

Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection: On the Integration of Faith, Epistemology, and Vocation

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Will you pray with me? “Keep, O Lord, we beseech thee, thy household the Church in thy steadfast faith and love, that by the help of thy grace we may proclaim thy truth with boldness, and minister thy justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen”

The faith we share means many things for our vocations. I want to emphasize that it means letting ourselves be changed by the world we want to change.

Jesus redeemed the structures of his society not by Christianizing them but by surrendering himself to them. If integrating our faith with our vocations means articulating a set of Christian axioms and then applying them to today’s debates in epistemology or ethics or architecture or public policy, then our attempts at integration can be of great value for our time. But if the timeless heart of the Gospel is the temporal events of Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, then the essence of integration doesn’t look like rolling out a Christian blueprint for our disciplines; it looks more like ... incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

There are many levels on which our faith can and should be articulated and applied to our vocations: professional ethics, the motivation and framing of our projects, our methods and conclusions, our pedagogy, our ambitions, our exercise of power, our ministry to colleagues, our patterns of life and work and worship. I have thought most about epistemology: what does it mean for a Christian—or for anyone—to understand Muslims or other “Others”? The “epistemology of interpersonal understanding” that I have come up with is, in brief, “relational, recursive, eschatological, and sacrificial.” I won’t go into that in detail now—I could talk your ear off about it later—but the upshot is that understanding human beings across deep religious

(or cultural or political) divides requires putting one's own identity on the line: loving my neighbor as myself requires repeatedly sacrificing interpretive frameworks that underpin both my own identity and my perception of the Other, whenever careful listening forces me to recognize that my frameworks are causing me to hear the Other as I want her to be rather than as she wants to be heard. I call this process "sacrificial listening" because listening to others well involves incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Incarnation. We are not just here to proclaim the truth; a human relationship is a two-way street, and a conversation is a negotiation that requires us to redraw our concepts and redefine our terms in order to communicate with those we seek to understand—much as Jesus took on flesh and first-century Mediterranean culture in order to communicate and listen, serve and be served, love and be loved—to have human relationships. We, like Christ, have a dual identity, and it is rightly shaped as much by our earthly location as by our heavenly citizenship. Harvey Fellows are rightly shaped as much by our secular profession and environment and colleagues as by our Christian presuppositions. In the book we read for my Summer Institute twenty years ago, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf argued that embracing Others requires opening ourselves to their influence and letting our identities be reshaped by them, even when we are profoundly at odds with them. If integration means incarnation, then those around us change us.

Crucifixion. We resist change that threatens our identity, and I believe that is the main reason why we are so bad at really listening to people who are unlike us, and so good at hearing what we want to hear, and squeezing people into mental boxes to keep them from disrupting the security of our own identities. (I think, for example, of Christians who insist on reading Muslims or Jews as legalists because we need someone to be a legalist, lest our liberating grasp of grace turn out to be unexceptional.) Because my identity is partly constituted by how I differentiate myself from others, really listening so that I am forced to revise the grid I use for understanding others risks unsettling my understanding of myself. Sacrificial listening costs us a part of ourselves. It puts us on the path to the cross, whence the Christian identities we have constructed for ourselves will not emerge unscathed. Incarnation leads to crucifixion. Jesus didn't come to win his negotiation with his culture; he lost. His loss was their gain. We must be ready to lose some of our negotiations and debates with our culture if we want our vocations to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

But we believe that crucifixion is the path to resurrection. Loving, serving, and listening to our neighbors, our opponents, our colleagues, and our disciplines—taking on their concerns and categories and dreams, and allowing even their brokenness to shape our thought, work, and art—may cost us a part of our present sense of self, of the vocation we think we have, of the Christian worldview we thought we had all figured out. But our final identity—the David, the Kristen, the Michael, the Shardé that God has known, intended, called, and loved from the foundation of the world—is as secure as the power of the resurrection.

In my relational epistemology, when I revise the conceptual framework that underpins my own identity for the sake of understanding my Muslim neighbor, I am sacrificing cherished parts of how I understand myself, but I am not losing out on who God meant for me to become. My sacrificial attempts at listening will finally give me a true understanding of my neighbor not when I finally give up the last piece of my identity, but precisely when I fully become the person God has always meant for me to be—at the resurrection. That is when we who now see one another “as through a glass, darkly,” will finally know each other face to face, even as we are fully known. And what a glorious communion that will be! All the discord of Babel, the brokenness that mars all human communication and keeps true understanding always just out of reach, will be dispelled in the immediacy of selfless divine love. Our relationships will be perfected precisely when our individual selves are also perfected in the likeness of Christ. I will only really know you, my dear Beth, at the precise moment when I finally know and am the David God has always meant for me to be. My epistemology for understanding other human beings is sacrificial—it imitates the vulnerability of Jesus’ incarnation and the self-sacrifice of his crucifixion—not because I lack confidence in my own Christian identity and faith, but precisely because I have confidence in the hope of the resurrection: the promise that the hits I take to my identity now, for the sake of understanding and serving my neighbor, will someday become a part of my eternal identity in the likeness of Christ.

The same trajectory of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection that guides my listening to Muslims applies equally to my vocational trajectory. The Harvey Fellowship was instrumental in honing my sense that I am called of God to model for the Church and for the secular academy a practice of listening sacrificially to those we disagree with, and my profession has given me a chance to do that. I have a good academic job at the University of Oklahoma, where I have time and resources to fly several times a year to Europe or the Arab world or Indonesia where Muslim intellectuals are gradually inviting me into their own conversations about the future of Islam.

This is a dream come true. And yet I yearn for an academic post overseas where I could mentor Muslim graduate students. Wouldn't that be the best possible setting for engaging the hopes and struggles of Muslim intellectuals? It would entail sacrifices, especially for Beth, but isn't that what God has called me to? So this year I started applying for the handful of senior jobs in my field that open up each year overseas.

What if I never get one? What if sacrificial listening does not generate enough high-impact journal articles to impress the right people? What if I was too transparent about my vocation in my interview for that dream job that I didn't get at Oxford? What if I have to spend the rest of my career teaching introductory classes to vaguely Christian freshmen from small-town Oklahoma and the suburbs of Dallas? What if following Jesus by writing for my Muslim interlocutors' publications instead of for prestigious journals means sacrificing part of that very vocation that I have so diligently sought to integrate with my Christian faith? That would be devastating to my sense of calling and identity.

Serving our fields incarnationally and sacrificially will change the vocations that we described in our Harvey Fellowship applications so many years ago, or not so long ago. It will alter our well-integrated Christian blueprints for our disciplines. It may even demand revisions to our understanding of the Gospel and its implications for society. And that is an unnerving prospect. Letting others change you is scary, especially when you aren't sure that you have the discernment to know exactly when to yield and when to push back. But if the unchanging heart of the Gospel is not a set of Christian axioms or a well-integrated worldview but rather the event of Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, then following Christ's example by entering into and taking upon ourselves the concerns, perspectives, and limitations of our non-Christian colleagues and opponents—letting them set the terms of our debates, letting our vocations and even our identities be reshaped by them so that we become more like them than we ever would have felt comfortable imagining—that is in fact the only safe path, and we may pursue it recklessly. We do not need to hold back just to protect ourselves, our callings, or even our faith, for we cannot lose our true selves, our true callings, or our faith by following Jesus. We can afford to surrender aspects of our worldviews, our premises, and our very identities, because God will redeem the structures of our disciplines not only through our brilliant Christian contributions but also and especially through our vulnerability, through our openness to being proved wrong, and through our courage to put our own identities and vocations at risk in order that we might hear and serve our non-Christian neighbors more sacrificially.

Not that we should simply surrender our convictions, our callings, or our Christian visions for our fields. We may often get them wrong, but we should strive with might and main to get them right! We are called to articulate the Gospel's challenging implications for our disciplines and our world. If our heart's desire is to see the structures of society redeemed and the City of God built up, then we must build with precious stones, not with hay and stubble. The quality of our integration of faith and work will be tested as with fire, and some of it—thank goodness—will not survive. So we had better build as Christianly as we know how. But we can only build on the foundation of the Gospel, which is not reducible even to our most astute formulations but only to the old old story of Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

If we live that story, then like Jesus our identities will be changed by the world we seek to change. Will my understanding of my Christian faith be altered by my interactions with Muslim theologians, or with postmodern secular intellectuals? Will sacrificial service to my field prevent me from fulfilling my calling to mentor Muslim graduate students? Will humility in the exercise of power mean that Laurena never becomes the Christlike CEO that she uniquely could be? When Olivia finally becomes the Olivia God has intended and loved from the foundation of the world, will she even recognize herself? I think so. But will she have given up some things that she once thought essential to her identity? Probably.

Let us not shrink from following Jesus in letting our world, our culture, and our non-Christian colleagues change us as we boldly seek to translate for them the transformative message of the Gospel. We need not fear to be changed, for even our worst mistakes will be utterly incapable of derailing God's redemptive work in the world and in us. Beneath any formulation of the Gospel's implications for my discipline, behind any Christian worldview or epistemology that I construct, beyond any vocation that I can envision for myself, there lies the power of the resurrection and the unassailable facticity of the eternal love of God, which is not a general but a particular love for very particular sons and daughters whose eternal glory consists precisely in our imitation, our assimilation to Jesus' incarnational and sacrificial negotiation, his losing bargain with the particular human culture to which he submitted himself that he might redeem it. If the incarnational vulnerability of our Christlike vocation leads to the loss of who we thought we were called to be, it will also lead to the resurrection of our own true self and calling, and with it the redemption of some little corner of our broken and beautiful world.

We need to encourage one another with these words. We need ... this! Thank you Eileen and Dennis, Duane and Lonni, Kristen and Phyllis.