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## Reviewing *The Christian Academic in Higher Education: The Consecration of Learning*

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# REVIEWS

***The Christian Academic in Higher Education: The Consecration of Learning.*** By John Sullivan. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018. 335 pp. ISBN: 978-3-319-69628-7 (HARDCOVER) \$119.

Professor Sullivan's purpose for writing *The Christian Academic in Higher Education: The Consecration of Learning* is to "put flesh on the notion of being consecrated to learning as a Christian academic in higher education." This "fleshing out" is embedded in the themes and issues that are particularly important to the professional tasks and activities common to Christian scholars and teachers in the contemporary university. To fully understand Sullivan's approach here, readers must be aware of Roman Catholic perspectives about "vocation," which are generally understood to pertain to priests, nuns, monks, and other "religious" occupations in the Church. Sullivan, an emeritus professor of Christian education in the Department of Theology, Philosophy, and Religious Studies at Liverpool Hope University in the UK, wants to inspire teachers, professors, researchers, and other educational professionals to consider their occupations as equally consecrated to the service of God and the Church. The teacher is as vital to the ministry to people as the priest.

Sullivan stresses the need for wisdom that comes from knowledge of the liberal arts. Wisdom is spiritual and ethical. Wise people are humble and open and act reverently toward others, though Sullivan declines to define these terms or provide illustrations that describe these characteristics. Equally undescribed is Sullivan's insistence on the recognition of the need for God's grace. Without a clear example, Sullivan advises scholars to connect knowledge to students' practical life problems. Religious teaching should naturally expose spiritual understanding and resist any separation of the academic arena from the normal lives of people. The vocation of teaching "gives me my sense of where God wants me to be, what God wants me to do, how God wants me to do it, and who God wants me to be" (208).

Sullivan recognizes certain dangers in connecting Christian faith with the work of an academic, such as leaving religious life on the sidelines of university life. One such temptation is for scholars to get involved in local student organizations that provide ministry to students on the campus, like denominational student centers, community service projects, and helping the local churches with liturgical services. By relegating the practice of religion to “religious” activity, the academic professional removes unquestioned faith from the central purpose of the university, which is “intellectually probing interrogation.”

Another temptation of scholars is the effort to interject religious thought into the academic subject matter in a forced or artificial way, rather than consider faith as a naturally occurring element in the study of all subjects. Thus, the religious scientist or artist is discouraged as disingenuous or, at best, unrealistic. Sullivan insists that a critical intellectual challenge be made to religious belief, which would come during the course of study for all fields of knowledge in a proper university setting.

Still a third temptation makes religious ideas an afterthought in other specific academic fields: “Oh by the way, now that we have studied our course subject, are there religious connotations that might arise?” There is a distinct disconnect of religious ideas from other fields of study, which, Sullivan believes, creates student resistance, frustration, or irritation. Religious ideas should be integrated into every field of study as a natural part of human inquiry.

Beyond these notions about the place of religious interest, Sullivan also considers Christianity itself a legitimate subject area of study for scholars. Along with history, science, mathematics, and all the other fields of learning, Sullivan advocates the study of Christianity. He sees the current state of affairs as disrespecting the importance of the religious element of human life. The university places too much significance on the study of STEM subjects or social sciences, as well as other traditional fields, and at the same time ignores religion, the so-called opiate of the masses, unworthy of serious investigation.

One aspect of Sullivan’s book that is very helpful for new scholars is his discussion of the actual work of the academic professional. Scholars’

work is “judged and they judge the work of others, students, colleagues, peers.” Words that describe this activity of judging are “discrimination,” “differentiation,” and “distinctions,” which tend to be not allowed in normal social discourse but are expected in academic circles. Experienced academics know precisely the meanings of such terms and their processes, but new professors might need some specific explanations and recommendations. The university’s principal role, according to University of Wisconsin professor emeritus Charles W. Anderson, sets “the standards of truth-seeking for a society, to stipulate the rules that distinguish good sense from nonsense, truth from error, excellence from mediocrity” (85). In a world that is trying to deconstruct the idea of truth, to “free” morality from all restraints, and to bless all efforts whether mediocre or somewhat better, Anderson’s wisdom is likely to be ignored and ultimately to end the “university’s principal role.” Even now, some people question the need for all higher education.

Sullivan’s approach is more easily received in a Roman Catholic college that expects religious studies to be an acceptable aspect of all fields of intellectual cognition. His book needs some history of the collegiate enterprise—that is to say, the Christian European foundations that were connected to Enlightenment values of classical educational knowledge. Sullivan does recommend educational training that tells scholars not only what they should do but also who they should be as humans, not ignoring how personal faith affects their profession.

Sullivan’s book is an excellent venue for the new scholar in the Christian tradition and the Christian college and reads like a “College Professorship 101” for beginners at university-level teaching; however, most of the terms used to discuss the work of the professor are undefined, which assumes readers know already. Non-Christian scholars or Christian scholars working in secular schools will not find much to carry to their personal professional settings. The admonitions to perceive the grace and help of God and the acceptance of the vocational call might still be useful individually for Christian scholars, irrespective of the views of their colleges. But some readers might want a more distinctive strategy that helps the Christian scholar work in a non-religious academic setting that restricts the use of religious ideas.

## REFERENCES

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