

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 12 | Number 12

Article 11

2013

The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking: A Student's Guide

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Recommended Citation

Graham, Matthew J. and Graham, Polly A. (2013) "The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking: A Student's Guide," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 12 : No. 12 , Article 11.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol12/iss12/11

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*The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking:
A Student's Guide.*

Dockery, D. S., and George, T. (2012).
Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Reviewed by Matthew J. Graham & Polly A. Graham



In their book, *The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking: A Student's Guide*, David Dockery and Timothy George give readers the first installment of a series entitled *Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition* published by Crossway. Both authors have served in the academy as theologians and have since migrated to administration positions. Dockery is now president of Union University while George is the founding dean of the Beeson Divinity School. This series has in view Christian students as well as others associated with college and university campuses including faculty, staff, and trustees. The goal of the series is to provide readers with a framework for distinctively Christian thinking on important ideas such as truth, meaning, beauty, and justice. Each volume will contain a glossary, study questions, and bibliographic entries, making volumes in this series attractive for possible use as companion texts in worldview formation courses.

The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking introduces readers to “...the distinctive way that Christians through the years have read the Bible, formulated doctrine, provided education, and engaged the culture” (Dockery & George, 2012, p. 20). Its purpose is to “reclaim and advance the Christian intellectual tradition” by challenging Christian institutions of higher education to undergo the work of holistically recasting the concepts of faith and reason—two concepts that ought never have been broken apart (p. 16). Surely, this book joins the vast chorus of other voices singing the praises of the richness, depth, and influence of the Christian intellectual tradition. In that way, its contribution may be considered somewhat pedestrian. The expected topics are covered in a brief, introductory style format. Yet, there is a manner in which this short book gains distinction. The philosophical underpinnings of the authors are in sync with those thinkers who level a critique of Modernism’s far-reaching influence. Furthermore, readers interested in theology and philosophy would do well in becoming familiar with a movement circulating in seminaries and divinity schools known as the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS). While an extended discussion of TIS is beyond the scope of this review, Dockery and George’s rhetoric of “reclaiming the tradition” flows directly from the theological prolegomena adopted by TIS adherents who advocate for the Church to “reclaim” her Scriptures.

Summary of Contents

The authors have arranged the contents of their book in accord with the principles, both outlined and implied, in their opening remarks. That is, the contents of this text seek to explicate how a Christian ought to understand her tradition, rather than taking a third-party, outside-observer stance. Chapter One, “The Beginning of the Great Tradition,” takes the reader on a tour not of key personalities (though individual thinkers are named), but a tour of the history of interpretation of Scripture. In compact format, readers are led through the apostolic and Patristic eras with special emphasis laid on the interpretative contribution of the School at Antioch.

Chapter Two, “The Development of the Great Tradition,” furthers the historical context by surveying the activity of the Church in the medieval period, extending comments to the present development of the Church in the Global South. Chapter Three, “The Shaping of the Great Tradition,” explains the Church’s handling of three heretical teachings: Marcionism, Arianism, and Pelagianism. Implications for contemporary Christian teaching and learning are explored in light of how the Christian Tradition has been shaped through grappling with heterodoxy.

“Theological Commitments of the Great Tradition” is the title of chapter four wherein a rather complex conversation is undertaken regarding the dynamic interaction of *the* faith with *my* faith and the *Church’s* faith. Implications are discussed wherein it is decidedly stated that nominal commitments (institutional and/or personal) to the tradition of the Church are not enough to ensure faithful transmission to the next generation.

Lastly in chapter five, “The Application and Advancement of the Great Tradition,” a model for Christian higher education is outlined in two distinct sections. First, historical context is given for understanding where Christian education has been, and then a proposal for the future is given. True to form, Dockery and George suggest that nothing short of a holistic mending of faith and knowledge will be sufficient. The university as the thinking arm of the Church ought to, nonetheless, be situated *ex corde ecclesiae*, at the heart of the Church.

Critical Engagement

While the title sends the message that this text is for students, there are moments when the implied audience is clearly not the student (cf. 63 paragraph 1st full). Generally speaking the tools (glossary, timeline) and overall brevity are quite helpful from the perspective of a student, yet the erudition of language and referencing of complex theological and historical ideas will require a steady hand at the wheel if this text is to be incorporated into any curriculum. By way of example, within twenty pages, the following words were employed in the regular flow of the text: *shibboleth*, *putative*, *fatuous*, *parsimonious*, *expurgate*, *irrefragable*, and the list could continue. To be clear, we are certainly not calling for a revision of the text that waters down its current vocabulary. Rather, our word to readers—especially those looking to incorporate the text into course curriculums—is that a considerable amount of front-end work will need to be done for this text to be classroom-ready. What we have in mind are vocabulary lists, chapter outlines, and either lectures or supplementary readings offered as background for some of the complex historical/theological content. Indeed the brevity of this text cuts both ways as the significance of many of these historical episodes stand to be lost on readers who step to this text with little to no prior exposure to these highly charged historical/theological moments in the life of the Church.

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As mentioned in the introduction, while titled *A Student's Guide*, this text is clearly aimed at all who are associated with institutions of Christian higher education. Certainly, student development professionals play a significant role in the formation of students. As noted, Dockery and George call for the reclamation of the Christian intellectual tradition in order to repair the bifurcation of faith and reason. The authors warn against,


Those...who would be satisfied if church-related institutions merely provided a place for warm-hearted piety that would encourage campus ministry and mission trips. The mission of Christian higher education must include more than the promotion of piety and activism. Christian universities must give priority to Christian thinking and thinking Christianly. (Dockery & George, 2012, p. 88)

Their warning does more than hint at the work that is normally associated with student development programs. We are prompted to ask ourselves if and in what ways our work promotes personal piety and service over Christian thinking? Do, or perhaps more poignantly, *should* student development personnel get a pass to emphasize piety and service while letting full-time teaching faculty bear the load of promoting Christian thinking?

Although personal piety and service are indispensable to the aims of student development professionals, we too are educators and thereby vital partners in the reclamation project. Regrettably, Dockery and George rather flippantly (although likely unintentionally) dismiss or at least bypass the responsibility and potential of student development professionals in recovering the Christian intellectual tradition:

The challenges facing Christian colleges and universities cannot be neutralized simply by adding nicer facilities, better campus-ministry opportunities, and improved student-life programs...Our twenty-first-century context must again recognize the importance of serious Christian thinking and confessional orthodoxy as both necessary and appropriate for the well-being of Christian academic communities. (p. 91)

It seems Dockery and George reinforce the divorce of faith from reason by surmising that facilities, ministry opportunities, and student-life programs are apart from serious Christian thinking. Should not every aspect of the Christian university be permeated by an understanding of and appreciation for the Christian intellectual tradition in order to holistically form students? If the authors are asking the Christian university to carry the mantle of passing on the Christian intellectual tradition, student development professionals should not be sidelined. Rather, we should be steeped in the tradition ourselves as well as creatively incorporating that tradition into educational opportunities for our students.

Therefore, while *The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking: A Student's Guide* is not written directly to student development professionals, it remains a profitable read for our departments. Although Dockery and George do not speak specifically to the educational role of student development, we are not absolved from the responsibility we have to understand and be formed by our rich tradition. Thus, this brief first installment is a helpful read as we join all those involved in Christian higher education to “reclaim, renew, and advance the breadth and depth of this marvelous tradition” (p. 92). 

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The Heart of Higher Education.

Palmer, P. J., & Zajonc, A. (2010).
San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reviewed by John Delony and Sheila Delony



Higher education is undergoing a time of transition, disruption, and a crisis of identity (DeMillo, 2011). Simultaneously, broad concerns regarding the cost and financing of higher education are dominating the public discourse regarding the many forms of post-secondary education. Intentional approaches and conversations about the broad intrinsic purposes of higher education have retreated to secondary importance as more pressing questions concerning institutional and individual programmatic viability, sustainability, and importance have taken center stage.

Due in large part to escalating costs and siloed approaches to teaching and learning, higher education has become about employability, return-on-investment, and certification. Students and institutions are using new technologies to sprint towards composite credentialing by “adding up pedagogical parts” (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010, p.10) and piecemealing credits from multiple, and, at times, divergent sources of varying levels of quality. In this evolving landscape, certificates and badges have begun to replace personal interactions while communal learning exchanges are taking place between usernames and on-line personas. It is in within this tumultuous environment that Palmer and Zajonc advocate for new, highly important integrative educational practices in which “higher education become[s] a more multidimensional enterprise...that draws on the full range of human capacities for knowing, teaching, and learning [and] that bridges the gaps between the disciplines” (p.1). The authors call for a grassroots, communal renewal in the philosophical approach to higher education that “engages students in the systematic exploration of the relationship between their studies of the ‘objective’ world and the purpose, meaning, limits, and aspirations of their lives” (p.10). Originating from conversations that both led to and followed the 2007 national conference, *Uncovering the Heart of Higher Education*, the primary purpose of *The Heart of Higher Education* is to cast a plausible vision of integrative education with the hope of prompting readers to engage in “focused and disciplined conversations” with their colleagues in order to build the “social capacity” necessary for institutional movement toward an integrative approach to education (p. 12-14). The book serves to provide the premises for such conversations as well as examples of initiatives that have already been put into action.

The introduction, which the authors use to state the origins, aims, and limitations of the book, is the only chapter written jointly by both authors. The remaining six chapters are presented by each author individually to maintain the distinct perspectives provided by their academic and practitioner backgrounds: Palmer as a sociologist and educational activist and Zajonc as a researcher and physics professor with a significant interest in “contemplative pedagogy” (p. 4). This unique dual authorship allows for their individual voices to speak from personal experiences and provide relevant expertise throughout the book. Their individual contributions are a significant strength of the book as the text neither becomes too ethereal, excluding practitioners from the conversation, nor is it too prescriptive, lacking the necessary philosophical underpinnings. In chapter one, Palmer addresses the weak philosophical foundation of integrative education by presenting a set of suppositions regarding ontology, epistemology, and pedagogy. In general, Palmer rejects commonly held assumptions about being, knowing, and learning on the grounds that they do not reflect scientific reality. He argues for a relational ontology which would result

in an epistemology rooted in scholars' conscious engagement with the subjects they study. Likewise, he posits a pedagogy grounded in relationships and hospitality. Community is the common thread woven through all of the discussed philosophical foundations. In chapter two, Parker continues to answer common criticisms of integrative education including its messiness, the emotional connection to cognition, the siloed nature of the academy, and the oil and water relationship of spirituality and academics. Throughout chapters three through five, Zajonc employs a narrative and highly technical approach to explore the links between science, the nature of the world, and the methodologies scholars and teachers employ to learn about the world. Zajonc's anecdotes, both personal and second-hand, add substance to the philosophical suppositions through his classroom and research perspective. In one of the more poignant revelations regarding integrative educational exploration, he states:

The moral admonition "discrimination is wrong" changes nothing in us. But truly "living the question" empathetically and imaginatively does change us and the way we make intellectual and moral meaning of our world. (p. 106)


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Zajonc suggests that to truly transform a student, the student must be exposed to "worldviews radically different than their own [which are] encountered and appreciated" (p. 107). In chapter six Palmer talks about the necessary dynamics of cultural change within the academy, specifically focusing on the need for conversations with like-minded colleagues and institutional stakeholders willing to speak honestly with each other and to act boldly as they feel empowered. This happens through personal stories, communal idea formation, and then action. Palmer suggests that true change will be found in "Rosa Park decisions" (p. 136) where academics living "undivided lives" (p. 136) will be moved to dramatic action for the souls of their students and their institutions. The appendix, which comprises the remaining quarter of the book, provides descriptions and examples of integrative education in practice. The appendix is a wonderful section full of ideas of integrative education that have been put into practice in classrooms, programs, and institutions across the globe.

The Heart of Higher Education is based on the presupposition that the core mission of a university is student learning and teacher-student interaction. While this assertion may sound obvious, it should be acknowledged that within a highly competitive university marketplace, many institutions of higher education are primarily interested in research agendas, revenue, student test scores, and rankings; students and learning are merely a means to such ends. In the current climate of higher education, the integrative educator

will find his or herself swimming decidedly upstream. Thankfully, Palmer and Zajonc do not suggest that this type of radical and necessary change will be easy. They suggest that “the education of the young is one of humanity’s greatest communal undertakings” and that there is a moral imperative and scientific basis for the creation of a “comprehensive learning environment” (p. 151).

For student development professionals, this book reinforces in a fresh way their work of holistic student learning. Student development researchers and practitioners daily live the importance of learning outside of the classroom, applied educational experiences, and the critical nature of integrating cognitive deposits into integrative educational experiences. Sadly, these same professionals also daily face the institutional and cultural roadblocks towards this type of seamless curricular experience for students. As such, this book is both a call for seemingly impossible change within the academy, as well as an affirmation of the work student affairs practitioners and outside-of-the-classroom educators perform in the lives of students. While *The Heart of Higher Education* is at times utopian, it is a significant start towards an important transformation in student learning and the pedagogies that guide it.

Palmer and Zajonc believe that the tools for change in higher education are in place and simply need higher education professionals to answer the call for the deep, holistic approach to educating students. This book is a conversation starter for those who want to engage at a deeper level in the importance of higher education and the critical changes in teaching and learning that must happen in order to educate for “the increasingly important challenge of how we live together in our time on earth” (p. viii). 

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