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EVERYDAY THEOLOGY

Academics and Faith: Our Interview with Dr. Jay Green

BY RICHARD DOSTER JANUARY 21ST, 2015



Dr. Jay Green, a professor of history at Covenant College, wants Christians to rethink the way we approach academic studies.

We have this “sturdy tradition” of integrating faith and learning, Green contends: an approach that seeks to inform, and ultimately transform the fields of philosophy, sociology, science, mathematics, and even religion.

Green, himself the product of a Christian college, is grateful that his own sense of God’s world has been “shaped by pursuing knowledge refracted through the prism of a Christian theological and philosophical framework.” But Green wonders if that’s enough; if we’ve thought thoroughly about what’s needed to form a full and accurate Christian worldview; if we’re truthfully integrating our faith with our study of the world around us; if the integration we have is producing “faithful learning.”

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We've thought a lot about how our faith should affect academics, Green says, but we've barely considered how our study of physics, history, philosophy, or sociology can affect our faith. Green believes we need a vision of faithful learning that pushes the conversation back in the direction of the disciplines.

"These are sophisticated and time-honored crafts," he writes. When they're practiced wisely, "they hold enormous potential for cultivating a deeper love for God and our neighbors."

In a new series of booklets called "Faithful Learning" Green and several colleagues lay out such a vision. ByFaith spoke with him about a few of the key principles.

Most byFaith readers have some understanding of how a Christian worldview shapes their study of math, science, and philosophy. You want them to consider this interaction the other way around: how academic disciplines can affect their faith. What do we have to gain from that?

Simply raising the question can serve to remind us that the academic disciplines — from Renaissance literature and plant biology to computer science and social psychology — are vital parts of God's good order and, though tainted by the curse of sin (as all parts of creation are), hold enormous potential for enriching our lives and deepening our walk with the Lord. God has equipped humankind with sensibilities that enable us to observe, select, organize, analyze, read, recite, write, count, calculate, translate, interpret, conjugate, draw, paint, code, play, and sculpt the raw materials of creation. And He has written into every human heart an impulse to know and to steward the "stuff" of His world. Human cultures over time have cultivated, refined, and concentrated these propensities into what we today call the modern academic disciplines. Each is an astonishingly good gift from our good and gracious God. The only fitting response is gratitude.

God has entrusted these magnificent tools to all who bear His image, and we are called to use them for our good and for His glory. It is disconcerting that many — perhaps most — of the world's leading scholars fail to see or acknowledge the deep story that grounds their work and gives it meaning. But God

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still uses these brilliant minds — even in their rebellion — to carry forth His purposes in the world. And they praise Him unwittingly. In turn, we have every reason to praise God when we have the privilege to observe a well-crafted essay, an elegantly formulated economic equation, a deftly engineered machine, or carefully constructed ethnography. Even if the hands and the brains behind these wonders have no interest in the things of God, these works bear something of His goodness and His beauty. Consider singing the doxology the next time you have the opportunity to thumb an accounting textbook!

As extensions of God's creation, the academic disciplines are a part of God's general revelation. And just as the Bible helps us to read, interpret, and care for the creation, a keen-eyed knowledge of general revelation also helps us to read, understand, and apply God's Word. A trained appreciation of literature, for instance, enhances the ways we read the literary genres found in Scripture. When we become schooled in sociology, we are better equipped to assess the social structures found in Old and New Testament societies, and better equipped to apply its insights into our own social contexts. Historical study helps us see the strangeness of past civilizations we find in the Bible, while a background in linguistics will lead us to apply deeper, more probing kinds of questions to the Babel narrative in Genesis 11.

You point out that many Christians are apprehensive about the modern university, believing its classrooms to be "incubators for left-leaning radicalism and secular humanism." How can the academic disciplines nourish our faith if they are studied in settings like these?

I'd like to push back a bit on the premise of your question. We Christians are sometimes too quick to assume the worst when thinking about what happens within university classrooms. Sociologist Christian Smith has shown that we evangelicals have long made a habit of convincing ourselves that

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our way of life is constantly in grave and existential danger. We like to think of ourselves as an embattled minority with our backs against the wall. While there is reason to believe that Christianity faces some genuine threats in our current climate, acting as though modern universities are nothing but repositories of “left-leaning radicalism” or “secular humanism” is neither accurate nor all that helpful. Such talk exaggerates the dangers posed by non-Christian colleges and universities, and leaves young people with the impression that modern learning falls entirely within enemy territory. This simply isn’t true! And I fear that continued talk in this vein could become an excuse to withdraw from this vital sphere of Kingdom stewardship.

Undoubtedly, college classrooms can be hostile environments to people of faith, and some professors do use such settings to grind political axes; most academic organizations, it should be noted, formally condemn this kind of illiberalism and advocacy. I believe Christians should exercise discernment as we enter into this or any other sphere of cultural work. But encountering new information or different perspectives in a class doesn’t necessarily signify an attack on faith or an attempt to reprogram minds. At its best, learning ought to be dynamic, challenging, expanding, and, at times, even unsettling. We don’t engage education merely to have our already settled (and often unexamined) opinions fortified. Not all of the presuppositions we Christians maintain are biblical; many of them probably need to be examined and reconsidered.

One of the most exciting features of college life is the opportunity it affords to read great books, think great thoughts, and join in the great conversation of human civilization. Intellectual growth is not inconsistent with Christian faith! We need to acknowledge that it has the potential of also nurturing rather than only diminishing Christian belief. And we should spend a little less time fretting about its dangers and a bit more time celebrating the ways it demonstrates God’s goodness to us.

You describe a number of Christian responses to secular learning and the modern university, providing pluses and minuses to each, but ultimately judging them to be inadequate. As an alternative you make the case for “faithful learning” — an approach that views the academic disciplines as a gift from God, as part of the creational order that can help us cultivate a deeper love for God and our neighbors. Can you talk about that?

I believe that engaging the traditional academic disciplines, if done thoughtfully and conscientiously, can inform, enliven, and deepen our faith in Christ. Our faith doesn’t occupy a solitary region of our lives but encompasses every part of us: mind, body, and spirit. As we develop greater aptitudes for knowing our world and ourselves, we simultaneously deepen our capacities to love God and our neighbors. The academic disciplines provide ways of helping us develop such aptitudes. Rather than seeing academic study as a purely “secular” dimension of our experiences or as a necessary evil that we must endure to make our way in the world, we should consider the ways that God can use these tools of insight to make us more faithful disciples.

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Academic disciplines are not merely bodies of knowledge and skills. They also rely on and help advance certain kinds of virtues. It’s easy to forget about these underlying virtues when we think about studying algebra or doing our Spanish homework, but good disciplinary practices are impossible without them: humility in the face of vast and complicated data; charity when encountering new or objectionable ideas; honesty as we discover results that don’t fit our presuppositions; courage to ask difficult questions, to face ridicule or antagonism for upholding

unpopular or unexpected conclusions, and to change one’s mind; compassion in the face of human suffering and cruelty; patience when working on projects with people who are irritating or lazy; and diligence as we face a long semester filled with a pile of difficult assignments that seem beyond our ability to complete.

These virtues are admittedly generic and commonly available to everyone who participates within

the academic enterprise. But it shouldn't be hard for believers to see them as also deeply Christian virtues. Just as Christians acknowledge that their aptitudes for calculus, abstract thinking, or singing soprano are gifts from God, they should equally recognize that the virtues embedded within academic practices are a part of the Spirit's fruit. And they should likewise consider the possibility that God may be using their academic labors not only to prepare us to better know and engage His world but also to shape our hearts in conformity to the character of Jesus Christ to enable us more faithfully to love God and to love our neighbors.

But that doesn't mean that everything that comes out of the secular university is good. We still need discernment, right?

Absolutely! We shouldn't trust everything that comes out of the secular university. But I would be quick to add that we also shouldn't trust everything that comes out of a Christian college or any other human institution for that matter. In "An Invitation to Academic Studies," I wanted to make a case for the basic legitimacy and relative goodness of academic disciplines in an effort to challenge and temper some of the outsized fears of secularism within university classrooms that many Christians too easily harbor. But nothing in my case for the disciplines should be read as an unqualified endorsement.

It would be reckless of us to send our children into college without helping them anticipate and discern the potential ideological and spiritual pitfalls they are likely to face in and outside the classroom; we need to send them to college with their eyes wide open and to buttress them for the challenges ahead. Having said that, I also think we should urge our kids to avoid walking into undergraduate classrooms with the "fists up," assuming that every encounter with a secular professor or a non-Christian text will be an occasion to correct errors or to contend for the faith. They need to be shrewd, yes, but they still must be teachable. With a proper attitude of discernment, our kids need to embrace their opportunities to learn through their encounters with biology and economics, political science and poetry, history and physics. Christian students do not engage the world of academic learning alone. God is with them in every circumstance, and it may please Him to use even their experiences of researching papers, practicing scales, conjugating verbs, or writing code to make them more like Jesus.

Toward the end of the introductory booklet you call for us to abandon the "oft-repeated maxim that a Christian student's highest educational goal is the development of a Christian worldview." What goals should have a higher priority? And if we adopt those goals, how will we be better people? Better Christians? Better students?

I contend that developing of a Christian worldview remains a necessary educational goal. It's essential that we equip our kids with the capacity to view reality through the lens of Scripture so they will be prepared to think theologically and philosophically about every facet of life. We need to root our children deeply in the Bible, reminding them that its narrative of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation should inform and enlighten the ways they see and interpret every square inch of Christ's reign. I'm not at all suggesting that developing a sophisticated Christian worldview is unnecessary. But I am arguing that it's insufficient.

We must do more than teach our children to be good theologians and philosophers of the subjects they study. Faithful learning requires us to take seriously the traditions of disciplinary craftsmanship that we have been blessed to have received. To become faithful Christian students, we must become apt and faithful craftsmen of our disciplines. To illustrate my point in the booklet, I reflected on the nonacademic craft of the blacksmith. A faithful Christian blacksmith should develop a deep and abiding perspective on the biblical foundations and significance of forging wrought iron with hammer and anvil; in other words, a faithful Christian blacksmith should see this craft through a Christian worldview. But the blacksmith who can only wax theological about said practices is, in the end, a very bad blacksmith. In fact, I would say that he isn't a blacksmith at all; he is merely a theologian of blacksmithery. He achieves the right to be called a faithful blacksmith only when he successfully (as judged by other blacksmiths) hones the necessary and time-honored knowledge, skills, and virtues related to forging wrought iron with hammer and anvil, and can demonstrate these practices by producing whatever tools, agricultural implements, or decorative installations that he, in his calling as blacksmith, has been tasked to produce. Worldview mastery of a craft is no substitute for mastery of the craft itself.

I believe we should apply the same principles of craftsmanship to academic study. When students enter college they will sooner or later choose a major. And in doing so, they begin a process of being inducted into an academic discipline, an endeavor that entails far more than ingesting a compendium of information. Whether it is in mathematics, music, education, or chemistry, students as college majors undergo a process of enculturation into the practices that have defined these disciplines since they originated as part of the academy. They here begin to imbibe the thick, rich, and varied traditions of knowledge, skills, and virtues that give the disciplines their unique qualities and enable them to advance certain kinds of understandings.

A faithful Christian student should be every bit as eager to become steeped in the cultures and practices of her academic craft as she is in thinking biblically about its foundational principles and implications. We are not called merely to be theologians of our crafts, but able and faithful academic craftsmen who are determined to carry out the good work of our guilds as part of our service to God's kingdom. Our faithfulness to God requires that we develop long-term, serious-minded commitments to these crafts.

Jay Green has been professor of history at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia since 1998.

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Richard Doster is the editor of byFaith. He is also the author of two novels, *Safe at Home* (March 2008) and *Crossing the Lines* (June 2009), both published by David C. Cook Publishers.

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5 Responses to *Academics and Faith*



miren ivankovic says:

January 4, 2015 at 5:36 pm

Interesting article and its topic. I have struggled for years about really true, honest integration of Christian Faith and my Principles of Economics classes. Some years ago I ran into Prof. Kenneth Elzinga, from Univ. of Virginia, and asked him about his approach, knowing that he is a person of faith. One, UV is a secular school, but he said, more importantly, he is Lord's servant, and as such, the best way to serve Him, is to teach his students economics so that they can become the best economists that they can be. He said, the classroom time, which is scarce as it is already, is reserved for economics. Students are welcome to visit my home and discuss other issues then, he concluded.

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Phillip Shroyer says: