

Raisons de Res Publica¹

*Dear Taylor: Why our challenging you does not mean
we are “breaking-up” with you or “stalking” you*

Since our initial publication of *Excalibur* and the ensuing campus brouhaha which erupted in response to it, I and my colleagues at *Res Publica* have engaged in a number of conversations with many of you in the Taylor community. Many of you have gone out of your way to encourage us in our efforts. Others of you have expressed grave concerns, while others of you have expressed vehement hostility and wounded-ness. I would like to address two constellations of questions that have come our way in the course of all this concerning what we at *Res Publica* are about. These questions are relevant to more than the current “shaken” state of the Taylor community.² They relate more fundamentally to perspectives regarding the purpose and ethos of Taylor as a University generally and as an educational institution which has historically identified itself in terms of evangelical Christianity specifically.

The first constellation of questions goes something like this: *What are the essential views and which non-essential at TU? Are we at Res Publica blurring an important distinction here? Where do we draw the lines?*

We must first respond to these questions by asking “essential and non-essential for what at TU?” Essential or non-essential for living the Christian life at TU? Essential or non-essential for a mature Christian faith in Jesus Christ at TU? Essential or non-essential for salvation from the wrath to come at TU? You get the idea. Clearly, the answer to the question about what the essential and non-essential views are at Taylor must be “It depends” — specifically, it depends on what is being discussed and on what process is in view — and essential and non-essential cannot be defined as consequential or inconsequential, respectively.

We at *Res Publica* would understand essential views at Taylor to be those delineated in the university’s foundational documents, especially its statement of faith. Furthermore, we would understand *essential* here to mean those views which the university considers foundational for *beginning* the integration of faith and learning at Taylor. However, this does not mean that the views expressed in Taylor’s statement of faith are the only views which will prove essential for *furthering* the process of integrating faith and learning. In other words, Taylor’s foundational documents do not identify all the views which may prove essential for achieving greater levels of coherence later on in the faith and learning integration process. For instance, Taylor’s

¹ Combining French and Latin appeals to my philosophical and ecclesial disposition. Plus, it just has a nice ring to it.

² See the recent article (March 26, 2018) in Christianity Today by Christen Gall, “Taylor University Still Shaken by Unsanctioned Conservative Newspaper” (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/march/excalibur-conservative-underground-taylor-university.html>).

statement of faith includes reference to Christ's "return in power and glory,"³ but it does not include any reference to Christ returning to "judge the living and the dead," even though belief in such is an explicit part of the *Old Roman Creed*, the *Apostles' Creed*, the *Creed of Nicaea*, the *Nicaea-Constantinopolitan Creed*, and the *Athanasian Creed*, all of which have taken the notion almost verbatim from the New Testament.⁴ Be that as it may, a member of the Taylor community might still care to argue that belief in Jesus' future return "to judge the living and the dead" is essential for proper understanding of the Gospel. Such a member may even be able to argue this in a compelling fashion. However, those in the Taylor community who do not accept this doctrine would still be free either to express their disagreement with the arguments or to accept them and change their minds. They could exercise either option without delegitimizing their enrollment or employment at Taylor. However, this freedom would not mean that they had a right for their contrary view to be accorded equal validity simply because they are upstanding members of the Taylor community.

So, we accept those views which Taylor's foundational documents deem essential for *beginning* the integration of faith and learning, but we all remain free to question, debate, argue, and disagree about those which are essential for *furthering* the integration of faith and learning. Thus, the delineation of essential views is relative to whatever subject is at hand and what stage in the process of the integration of faith and learning is in view. With this it is evident that we at *Res Publica* are not blurring an important distinction between essential and non-essential views at TU; rather, that blurring has already occurred in the Taylor community and is even implicit in the constellation of questions which have been posed to us. We are simply trying to help restore some clarity to these categories. Furthermore, we are not drawing lines in the sense of inclusion or exclusion from the community. Rather, we are crafting arguments and drawing conclusions about particular ways of configuring truths and non-truths. Connecting dots — to risk using a simplistic metaphor — is not the same as "drawing lines in the sand."

The second constellation of questions go something like this: *Are our arguments actually personal attacks? Are we indicting some of our colleagues' work because we oppose their views?*

Arguments for particular ways of configuring truths will always implicitly pose a challenge to those who configure them differently or to those who resist considering their configuration at all. The former challenges rational justification, the latter laziness and nihilism. Freedom of

³ For the Taylor University statement of faith go to <http://www.taylor.edu/about/mission/>. For Huntington University's statement of faith go to <https://www.huntington.edu/about/statement-of-faith>. For Indiana Wesleyan's summary of Wesleyan beliefs which includes reference to Jesus Christ's "return to earth to judge every person, living and dead" see the document posted at https://www.indwes.edu/about/docs/Summary_of_Wesleyan_Beliefs.pdf. For Wheaton College's statement of faith which refers to Jesus' return "to judge the nations" go to <https://www.wheaton.edu/about-wheaton/statement-of-faith-and-educational-purpose/>.

⁴ For the texts of the creeds see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edition (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2006); John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd edition (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982). For New Testament references to Jesus as the one who will judge the living and the dead see Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Pet 4:5; cf. Matt 25:31–46; 1Cor 3:12–13; 4:1–5.

thought does not mean freedom from critique or from the responsibility to validate thinking. We at *Res Publica* are of the mind that a person may argue for a particular way of configuring a body of truths as essential for responsible Christian thought and living in a particular area of concern. This person may also claim that such a particular configuration of truths exposes other proposed configurations as lacking rational justification and therefore as being non-truths, while other people will be free to disagree and to assert counterarguments which they think represent better approximations of the truth. In making a claim regarding such *essentiality* this person who makes these arguments is not saying that acceptance of their views is essential for involvement or membership in the Taylor community. Such argumentation also does not mean that any individuals who may happen to hold the views being challenged are themselves being personally attacked by the one expressing the critique. Nevertheless, we still recognize that some persons may feel personally attacked depending on how deeply they have identified themselves with the view under critique and how unwilling or incapable they may be of stepping back from their view in an attempt to exercise a fresh and perhaps even greater measure of objective detachment. Here I am not suggesting that total objectivity is obtainable for any of us, but each of us is still capable of getting better at exercising greater degrees of objectivity, and we should encourage one another to do so. That being said, it may be natural for us to wonder whether a critique is directed specifically at us (or at someone we care about) when we hear a view critiqued which we (or someone we care about) happens to hold. It may even be natural for us to worry what other people think of us (or of someone we care about) and whether the critique has made us (or someone we care about) less apt to be respected in other people's eyes. However, when we find ourselves having this natural reaction, we must recognize that we are in a precarious position, because indulging a wounded ego — be it our own ego or that of someone we care about — is often the first step in fostering our own resistance to learning (or that of someone we care about). Here is where empathy has its dark side.

What each of us should do in this situation is consider first the extent to which the view being critiqued or challenged is actually representative of the view we hold. To the extent we conclude that it is, we should then ask whether the arguments directed against our view are valid and superior to the arguments we employ to support our view. If we think those arguments are indeed superior to our own, then the next step is to consider changing our mind. Alternatively, if the arguments and counterarguments prove inconclusive one way or the other, then we may well opt to agree to disagree, as the saying goes. However, we must point out that "agreeing to disagree," properly speaking, is something that people do only after they have engaged in thorough and prolonged argumentation over a subject, during which all arguments have been exhausted and all evidence put forth, and yet they still find themselves at loggerheads. Agreeing to disagree does not mean retreating to your respective corners at the first whiff of any difference of opinion and then silently agreeing not to bring up the issue further so that all may "get along," as if all viewpoints have equal claims to validity by virtue of the mere fact that some nice person holds to any one of them. In the event that we are simply confronted with a message or claim which does not offer supporting arguments — and this happens quite frequently in the course of a normal day, so much so that it often goes unnoticed — then what we should do is try ourselves to imagine and construct what valid supporting arguments there might possibly be and then proceed from that point. Of course, taking this

approach demands a rather high level of personal commitment to the quest for wisdom and a tremendous resolve to take Christian responsibility for one's own thinking and learning (cf. 2Cor 10:5).

The freedom to exercise any of these options which I have just described does not mean that face-saving-mechanisms will or even should be made available for us to prop up our egos and reputations as thinkers, scholars, or virtuous characters. There are worse things in this world than being compelled to repent of previously held beliefs, even if it means breaking with our own body of previously published work or publically declared positions. Indeed, this is a small price to pay for gaining possession of wisdom and truth. Having a desire to adopt and maintain a particular view is not the same as having a rational justification to do so. Whatever pain may come from being compelled to change one's beliefs, it is nothing compared to the pain that comes from continuing to live a lie. Ego-checking is the first order of business in acquiring knowledge and wisdom (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7, 29; 2:5; 9:10).

Some Final Thoughts

In considering these constellations of questions which relate not just to *Res Publica* but also to the purpose and ethos of Taylor University, we cannot ignore consideration of Taylor's reason for existence. Here we must concern ourselves with first principles. Foremost among these is that Christianity worships the God of Israel in the person of Jesus Christ and seeks to recruit all people from all nations to share in that transforming worship. The need to justify a continual turning towards and maintenance of this worship in the light of the current state of available knowledge is what necessitates the integration of faith and learning. This is the very thing towards which education at Taylor University claims to be fundamentally devoted. It is the essence of a Christian education.

While there are many ways in which Taylor's *raison d'être* can be undermined, I would submit that confusion regarding Taylor's reason for existence, indeed, its identity as a Christian educational institution which exists for theological reasons, is a major reason why the ethos of our campus community and its broader alumni has proven to be so dysfunctional of late and not merely "messy." Taylor has many competing desires for its identity coursing through its body politic. Unfortunately, what Harry G. Frankfurt has argued regarding individuals applies equally to institutions. According to Frankfurt, even though some philosophers maintain that, just in virtue of having a desire, a person necessarily has a reason for trying to satisfy it, the mere fact that a person has a desire does not give him a reason. What it gives him is a problem. The individual, and likewise the institution, has the problem of whether to identify with the desire and thus validate it as eligible for satisfaction, or whether to dissociate himself from it, treat it as categorically unacceptable, and try to suppress it or rid himself of it entirely. If the institution, like the individual, identifies with the desire, it acknowledges that satisfying the desire is to be assigned some position—however inferior—in the order of its preferences and priorities. If the institution externalizes the desire, it determines to give that desire no position in that order at all.⁵ The integration of faith and learning is about deciding what desires to

⁵ Harry G Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right*, ed. Debra Satz, The Tanner Lectures (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 11.

identify with and what place to give them in terms of preferences and priorities. Not every desire mongering for satisfaction is worthy of satisfying.

Within every discipline there are any number of liberal, conservative, and progressive routes by which one may sell one's soul. Do you know what the most pervasive and pernicious of those are in your discipline? Are you able to recognize the counterfeits and can you explain what makes them counterfeits? Are you able to discern counterfeits by their unsanctioned material composition? Are you able to recognize counterfeits by their unsanctioned production process? None of us may ever be able to flag every funny bill that comes into circulation, but anytime we are able to flag one with integrity, that is a good thing that promotes the social welfare of everyone. However, those who sacrifice their integrity for the sake of a relationship and call it an act of love end up without integrity, relationship, or love. Such perverse unfaithfulness also constitutes a grave social injustice. Of course, there is a difference between giving up your integrity and giving up your pride; and humility is what enables us to tell the difference between them. However, true humility has to do with knowing one's proper place before God and one's proper place before other people. It is therefore a by-product of a robust creation theology which rightly discerns the divinely instituted order of things.⁶ This is wisdom. By contrast, folly in biblical prophetic and wisdom thought means blindness to the proper orders of the world, which in turn naturally produces pride and arrogance, leading to a false estimation of where true security lies for humans.⁷

In the Old Testament, an ancient Israelite sage known as Qoheleth had further bracing things to convey about wisdom, folly, order, and education which academicians may neglect at their peril. If you will allow me to be brief, I will just summarize three of his points. First, acquiring more wisdom does not lead to the solution of every problem (Eccl 1:18; 7:23). Nevertheless, wisdom is still better than folly, in as much as the former involves sight while the latter involves blindness (2:13). Second, death is a great equalizer, and so life must be lived and not deferred, seized but not hoarded (8:8; 9:3–5, 7, 10). If any Christian educational institution ought to be ever mindful of the fragility of life and the significance this has for how we go about education, it ought to be Taylor University. Third, notions about outcomes are just that: notions about outcomes. Plans can be made and strategies devised, but whether and how these will work out cannot always be foreseen. An ethic predicated on preconceived notions about outcomes has severe limitations and liabilities (2:21; 8:7, 16–17; 9:1, 11, 12; 11:2, 6). For this reason, it is remarkable that even so minimalistic a sage as Qoheleth — who pushes his own reflections on absurdity almost to the breaking point and deconstructs much arrogant naïveté regarding the integration of faith and learning — still appears to have found room for an eschatological perspective to motivate present living for which one is accountable to God (11:9; 12:14). Indeed, it may even be that his reflections have compelled him to make room for it. But the route through which things will work out between now and the eschaton cannot be assumed and may well not even be traceable. This is why the integrity of the observer of the world as an agent in the world accountable to God is so important. Taking responsibility for one's thinking and being willing to consider and sift criticism dispassionately and in constant

⁶ Gen 3:1–7; Isa 2:12; 5:20; 29:15–16; 51:12; 66:2; Jer 8:4–9; Mic 6:1–16; Amos 5:8–15; Prov 8; 9:10.

⁷ John Barton, "Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem," *Journal of Theological Studies* 32.1 (1981): 11–12.

consultation with the sacred traditions bequeathed to us is a crucial part of the creative quest for this integrity and the character formation to which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is dedicated.

With respect to our own Christian eschatological perspective, if we believe that Jesus Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, then we implicitly admit that this future evaluative procedure conducted by Christ himself presupposes that it is quite possible of us to go wrong in ways which really matter between now and then. The reality of Christ's future evaluative critique leads to a question regarding what standard of judgment, what ethic, will guide Christ's judgment and whether that ethic can be known by us beforehand in preparation. And even if we answer that question by saying that Christ's ethic will be defined ultimately by God's unconditional love and unmerited grace, we are still obligated to ask whether or not it then matters how we actually live our lives prior to Christ's final reckoning. Having answered those questions, we are then obligated moreover to consider whether or not our answers make a mockery of God's love and grace and of His future appearance in the return of Jesus Christ.

I hope we are aware that this eschatological concern with "how shall we then live" is what the New Testament is all about considering, and that its authors take up this instructional task on the basis of what is taught in the Old Testament, and that Christian education has been grappling with all of this for good or ill ever since Jesus first delivered the Sermon on the Mount and commissioned the Twelve. I hope that we can see what a "critical thinking" sort of enterprise this is. I hope we can see that any college or university that identifies itself as Christian but then ignores this task — be it out of willful disregard, sheer incompetence, anxious distraction, mere ignorance, deference to market forces, or simply from a desire to keep the peace and get along at any price — is little more than an *historically* Christian college community in pursuit of secular pluralistic ideals, or, perhaps more disturbingly, is a self-absorbed gnostic community that confuses real divine intercourse with fleshly self-gratification under the covers of sentimental piety. I pray that we are familiar enough with the fruits of both the secular and the gnostic projects to be sufficiently terrified by them. If we are not, I pray we will at least recognize that the creation and development of an appropriate wisdom ethos at Taylor University is a critical response which expresses our awareness of the theological basis for our existence and the obligations that such entails. We at *Res Publica* hope for this and have put our careers and reputations on the line in order to be of some service in bringing it about.

— Richard G. Smith