. 1952. Education. CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association.