

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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ANATOMY OF A STUDY CENTER

Richard V. Horner

Since the Christian Study Center does not fit established categories in the university, we frequently need to explain what we do. We are something of an enigma, so this past summer we produced our second view book. It articulates our project and includes our newly crafted purpose statement: *Rooted in the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life and culture, and working in cooperation with the University of Florida, the Christian Study Center of Gainesville draws on the intellectual and cultural resources of the Christian tradition and on the scholarly resources of higher education to understand cultural change and to address human questions that are widely shared in the university community.*

In that purpose statement we specifically identify with two things. First, we identify with the Christian tradition, and second, we identify with the University of Florida. In identifying with the Christian tradition we talk sometimes about the "thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life and culture" and at other times about "the intellectual and cultural resources of the Christian tradition." Both phrases express our conviction that the Christian tradition offers an understanding of human experience and culture that everyone needs to consider, both those who profess Christian faith and those who do not. Throughout the modern era Western culture has largely resisted Christian thought, but it is now time to reconsider.

In identifying with the University of Florida we want to identify with the university itself

and with the university community at large. We are glad to be in this neighborhood, and it is important to us to be good neighbors not only to the university but to all who are a part of this community – to book stores and restaurants, to churches and campus ministries, to professors and students, to the University of Florida and to Santa Fe Community College. Most centrally, though, when we identify with the university we identify with the work that it does: the work of research and inquiry, of teaching and learning, and of producing knowledge and generating ideas that shape lives and cultures. We are very serious about

joining the university in its work and about bringing the resources of scholarship together with the intellectual and cultural resources of the Christian tradition.

The reason we want to bring scholarly resources and the Christian tradition together is "to understand cultural change and to address enduring human questions that are widely shared in the university community."

Study centers and institutes associated with university communities can have various legitimate focuses. We have placed our focus on understanding contemporary cultural change and on addressing enduring questions about what it means to be human. In short, we want to keep the important challenges of what we call human flourishing in view, and we want to bring the best scholarship and the deepest Christian reflection to bear in thinking about important enduring questions in a constantly changing context.

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Working from the basic purpose statement, in addition to *drawing* on the resources of higher learning and the Christian tradition, we also want to *contribute* to them. Quoting the view-book: “The Study Center affirms scholarly inquiry, artistic creativity, and Christian reflection and we seek to contribute to each of these critical endeavors out of love of God and neighbor.” We do not mean to be presumptuous, but we do intend to be serious about our work. We have been blessed with precocious, articulate undergraduate students and with thoughtful, hardworking graduate students, with first-rate local faculty/scholars who are doing important work in their fields, and with numerous, excellent guest scholars who come from around the country. From student scholars and artists who are just developing through to Study Center board members who are senior scholars, the Study Center has been making important contributions to the university and to higher learning, and we know we are still just at the beginning of what is to come in both scholarship and the arts as we continue in the tradition of Christian reflection.

Across the page from our statement of purpose our view book lays out four fundamental commitments, and when taken together they help to give a sense for the unique role that the Study Center plays here in Gainesville. Our first commitment is to Christ, which includes the historic Christian faith as articulated in the Old and New Testaments, summarized in the creeds of the Church, and enriched by the Christian tradition. Because of that commitment, we are also committed to critique or scholarship, to a conversational approach to inquiry, and to questions that focus on culture. Our program flows out of our vision for exploring the intersection of Christian thought and academic discourse and also out of our four commitments, and we are very pleased with the way our classes, lectures, and reading groups have come together this year.

Our purpose and commitments generate and shape our program. Our Monday night classes represent the breadth of what we are trying to do. Therefore, they are a central part of what

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we offer at the Study Center. Over the past several years we have seen these classes develop into engaging, thoughtful explorations of a wide variety of issues that bring current scholarship and Christian thought together. This class is one of the places where our commitment to bring the university and Christian thought together gets worked out in specific ways. Put simply, we approach these Monday evening classes by starting where the university is and then moving toward Christian reflection and understanding. Let me explain a little of what this means.

First, because we think scholarship is important and because the university is our starting point, we accept the university’s standards for scholarship and its expectations for those who teach. There are other completely legitimate ways to operate in this community, but this is the path we have chosen for ourselves. We have made the deliberate choice to offer classes that could just as easily be offered on the campus. While members of the university community may not agree with our conclusions, they should have no reason to complain about the quality of the scholarship, the qualifications of our teachers, the legitimacy and importance of the issues addressed, or the genuine academic freedom that our guests have as they stand at our lectern.

Second, because the university is our starting point, we ask questions that are, or ought to be, shared in the university community. While members of the university community often do not share our answers or conclusions, we do want to be addressing questions that matter widely in the university, so we seek to begin with shared questions that arise in the context of human experience and specifically in the course of inquiry and learning. Having said that, we also want to formulate questions that ought to be asked, even if they are not already being asked. In fact, we view the framing of questions as a central part of our work. We want to ask questions that keep the focus on what it means to be human, and we want to ask questions that provoke thought, deepen reflection, and lead to engagement with Christian wisdom and understanding.

While we start with the university and draw on its scholarship, we aim at Christian thought in a way that asks both those who profess Christian faith and those who do not to consider more deeply a Christian understanding of whatever the issue happens to be. Our conversational approach seeks to bring together different voices for the sake of finding understanding about our genuine questions. There are voices from scholarship, voices from the Christian tradition, voices from those who attend our events, and each adds something to the conversation so as to allow us to take seriously the ways that Christian insight might respond to particular questions.

A couple examples come to mind of how these two objectives, starting with the university and aiming at Christian reflection, have shaped our classes.

Last fall we offered a class on "How We Got Four (and only four) Gospels." This may not sound like it starts where the university is, but stop and consider. In the year previous to this class Dan Brown's best-selling book *The Da Vinci Code* had been turned into a movie, the Gospel of Thomas and the Nag Hammadi documents had become the stuff of 24-hour news programming, and National Geographic had published the Gospel of Judas. Questions about the biblical text, and especially the gospels, had become questions for everyone, including scholars. We were starting right where we needed to, and we moved by way of first-rate scholarship to a consideration of the biblical texts that gave us good reasons to see why the canonical gospels would have been received as they were by the early church.

Last spring's class on poetry provides another good example of how we shape the questions that we think ought to be asked on the campus. We entitled the class, "The Poet as Priest" and we asked our five speakers to address the question, "How do you account for the power of poetry?" We unpacked this question as follows. Does poetry put us in touch with something that transcends the poem and the poet? If not, how do you make sense of the power of poetry? Is a poem just the sum of its parts or is it something more? These are the sort of questions that we think are well worth asking on university campuses. It is the sort of question that we want students and faculty to struggle with, and we are very grateful to the three students and two faculty who did struggle with it for our benefit and hopefully theirs as well.

By starting where the university is and moving toward Christian understanding and reflection, these classes served both Christians and those who do not hold to a Christian understanding of human experience. In the first case, Christians, who do not always take scholarship as seriously as they ought where the biblical text is in view, had to do some demanding thinking about ancient history, and in the second case, Christians, who do not always think as deeply as they ought to about such things as the power of poetry, had to think more deeply and carefully about what a Christian understanding of human experience entails. Meanwhile, people who have dismissed the biblical text too easily had to deal with the fact that solid biblical scholarship suggests a far more coherent and reliable canon than 24-hour news anchors indicate, and people who have dismissed a Christian understanding of human experience too easily had to grapple with the fact that this understanding offers a compelling way of thinking about poetry and about other deeply moving works of art.

Our Monday night class has been the context for an emerging, new initiative that is taking shape called the Forum on Religion and Scholarship. The Forum on Religion and Scholarship seeks to promote a broad ongoing discussion of religion in the university. While the Study Center's own staff and teachers will obviously contribute in ways that are rooted in Christian faith and understanding, the Forum as a whole will welcome a wide discussion of religions and of the issues that arise at the intersection of religion and scholarship in the university setting. For the most part, we expect to develop this discussion on the campus. Currently, for instance, we are working with historians at UF in both Christian and Jewish history to develop a series of lectures on the issue of "Teaching the History of Religion." These lectures will take place on the campus of the university. This fall, meanwhile, we are going to get the Forum on Religion and Scholarship started by including it in our Monday evening class.

The Forum grows largely out of last fall's Monday night series on Religion and Scholarship, which grew, in turn, out of John Sommerville's book on *The Decline of the Secular University*. As John observed in his book, over the past century and more, universities have resisted and marginalized religious thought, and it is now time for them to reconsider. We agree with John, and we hope that

the Forum on Religion and Scholarship will help in thinking about how religion can contribute to higher education. We are encouraged, frankly, that the main criticism of John's book has been from people who argue that religion has already been making a comeback in the university. We are glad to hear this argument being made, but this takes nothing away from John's call to explore far more fully the role that religion can play in higher learning.

We also agree with John when he notes that where religion and the university are concerned, secularism is not the only challenge. In recent years the university has moved increasingly away from liberal arts education and toward professional and vocational training: medicine, law, engineering, education, business, sports medicine, family youth and community services, etc. This trend creates two polar challenges. First, just as the Study Center explores the relationship between Christianity and the liberal arts, so we need to explore the intersection of Christian thought and the professions. Second, as the trend toward vocational training marginalizes the Humanities, and as literature, philosophy, history, and religion become relatively less and less important with every passing semester, we have reason to be concerned from the standpoint of Christian understanding. While some of the demise of the liberal arts is the fault of scholars in these disciplines, as a Study Center we believe it is important to support the humanizing role of the Humanities and of religion specifically.

It is difficult to argue for the broad exploration of religions these days without being misunderstood. Often the study of religions is framed by the view that all religions are equally valid and pretty much interchangeable. In such an understanding, religion or spirituality denotes a realm that is either imaginary or malleable and thus open to being fashioned as we wish to fashion it. In this approach to religion, one notion of spirituality is seen as good as any other, and the only truths worth taking seriously are the truths we create for ourselves rather than truths that we discover about humans as humans. In such a framework, ironically, the attempt to affirm and promote the study of religion flattens and empties all actual religions, robbing them of their differences, significance, and potential contribution to academic conversation.

The opposite problem arises when people who do take religion seriously and do hold their convictions deeply conclude that they will simply shut out other viewpoints. Here at the Christian Study Center we do, in fact, take religion seriously, and we hold our Christian convictions seriously, but for this very reason we want to encourage dialogue rather than cut it off. We want to begin and sustain conversations rather than end them, and we believe this means inviting people, who come from a variety of religious viewpoints and from both religious and secular viewpoints, to speak to us as well as listen to us. For this reason, we invite a broad range of speakers to participate in our classes and lectures, and we will seek to be especially broad and inviting in our Forum on Religion and Scholarship.

The fact is, the sort of issues that we have just identified are exactly the sort of issues that we want the Forum on Religion and Scholarship to explore. At such points as these we begin to touch on some of the reasons why we need an ongoing exploration of the issues that arise at the intersection of religion and scholarship in the context of the university. We are, therefore, eager to take this initiative, and we are very pleased and appreciative of the faculty from the religion and history departments who have agreed to lead the way in our series this fall. We are also glad that John Sommerville will once again contribute a paper that will not only address the issue of studying religion but will also provide an example of the sort of thing that John has called for in his book.

These essays are never long enough to explore all the issues that we would like to explore or all the issues that we deal with regularly as we seek to serve the university out of love of God and neighbor, but we trust this brief essay provides some additional insight into our work as a Study Center. There are several other facets to our work that we have not touched on here, so again we encourage you to read through the view book and also to peruse the center pages of this issue of *Reconsiderations* to see more fully how the Christian Study Center contributes uniquely to the university community.

Richard V. Horner is the Executive Director of the Christian Study Center.

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

FALL 2007 ACADEMIC PROGRAM

“Blaise Pascal: His Thoughts – And Ours”

Daniel Julich, doctoral candidate at UF, and **Richard Horner** lead a study of this important seventeenth-century Christian thinker.

Mondays, September 10th – October 8th at 7:30 pm

“Studying Religion -Why is it important? -What makes it so challenging?”

UF faculty from Religion and History lead an inquiry into the importance and the challenges of teaching religion in the university. Speakers include:

Jon Sensbach, Associate Professor of History

Jason Neelis, Assistant Professor of Religion

Leah Hochman, Assistant Professor of Religion, Center for Jewish Studies

John Sommerville, Professor Emeritus, History

Mondays, October 15th – November 5th at 7:30 pm

“The Culture and the Cross” (new this semester)

Richard Horner leads this class for UF and SFCC students that explores the voices of our culture and the voices of the cross. (Lunch provided.)

Wednesdays, September 5th – November 14th, 11:45 - 12:35 (period 5)

Reading Group: “Dogma or Drama? Selections from Dorothy Sayers”

Todd Best leads this discussion of Sayers’ *Letters to a Diminished Church* and *The Mind of the Maker*.

September 21: Letters to a Diminished Church, Part 1 - pp. 1-124

October 19: Letters to a Diminished Church, Part 2 - pp. 125-275 (171-240, optional)

November 16: The Mind of the Maker, Preface, pp. 1-178.

Fridays, September 21st, October 19th, November 16th, 11:45 - 12:45

Graduate Roundtable

Todd Best leads this inter-disciplinary reading and discussion group for graduate students.

This fall’s reading: *Restoration of Reason* by Montague Brown.

Fridays, September 14 & 28, October 12 & 26, and November 9 at 10:00am.

Pascal Society Lectures

Ryan Fields: “John Hamilton and His Kirk: Reevaluating the Scottish Reformation and the Catholic/Protestant Divide”

Wednesday, October 10th at 11:45am

Graham Glover: “An Introduction to Pope Benedict XVI and ‘A Theology of Politics’”

Friday, October 26 at 10:00am

CHANGES IN OUR BUILDING

The physical space of the Center is morphing once again. After last year’s consistent full crowds for our Monday Night Class, we are currently in the midst of expanding our classroom. Upon completion later this fall, the expansion will give us an extra 25 seats making our capacity about 75. Of course, last year we had nights when there were 75 people in the old version of the room, but that was standing room only. With our expansion we can provide comfortable seating for larger crowds.

Also, we are converting our upstairs Conference Room into offices for staff. This will mean that for the first time, all our full time staff will have office space, and they will all be in one part of the building. Many thanks to those who have made contributions to make these expansion projects possible.

WHY CHARLES TAYLOR DESERVED THIS YEAR'S TEMPLETON PRIZE

C. John Sommerville

You may know that the annual Templeton Prize, which carries more money than a Nobel Prize, is awarded for contributions in religion. Over the years it has become a notable cultural event. It has been awarded to Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, but is normally given to those working the border between science and religion, like Stanley Jaki and John Polkinghorne.

This year the prize went to Charles Taylor, which is a name that should mean more than it does. Taylor is a philosopher, who taught at Oxford and McGill (in Montreal), and he is notable for putting "personalism" on the philosophical agenda.

Why is that remarkable? Personalism is significant in that it brings religious questions back to the table in the discourse of meaning. The academic world is caught in a struggle between philosophical Naturalism and this other thing I'm calling Personalism. Philosophy departments aren't necessarily debating this issue, being distracted by smaller-scale concerns. But the parts of the university that impinge on the "real world," the sciences and all the professional schools, keep stumbling over issues of Naturalism and the human.

Naturalism is basically materialism. It seeks to "reduce" human values like justice, truth, responsibility, wealth, love, the human, to "physicalist" terms. You've been hearing about the neuroscientists' efforts to explain religion and everything else (except their own science!) by tracking and measuring brain impulses. Before that, it was sociobiology that tried to explain the human away, in terms of evolutionary psychology. That didn't get very far before getting stuck. But the naturalists will never give up, nor should they. Science has a duty to see how far naturalistic explanations and proofs will work. Unfortunately, scientists sometimes explain things before discovering them, promising answers before they're available. This is often convincing to journalists, and is becoming imbedded in our culture.

Personalism takes the opposite approach. Basically, it takes those value terms (justice, responsibility, love, etc.) to be as real as anything in the universe. Philosophers define real as irreducible, and personal values have never been "explained" or reduced conceptually. There is no reason to think they ever will be, making them as real as gravity or space. Indeed, personalists

argue that the *most* real things in our universe are the things that can *act*. Actors (persons) are more real than the things that are acted upon, such as our physical elements. So it is not only our bodies that are "real" but our intentions and character as well.

Since religion is more obviously part of the personal rather than the material, Taylor's arguments bring religion back to the forefront of philosophy. In many academic departments, Naturalism is assumed to be self-evident. So while people may casually use human and even religious terms, we imagine them to be philosophically or scientifically second rate.

This is where Taylor made a breakthrough. He has forced academics to recognize the reality of the personal. The important thing for us is that the personal is the conceptual language that religion is comfortable with. It's an old term that never captured the attention of philosophers. Taylor did capture their attention, especially with his *Sources of the Self* (Harvard, 1989). "Self" is the fashionable term for human concerns. It is a long and complex book, but it became an instant classic.

For whatever reason, Taylor doesn't build his case by drawing on his personalist predecessors, like Martin Buber, John Macmurray, Michael Polanyi, Borden Parker Bowne, John Zizioulas, John Habgood. Fashion has passed them by. Rather, his big book engages the usual suspects: Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, the Encyclopedists, Hume, the Romantics, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault. In other words, he is forcing his way into the philosophical canon rather than pleading for a niche within the academy.

Though retired, Taylor is still very active. Being asked to give the Gifford Lectures in Scotland is as high an honor as philosophers or theologians get. Taylor gave his series in 1999 and is developing them into three books on the large subject of secularization. He is broadening that theme far beyond the discredited "secularization hypothesis" of Max Weber and others. The third volume, *A Secular Age*, is due out this year.

Note: *Reconsiderations* ran a review of *Sources of the Self* earlier, in 2:4 (June, 2003). To access that review online, go to: christianstudycenter.org/article.php?ArtID=44.]

A board member of the Christian Study Center, C. John Sommerville is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Florida. He is currently finishing a book on religious ideas for secular universities.

SELECTIONS FROM CHARLES TAYLOR'S ACCEPTANCE
SPEECH OF THE TEMPLETON PRIZE

MARCH 14, 2007

But the barriers between our social sciences and the spiritual dimension of life are crippling in a whole host of other ways as well. I have recently been working on the issue of what we mean in describing our present civilization in the West as "secular." For a long time, in mainstream sociology this development was taken as unproblematic and inevitable. Certain of the features of modernity: economic development, urbanization, rising mobility, higher educational levels, were seen as inevitably bringing about a decline in religious belief and practice. This was the famous "secularization thesis." For a long time, this view dominated thinking in social science and history. More recent events have shaken this conviction, even among mainstream scholars.

But well before this revision occurred, a minority of scholars were already turning the theory inside out...

It was indeed, true that the various facets of modernization destabilized older, traditional forms of religious life; but new forms were always being re-invented, and some of these took on tremendous importance...

Breaking out of the old intellectual mould opens up a whole new field of great importance: what are the new forms of religion which are developing in the West? And what relation do they have to those which are growing elsewhere, in Asia, Africa, Latin America? This is part of what I am trying to study in my work, drawing on the pioneering analyses of David Martin, on the writings of Robert Bellah, and on the recent work of younger sociologists, like José Casanova and Hans Joas.

Some of these forms, like those in which religion or confessionality becomes the basis of a quasi-nationalist political mobilization, have obviously assumed immense, even threatening proportions in our day. We urgently need to understand their dynamic, their benefits and dangers, an area that the old framework of secularization theory hid from sight. In this domain too, John Templeton's insight turns out to be valid, a blindness to the spiritual dimension of human life makes us incapable of exploring issues which are vital to our lives. Or to turn it around and state the positive: bringing the spiritual back in opens domains in which important and even exciting discoveries become possible.

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST AND SUPPORT

The Christian Study Center is funded solely through the generous contributions of those who share our commitment to serve the university community by exploring the intersection of Christian thought and academic discourse.

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

Essay: "Anatomy of a Study Center" by Richard V. Horner, p. 1.

Most centrally, though, when we identify with the university we identify with the work that it does: the work of research and inquiry, of teaching and learning, and of producing knowledge and generating ideas that shape lives and culture.

Review essay: "Why Charles Taylor Deserved This Year's Templeton Prize" by C. John Sommerville, p. 6.

Since religion is more obviously part of the personal rather than the material, Taylor's arguments bring religion back to the forefront of philosophy.

FALL CALENDAR

Monday Night Class - "Blaise Pascal: His Thoughts - And Ours"

Daniel Julich and Richard Horner

Mondays, September 10 - October 8, 7:30pm.

Reading Group on Christian Thought: "Dogma or Drama? Selections from Dorothy Sayers"

Facilitated by Todd Best, Director of Programs.

Fridays, September 21, October 19, November 16, 11:45 - 12:45pm.

See inside for reading schedule.

New class for undergrads - "The Culture and the Cross"

Taught by Richard Horner. Lunch provided. Especially for undergraduate students.

Wednesdays, September 5 - November 14, 11:45 - 12:35 (period 5)

Reading Group: Graduate Roundtable - Restoration of Reason

Facilitated by Todd Best. For graduate students.

Fridays, Sept. 14 & 28, Oct. 12 & 26, Nov. 9, 11:45am.

Please check our website at www.christianstudycenter.org for the latest information and previous issues of *Reconsiderations*. If you do not wish to receive *Reconsiderations*, email us at info@christianstudycenter.org or call us at 352-379-7375

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