

# THE CRESSET

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## Vanity, Variety, Vision

Protestant Universities and American Experiences

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**H**ow has Protestant higher education influenced America? The question might call forth some grand claims, but it also immediately signals a major difficulty. Protestantism is not one entity but many. Can any description of Protestantism and its universities encompass the whole? Our approach will be first to divide and then, not to conquer, but to provide points of reference for a conversation that includes both Protestants and Catholics involved in higher education.

The title provides a road map for this essay. The first section discusses “vanity,” a serious temptation that has bedeviled Protestant higher education from the beginning, and we link vanity to the misguided desire for monolithic Protestant influence. The “variety” portion of the essay underscores the historically pluralistic character of Protestantism and its schools of higher learning. Finally, the “vision” section articulates a “pluralithic” (yes, that’s pluralithic not pluralistic) understanding of our calling as Christian—not just Protestant—scholars, teachers, and administrators. Pluralithic Christian higher education recognizes and honors our many particularities, but also confesses the unity for which we long as followers of Jesus.

Before we begin, a word of self introduction is appropriate. Protestantism is never generic, and the two of us are Protestants of a distinct kind, or at least of a distinct mix. Between the two of us, we have one set of grandparents who were German Lutherans, but the other three sets were all Scandinavian Pietists who would have felt right at home with the puritanical and devout worshipers portrayed in the classic film *Babette’s Feast*. Of course, America influenced them, and here they became much more revivalistic and dispensational than if they had stayed in the Old Country. Still, they were warm-hearted and sincere Christians, and in large part because of them we still remain, in many ways, evangelicals even if our church membership is now in the mainline.

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If you really want to know our predispositions, however, it might be more instructive to look at our institutional affiliation, for our convictions and habits of faith have been deeply shaped by the place where we work. For the past twenty- three years we have taught together at Messiah College, where the heritage is a mix of Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism. This means that while personal faith (Pietism) is important at Messiah, so is social holiness (Wesleyanism) embedded in concerns for peace, justice, and reconciliation (Anabaptism).

Exposure to Anabaptism has been especially significant for us. Like every tradition, Anabaptism has its good points and its weaknesses. Anabaptists, at their worst, can sometimes think of themselves—very humbly of course!—as better Christians than anyone else. But more typically, and at their best, Anabaptists see themselves as playing only one role among many different roles that need to be represented within the overall matrix of (in biblical language) the body of Christ or (in contemporary theological language) the public practices of Christianity. They know very well that Christianity is a complex and diverse affair, a subject about which generalization is almost impossible. Similarly, this essay undoubtedly will reflect our Anabaptist particularity, but we hope that it also respects other perspectives and invites broad conversation.

### I

#### **Vanity: Monolithic Protestant Higher Education**

The word “monolith” is not hard to translate. It means “one rock.” For Christians, referencing “one rock” may bring to mind a host of religiously associated imagery: perhaps the old hymn “Rock of Ages,” or the New Testament passage where Jesus calls Peter a rock, or the parable about how the wise man built his house upon the rock and not the sand so that when (as the children’s chorus says) “the rain came down and the floods came up, the house on the rock stood firm.” But the term monolith might also have a somewhat negative connotation: something big and old and unmovable; something stuck in the ground; something that you would like to discard but is just too heavy to move. Protestantism in America has been a monolith in both senses: it has been a foundation on which to stand and a cumbersome, old rock that has not always served either Christian faith or the nation well.

At first glance, of course, Protestantism in America does not look monolithic at all; it looks like a motley collection of boulders and pebbles all thrown together. And in many ways, that is what Protestantism is: a moraine of rocky rubble thrown up by glacial religious movements of the past that have, in many cases, long since melted away.\* This jumbled reality of American Protestantism includes the seventeen-million-member Southern Baptist Convention and the eight-million-member United Methodist Church as well as the

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Church of God in Christ, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which claim just about five million members each. These are the five largest Protestant denominations in America according to the latest edition of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* (Lindner 2005). But American Protestantism also includes the Assemblies of God, the Unitarian Universalists, two big Presbyterian Churches (“USA” and “in America”) as well as many smaller ones, the Mennonites, Moravians, Missouri-Synod Lutherans, and historically about 250 separate groups that have called themselves “*the Church of God.*” Going down the list in order of size one finds the 25,000 member Brethren in Christ church that founded Messiah College, the even smaller United Zion Church that split from the Brethren in Christ in 1855, and finally, near the bottom, the optimistically but incongruently named Universal Church of Christ, whose membership worldwide is less than one thousand. This ecclesiastical stew is Protestantism.

American Protestantism has been fragmented and diverse for a long time. That is its genius, but also its abiding flaw. More than 150 years ago the Reformed pastor and teacher, John W. Nevin, sitting back and observing the panoply of American Protestantism from his seminary office in the neat and tidy town of Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, said that what he saw was not pretty. Nevertheless, he hoped that in due time Protestantism might eventually surmount its chaotic confusion and “stand forth redeemed, and disenthralled from the evils that now oppress it, to complete the Reformation so auspiciously begun in the sixteenth century.” He continued, “Only as we believe that Protestantism is itself a process... does it appear possible to be intelligently satisfied with the present posture of *the great experiment*” (Nevin 41, 49; emphasis added).

For Americans, the language of “experiment” does not apply merely to Protestantism, of course. From the earliest period of colonization, English settlers in particular called North America a great experiment in human history and government. Most famously, Roger Williams termed his colony of Rhode Island a “lively experiment” in democracy and religious freedom, and further south in the Mid-Atlantic region William Penn branded his sylvan lands a “holy experiment” unlike any other. But perhaps the most accurate terminology comes from a more obscure source, Samuel Smith, who wrote a history of New Jersey in the year 1765. He called his own small colony an “unprov’d experiment,” because no one knew how it would turn out (Smith viii).

In some sense, we still do not know how the American experiment will end, and the same can be said of Protestantism. The clock is still ticking. But we do know that the confluence between these two great experiments is not accidental. America was founded, not entirely but largely, by Protestants who were seeking freedom to pursue their own particular brands of Protestantism. Even though the Founders were not all devoutly Christian themselves, virtually all of them had internalized Protestantism’s principle of religious freedom along with the pluralistic implications of such freedom. They were

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not content with pluralism alone, however, because they also valued the common good. Thus they sought to create a system of government and a national culture that combined the many and the one (*e pluribus unum*). In their concern for unity as well as diversity, the Founders (i.e., those in the political realm) were in some sense significantly ahead of the nation's Protestant religious leaders who were often more focused on heaven and their own particular group's earthly well being than they were on the good of the nation as a whole.

Educators—most of them Protestant—clearly played a role in shaping the new American nation. In his book *Creating the American Mind*, J. David Hoeveler argues that in the years leading up to the American Revolution “evidence abounds of the academic role in shaping Americans’ ways of thinking about themselves as a people and as political players.” He says that the American colonies were gifted with a group of leaders who often “drew on learning... from their college days” as they struggled to create a new nation founded on the principles of freedom, democracy, and equality. Going even further, Hoeveler suggests that the entirety of early American history was shaped by the intellectual culture created and nurtured by the nine Protestant colleges of the colonies (Hoeveler 242).

When describing such expansive social experiments as the creation of a new form of government or the perfect church, it is difficult to avoid vanity when some success is achieved. Patriotic flourishes of pride accordingly have become almost standard fare in writings about the founding of the nation, and Hoeveler's book transfers some of that glory to the history of Protestant higher education. And who among us would not be happy to join in that celebration? It is nice to be praised once in a while. But is this justified pride or mere vanity? Webster's Dictionary describes vanity as “exaggerated self love: inflated pride in oneself or in one's appearance, attainments, performance, possessions, or successes.” A historian using our college catalogues as primary source documents likely would conclude that more than a bit of vanity is in evidence. Schools often portray themselves in glowing colors with warts and wrinkles all carefully airbrushed away. Is there any harm in that kind of individual institutional preening? Probably not; but when the scale is enlarged to include all of Protestant higher education, the dangers of vanity become evident.

Up until the late 1950s, this more dangerous kind of vanity was evident in the Protestant pride and privilege that dominated much of American higher education. Thus when William F. Buckley wrote *God and Man at Yale* in 1951, criticizing the institution for its inattentiveness and general disrespect for religion in the classroom, the Yale faithful did not focus on the merits of his jeremiad. Rather, they were aghast that a Catholic like Buckley was critiquing the Christian—i.e., the Protestant—character of the university. Their logic was that Yale was a quintessentially American Protestant college, so by defi-

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dition it was committed to freedom, democracy, and faith. Yale set the standard for what American higher education should look like, and Yale did not need any upstart young Catholic—a member of a church still locked in the jaws of medieval authoritarianism—telling its faculty what they should or should not be doing (Marsden 10–16).

Such obvious Protestant national vanity is largely a thing of the past, but not entirely. Few politicians or church leaders now tout Protestantism as the defining religion of our country, but Protestantism remains the majority faith of the land, and the United States remains overwhelmingly Christian. According to a recent Pew Forum survey, fully 67% of Americans believe that the country was founded as a “Christian nation” (*Newsweek*, 11 September 2006). What that means is a matter of debate, but it at least infers that the notion of Christian America still packs a political punch. Most of the people punching that theme are Protestants, and many of them would see great appeal in the ideal of a monolithic Christian nation supported by a phalanx of proudly “Christian” (read “Protestant”) universities.

But Protestantism itself problematizes that kind of monolithic vision of nation and faith. Protestantism is and always has been an odd jumble of movements and organizations. The movement’s inherent diversity and its inability to reconstitute itself as the one true church has, in fact, been called “the Protestant problem.” Yet that very diversity with its implied critique of monolithic ideology might also be envisioned as a gift, perhaps even the most important gift that Protestantism in general and Protestant higher education in particular has bequeathed to America.

Ironically, the most articulate description of the positive merits of Christian diversity may come from a person who is neither Protestant nor American, but a Polish Catholic, the late Pope John Paul II. In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul admits that the current divisions of Christianity—divisions that are largely Protestant in nature and origin—“are certainly opposed to what Christ had in mind,” but he immediately adds that “these different approaches to understanding and living out one’s faith in Christ can, in certain cases, be complementary; they do not have to be mutually exclusive.” Going further, John Paul wonders whether Christian diversity might actually be a positive good, musing, “Could it not be that these divisions have also been a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ’s Gospel and in the redemption accomplished by Christ? Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise.” Might not the need “for humanity to achieve unity through plurality, to learn to come together in the one Church, even while presenting a plurality of ways of thinking and acting... be, in a certain sense, more consonant with the wisdom of God” than simple unanimity? (John Paul II 147, 153).

What Pope John Paul describes is no longer just a Protestant concern. Rather, this “problem of Protestantism” is now a global Christian phenomenon in which all

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Christians—Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox alike—participate. And if John Paul is right, this “problem”—and there is no doubt it is on some level a problem—may simultaneously be a gift.

### II

#### **Variety: Pluralistic Protestant Higher Education**

Retrospectively, it seems clear that diversity and variety are inherent in Protestantism, but Protestants did not originally set out to produce variety in faith. They set out to be right. They intended to reform the one, true faith every Christian should follow.

Things fell quickly apart. The date was 1529, only a dozen years after Luther had posted his famous Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The place was Marburg, a smallish town in central Germany about fifty miles north of Frankfurt. The meeting involved Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. These, the two most prominent leaders of the very young Protestant movement (so young it was not yet called Protestant), agreed on fourteen of fifteen proposed points, but that was not enough. They differed over how to understand the Eucharist, so they felt compelled to part company and go their own separate ways. Luther said famously, “We are not of the same Spirit.”

Protestant groups have been multiplying ever since, and their divisions often have been laced with the kind of antagonism, even hatred, that only small differences of opinion can produce. This diversification led quickly to violence. Early Protestant practice often included the religious cleansing of the land, driving out those with dissident views and putting to death those who failed to stay away. So Anabaptists—the wrong kind of Protestants—were killed in Holland, and the Unitarian Michael Servetus was executed in Switzerland through the cooperative efforts of John Calvin and the Catholic inquisition, because Calvin thought free-thinking Protestantism was a greater danger to his Genevan experiment than was the Roman Catholic Church. In England, both Puritans and Catholics were harried out of the land by the simultaneously broad and intolerant Church of England under Queen Elizabeth’s rule. And, in America, Quakers were hung on the Commons in Boston because the Puritans had come to the New World precisely to get away from heretics like them, and the Puritans were not about to let the Quakers or anyone else spread false doctrine in their “New” England, where everything was to be done decently and in order and all in unison.

With time it became apparent that no particular Protestant group could hold everyone else at bay, even in places like Anglican London or Calvinist Geneva or Puritan Boston. So grudgingly, reluctantly, Protestants learned to live side by side with those different from themselves. This took place everywhere, but the epicenter was America, the only nation

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that had made religious freedom a basic right of citizenship. Puritans in the northern colonies and Anglicans in the South slowly accommodated to the presence of Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Unitarians as neighbors and even occasionally as friends. And, with time, they learned to live peaceably, if sometimes uneasily, with an ever widening assortment of faiths, most of which were new versions of Protestantism.

This process of accommodation to Protestant pluralism has a name: denominationalism. Protestant denominationalism, at least as it originally evolved, was the belief that even though you are less right than me, I will still consider you and your church Christian in some limited sense, and I will desist from trying to eliminate you by either physical violence or legal pressure. In certain circumstances, I may even cooperate with you if our purposes overlap. But generally, I see the two of us as religious competitors, and my fervent hope is that my own church will be the victor over yours.

It was that kind of competitive denominationalism that John Nevin found so unfortunate when he was writing about American Protestantism in the mid-nineteenth century, and in response he championed an alternative “Catholic and Reformed” ecumenical vision of what Protestantism could become. But Nevin’s kinder and gentler vision of Protestant faith was not to rule the day. Instead Protestant denominational competitiveness continued and intensified as the decades rolled on during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that denominationally competitive ethos defined the environment in which many of America’s Protestant colleges and universities were formed.

Rather than being created first and foremost to serve either the advance of the gospel or the benefit of the nation as a whole, many Protestant colleges and universities, probably most, were founded with rather more narrow denominational concerns in mind. Higher education was a handmaiden of the American Protestant inter-denominational struggle, and colleges had two essential roles to perform. First, they trained future leaders, denominational leaders who would hold high the standards of their own particular faith in the competition for the souls of American citizens. Second, denominational schools provided safe havens where young people from the denomination could receive an education without being tempted away from church membership. That is, denominations developed their own institutions of higher learning out of fear that their own young people would otherwise attend schools sponsored by competing denominations. In such circumstances, young Baptist men might become Presbyterians or young Lutheran women might become Methodists. God forbid! Each church clearly needed its own school.

And it was not just formal denominations that joined this higher educational competition. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a variety of new fundamentalist/evangelical organizations and social networks emerged that functioned in much the same way as the older denominations. A number of new Protestant colleges and universities were founded to serve this clientele, and they were as competitive in spirit as any

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denominational college or university.

While Protestant denominational and non-denominational competition remains a factor in the overall American religious scene, the majority of Protestant schools are no longer heavily invested in that contest. Many Protestant colleges have enlarged their older religious identities to become more ecumenical and more embracing of Christian and human difference. Some schools have not stopped there, however, but have opted to become ever more generic, speaking only vaguely about being committed to Christian “values” or to Judeo-Christian principles or to education that somehow serves the common good, and many of these schools no longer seem religious at all. The driving force behind this change often was the desire for more influence in society, and such influence was perceived as inversely related to religious particularity. Having more of one meant having less of the other. This narrative of chasing after “influence” and of thinning and disappearing Christian identity has been compellingly and pessimistically recounted by George Marsden and James Burtchaell. Their descriptions apply to the history of many now Protestant-in-name-only colleges and universities, but this sectarian to secular plot line is not inevitable.

Many Protestant schools opted to keep their religious identities alive and intact, and the stories of some of these colleges have been recorded in books like Richard Hughes and William Adrian’s *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century* and Robert Benne’s *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions*. The colleges and universities discussed in these two publications clearly value their specific Christian identities, but they have broadened their scope and vision of faith beyond mere sectarianism.

Benne says (borrowing the language of Freud) that the strength of these schools is found in the fact that they have rejected the religious narcissism of small differences, yet they have retained a commitment to both their specific traditions and the “Great Tradition” of Christian faith which he describes in terms of a C. S. Lewis style “mere Christianity” (Benne 184, 199). Hughes and Adrian underscore the significance of particularity even more strongly, asserting bluntly that “there is no such thing as generic Christian higher education” (Hughes 3). The schools included in these studies have not jettisoned their past; instead, each has embraced its own past in new and creative ways. And that newness and creativity is important. Rather than passively following the lead of their denominations or supportive constituencies, these schools have become active and constructive agents in the process of traditioning—the process of passing on the faith to future generations in, if anything, better shape than it was inherited.

Every Christian tradition at its best has something positive and distinctive to contribute to the general conversation of faith, to national conversations about policies and values, and especially to Christian higher education. This is precisely what Pope John



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Paul II suggests in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, and it is also the main thesis of our book *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation*. How can we as Christian scholars from many different traditions affirm our particularity and yet talk with each other intelligently? How can we learn from each other more effectively? How can we maximize our pooled resources for honoring God, thinking about the world, and caring for those who most need our assistance? These are very Protestant questions made necessary by Protestantism's internal diversity, but more and more these are questions that all Christians—and especially those in higher education—need to ask and answer together.

Each Christian tradition has something to share and something to learn from the conversation. Our book discusses some of the ways that various ecclesiastical and spiritual traditions contribute to the scholarly enterprise, and we contend that universities associated with different Christian traditions will and should bring different particular emphases to their educational priorities and scholarly work. But particularity is only half of the story. The other half is a willingness to reach beyond particularity, seeking to honor and affirm that common calling we share as Christians. It is the joint commitment to both particularity and unity that we label “pluralithic.”

### III

#### **Vision: Pluralithic Christian Higher Education**

Pluralithic Protestantism, pluralithic Christianity, understands the value of particular traditions, but nurtures those particular traditions on behalf of and for the sake of the Christian faith as a whole and the world as a whole. If monolithic Christianity seeks to speak with one voice and drown out all others, and if pluralistic Christianity sometimes seems to produce a tuneless cacophony, then pluralithic Christianity hopes to nurture something harmonious out of diverse voices. An image from the New Testament may be pertinent. The author of 1 Peter describes the church at one point as “living stones” arranged into a “spiritual house” that is then equated with a “holy priesthood.” That vision of living stones cooperating together for the sake of the gospel and the good of the world is a fitting image for how our different missions and identities as Christian schools might be seen as complementary rather than competitive.

The goal in all of this—the reason for our mutual appreciation and cooperation—is not “influence” but faithfulness. For Christian scholars, being faithful means being true to our own best intellectual insights about how the world is put together and simultaneously being true to the teachings and example of Jesus. In the long history of Protestant higher education, the desire for influence and for increased praise and prestige has too often been a siren tempting institutions away from their roots and the par-

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ticular communities they were founded to serve. Like other universities, our institutions have yearned to draw the best and brightest students from across the country and, if possible, from around the world, making our campuses as cosmopolitan as possible. We have wanted to teach as many courses and subjects as possible, sometimes for no higher purpose than gobbling up more “market share.”

This quest for influence and prestige comes with a cost. Some critics say we no longer educate students to be persons who are genuinely capable of being responsible for any particular cause or any specific place, but rather produce “itinerant professional vandals” (Berry 50) who are oblivious to the concerns of real people living in local communities of faith and life. Of course, there is a need for universities that are national and international in composition and scope, and of course all campuses must value diversity along with the lessons of reconciliation and insight that only diversity can produce. But some of our schools may simultaneously be called to particularity, to remembering our roots, to being mindful of a specific calling, and to caring for one place.

How does a church related school determine how to proceed? What compass can help us negotiate that terrain? Once again, Pope John Paul II provides guidance, though in this case his wisdom is refracted through the Protestant pen of Martin Marty in his book *The Public Church*. Quoting from the writings of John Paul before he became pope, Marty highlights the principle that every church possesses both “a special interiority and a specific openness.” Explaining that phrase, Marty says this “special interiority comes from... the faith its members hold in common.” Taken by itself this emphasis can lead to “introversion and the church [can] become a company of people huddled together with their backs to the world,” but combined with a commitment to “specific openness” this should never occur. The goal for each church is to nurture a “mediated, focused, and disciplined” connection with the larger world, a connection that is, because of each church’s special interiority, necessarily particular and selective. The alternative, says Marty, is to “sprawl and spill [ourselves] until all [our] substance is gone” (Marty 4).

A few years ago one of us had the privilege of writing a short theology book, a book entitled *Gracious Christianity: Living the Love We Profess*, with our good friend and former president of Messiah College, Rodney Sawatsky. During the time that book was being written, Rod was in the process of dying from a very aggressive form of cancer. Much conversation went into that book—long hours talking about priorities related to faith and life. In those conversations, one thing finally seemed clear, “God for the most part has chosen to change the world by layering small grace upon small grace” (Jacobson and Sawatsky 26). God works a little at a time; the kingdom of God puts down roots slowly in the soil of human existence. That conclusion may not be surprising coming from two Anabaptists, since Anabaptists are prone to assume that God operates close to the ground. But maybe

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an Anabaptist vision of faithfulness construed as many small acts of graciousness is a helpful antidote to overly grand visions of how Christian scholars and schools can influence the world. The shared goal is not, after all, “influence,” but rather faithfulness.

The well known social activist Paul Loeb writes something similar in his book *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time* when he says that the best way to stave off both vanity and cynicism is to put our efforts into small things. Over time, he writes, “cultures shift, bit by bit” and those small changes layered one on top of each other sometimes produce “global ripples” of influence that can change attitudes and actions in remarkable ways (Loeb 98, 109). We remember and honor social activists and visionaries who have made huge leaps of imagination and grand and noble gestures of defiance, and well we should. But that is not the role destined for most of us, and, if we would look at the lives of even the most revered activists and visionaries, we would likely see that their lives too were made up of many small acts of courage, grace, justice, and love that slowly over time made them the people they were.

The many tiny, almost invisible, ripples of good set in motion as we attend faithfully to our different and distinct institutional purposes may be the best measure of our faithfulness as well as the most fruitful way we can contribute to the world. Whom specifically are we called to serve, in what ways, for what purposes? What special responsibilities do we have to the religious communities that founded our institutions and to the local communities in which our schools are situated? What academic goals and tasks might fit best with our particular callings as institutions of Christian higher education? What micro processes of grace should we be paying attention to as we seek to teach and nurture students into lives of meaning, responsibility, and faithfulness in the world?

Many Christian universities were founded with clear notions of their special interiority and their specific openness, but some have lost touch with those points of reference—or at least their grip has been decidedly loosened. Has real benefit accrued, or have some Protestant (or Catholic) universities merely sprawled and spilled themselves until all their religious substance is gone? Paying attention to institutional particularities, paying attention to our different senses of interiority and openness, is not a script for renewed sectarianism. Nor is it a recipe for fundamentalist revolt. Quite the contrary, it is an invitation to reaffirm the particularity with which God has gifted us and to serve with new energy the people our institution, and perhaps no other institution, is in a position to help. Those kinds of ripples of Christian grace can truly change the world.

We conclude by citing one recent, very visible example of how the special interiority and specific openness of a Christian subgroup can surprisingly influence, faithfully influence, the world. Not long ago, a deranged man entered an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and shot to death innocent Amish girls. The national

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news was saturated with clips of horses and buggies and bonneted women in black. And under the harsh scrutiny of public attention, the Amish community sent out one clear message: we forgive. We forgive the man who did this. We will not seek any kind of retribution. We will reach out in love to his family, because Christ is love and we are followers of Christ. We will mourn the loss of our daughters, but we will not hate. The Amish are sectarian to an extreme. They clearly value their special interiority. But openness to others? Yes, in spite of their commitment to separateness, their willingness to forgive has become a ripple of faithful influence for good around the world.

The Amish educate their children only through eighth grade, so they cannot provide any direct advice about Christian higher education. Their role in the kingdom of God is very different from ours as intellectuals. Christians who are called to intellectual tasks will sometimes be required to ask difficult questions, to stir up curiosity, and to push at the edges of what we think we know about God, ourselves, and the world. None of that is very Amish at all. But, like the Amish, each of us is called, regardless of our disciplinary expertise, to do our work in ways that take seriously the special interiority and the specific openness of the particular faith communities to which we belong and of the particular institutions of higher learning with which we are associated.

The goal is not to create a new Protestant monolith, nor is it to create a new and expanded Christian or even Judeo-Christian monolith. The goal is not to have our voices as Christians become so loud they silence everyone else. At the same time, the goal is not simple pluralism, each of us expressing our own individual views with no regard for what other Christians and other scholars might think.

The goal, then, is for Christian higher education in America to honor the particularities of our various and varied communities of learned faith, while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of every particular Christian tradition and the need to learn from others. We have called this a pluralithic vision of Christian higher education: a vision that combines conviction with conversation and that mixes faith with hope. And our hope is this: That the small ripples of goodness, beauty, and truth we create each day through our teaching and research—the small graces of insight and love that we communicate to and receive from each other and our students—might ultimately flow together by God’s grace, slowly improving our schools, our churches, our local communities, our nation, and perhaps even the world as a whole. ✠

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