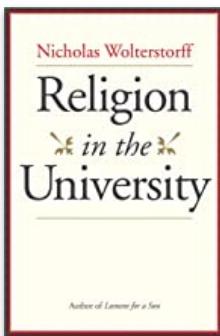


# ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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## *Religion in the (Public) University*

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### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades Christians in academia have been exceptionally well served by (Christian) philosophers. There has been an extraordinary renaissance of Christian

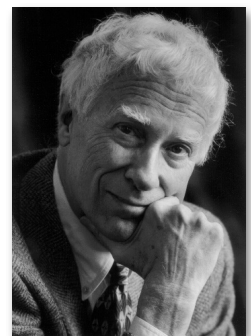
philosophy, especially in America, with a whole corpus of literature and journals appearing. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (NW) have been leading figures in this renaissance and have, themselves, produced a major body of rich and creative work. Since his retirement from Yale, Wolterstorff has published a surprising number of books and it is his latest book, *Religion in the University* (Yale University Press, 2019), that is the subject of this edition of *Ethics in Conversation* (EiC).

Plantinga and Wolterstorff are alumni of Calvin College where they also taught philosophy. As I noted in a previous EiC, the USA is blessed with hundreds of such Christian colleges and universities. However, it is not such institutions that are the focus

of Wolterstorff's book, but the *public universities*. Wolterstorff is Emeritus Professor of Yale and it is this type of university that he has in mind in his reflections. He poses early on the question at the heart of the book: "Is it permissible for the scholar who is religious to allow her religion to shape how she engages in the practice of her discipline?". (p. 4) By "permissible" NW has in mind the ethic of scholarship in the modern university, i.e. what it does and does not allow.

### MAX WEBER (1864-1920) AND THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

NW reaches for the work of the influential sociologist Max Weber to articulate the ethos of the modern university. Two years before he died Weber gave his lecture "Science as Vocation", and reading NW pushed me to go and read Weber's lecture. In German "science" is *Wissenschaft* and refers not just to the physical sciences but to the range of



university disciplines, and it is important to remember this in the quotes below. Weber's "Science as Vocation" is sobering, depressing reading, and it is hard to think that many young students would be encouraged to enter academia as a result.

Weber is clear that religion has no role in university scholarship. He writes, "today no one can really doubt in his heart of hearts that science is alien to God—whether or not he admits it to himself. Release from the rationalism and intellectualism of science is the fundamental premise of life in communion with the divine."<sup>1</sup> Weber sets religion in antithesis to scholarship and insists that if the believer is to participate in the university, he or she must leave their religious beliefs at the classroom door:

Science, which is without "preconceptions" in the sense that it rejects any religious allegiance, likewise has no knowledge of "miracles" and "revelation". If it did, it would be untrue to its own "preconceptions". The religious believer has knowledge of both. And a science without "preconceptions" expects of the believer no less, but also no more than the recognition that if the course of events can be explained without recourse to supernatural interventions that must be excluded from an empirical account of the causal factors involved, then it will *have to be explained* in the way that science attempts to do so.<sup>2</sup>

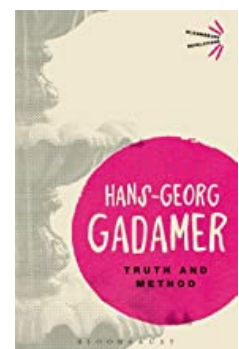
Weber describes this state at which we have arrived as "the fate of the age" and notes that those who cannot endure it should return to the arms of the

churches. However, by doing so "he will inevitably be forced to make a 'sacrifice of the intellect'".<sup>3</sup> Through his vast historical research Weber was emotionally attracted to the "inner-worldly asceticism" of monks and nuns of the medieval era but he thought such lives were no longer possible. Religion was now a private matter and simply had no place in the spheres of public life.

## WHY MAX WEBER IS WRONG

NW identifies three developments that have shown Weber's approach to the modern university to be quite wrong. First, he points to developments in philosophy of science, in the narrower sense of the word. A vital insight is that scientific theory is *underdetermined* by the facts. One might think that a scientist just assembles the facts and thereby the theory emerges. However, the underdetermination of theory by facts means that the identification of facts and their interpretation are open to more than one interpretation. There is much more going on in science than collecting facts and NW points to Thomas Kuhn's influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (first ed. 1962) in this respect, which pointed out that science always operates within a paradigm.

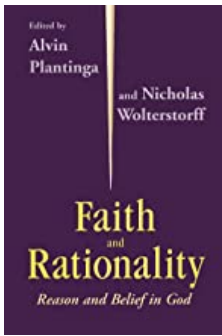
Second, NW flags the publication in 1960 of H.-G. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. Gadamer is the father of modern philosophical hermeneutics, and he argued for the importance of tradition in understanding, making the point that our understanding moves forward on the basis of our pre-judgments, the very thing Weber sought to eliminate.



<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*. Hackett Classics. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004). Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



Third, NW points out that whereas Weber appeals to universality and neutral objectivity, over the past fifty years the university has been inundated by diverse particularity. Historically, white

middle class males dominated western universities, but in recent decades the demography of such universities has changed and with it a range of very particular subjects have appeared such as post-colonial literature, black liberation studies, queer theory, etc.

## RELIGION?

Despite the above developments, the role of religion in the university remains controversial. In his Preface NW notes that whereas most scholars are aware of the above developments, when it comes to developments in the rationality of religious belief, far too many remain ignorant. This makes the third chapter perhaps the most important in this book. NW begins it by quoting the social theorist Seyla Benhabib who reportedly said of religious people that they “suffer from a rationality deficit”. (p. 63) NW responds to such charges, and does so decisively.

As he observes, in recent decades philosophers of religion have addressed the issue of the rationality of religious belief more extensively and creatively than has ever been done before. Indeed, NW, Alvin Plantinga, and many others have played a central role in such developments. Under the name “Reformed Epistemology”, NW, Plantinga and others developed compelling arguments that one is rationally justified or warranted – to use Plantinga’s term – in taking belief in God as properly basic, and allowing one’s scholarship to proceed on the basis of such belief. The radicality of this view needs to be grasped. Properly basic beliefs are

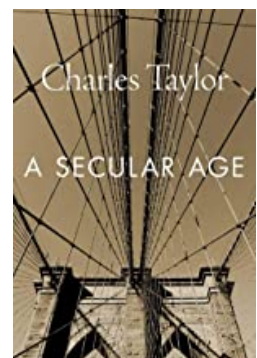
assumed; they do not need first of all to be argued for. NW and Plantinga have defended this view in several major works, and the reader is referred to this third chapter for a marvellous summary of such work.

## THE PLURALIST UNIVERSITY

NW notes that “though reason may often appear king in the realm of learning, our capacity for reasoning is always functioning in the service of some particular faith or love, or in the service of some intuition or interpretation of how things are”. (p. 118) He proposes that we think of academic learning as *interpretive* and as a *social practice* along the lines developed by the Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his *After Virtue*.

NW appeals for the public university to be genuinely pluralist, creating the space for the diversity of voices of its students and scholars to be given space and allowed to be heard within its context. In this way students would bring their whole selves to the communal goal of “Truth suffused with significance”. (p. 128) The role-ethic of the student in such a university is *dialogic pluralism*, in which one offers reasons for one’s position while listening attentively to opposing views, and engaging in civil dialogue. If the old Weberian ideal of the university was objectivity, that of the new, pluralist university is honour and fairness. NW confesses that “I myself have no idea what it would be like for a philosopher to be objective; nothing comes to my mind when I try to imagine what that might look like.”. (p. 131)

NW invokes Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* in support of the view that religions are not just transcendent add-ons; they are rather comprehensive orientations with major implications for all of earthly life and study. He is adamant that if the modern



university is to be genuinely inclusive and non-discriminatory then it has to create room for religious perspectives. But what of groups that wish to remain in their enclaves? NW is sympathetic to the need for groups to have space within which their orientations can come to fruition but eventually the time comes when one must re-enter the dialogue. In this way NW presents an argument for the place of religious voices in the modern university on the basis of justice and fairness. Beyond that he argues that something great is lost when we refuse a place to such voices.

## LEARNING FROM WOLTERSTORFF

It is hard to overstate the importance of *Religion in the University*, and not least for the UK and Europe. Across the board our universities have embraced the emergence of particularity – NW’s chapter 2, but religion is on the whole only welcome in so far as it conforms to this situation, an updated version of Weber. One wishes that this eloquent and accessible, short volume would be read, studied, and debated by vice-chancellors, administrators, lecturers, and students across our universities, and in particular those with religious foundations, the twenty or more Anglican universities, for example. Of particular importance is NW’s case for the rationality of religious belief and his insistence that religious orientations are comprehensive and not mere add-ons. If this is right then justice demands that just as queer theory, transgender approaches, post-colonial insights, Marxist analyses, etc., are granted a place at the academic table, so too should, for example, Christian perspectives and Muslim ones.

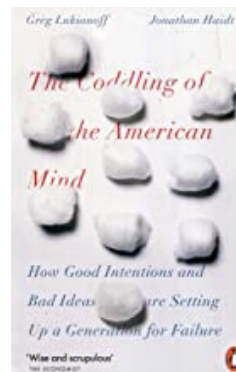
Why is it so unimaginable that such serious debate should take place? Having worked at a secular UK university (with an Anglican foundation) and at a Christian University in Canada, remarkably at neither was I ever aware of a serious discussion

about the nature of a university today, and how this should influence our decision making. One might well wonder how this is possible in places that venerate the life of the mind. The answer, I think, is that our universities have become suffused with the regnant spirit of our age, namely pragmatism. In the UK, a managerial class now governs our universities and such leaders specialise in adjusting the sails of their institutions to the politically correct winds of the day, ensuring balanced budgets and enough students to fill the classrooms. Balanced budgets and student recruitment are vitally important issues, but, when they operate outside of the context of a deep sense of what the university is, they leave the university twisting and turning as the winds change direction.

## ENGAGING WITH WOLTERSTORFF

### 1. Pluralism in practice.

Reading *Religion in the University*, one emerges with a sense that Yale University comes close to being a good example of the sort of pluralism NW has in mind. Of course, NW knows Yale intimately, whereas I do not. However, while I lived in Chicago for most of the past academic year, I read Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s *The Coddling of the American Mind* (Penguin, 2019). This acclaimed book provides example after example of serious intolerance on US campuses, including that of Yale.



They relate the story of Erika Christakis, a lecturer in Yale’s Child Study Center, who sent out an e-mail in 2015 questioning the wisdom of Yale administrators’ providing guidance about inappropriate and appropriate Halloween costumes. (pp. 56-7) Erika affirmed the desire to avoid hurt but expressed concern that such decisions encourage vulnerability in students. Erika

and her husband were seriously harassed at their house by a group of some 150 students and repeated demands were made that they be fired. Instead of the leadership immediately intervening to prevent such harassment, and insisting on respectful debate about such an issue, support for the Christakis's was slow in coming, and eventually Erika and her husband resigned from Yale. Lukianoff and Haidt's analysis of why students reacted in this way is that "It's as though some of the students had their own mental prototype, a schema with two boxes to fill: *victim* and *oppressor*. Everyone is placed into one box or the other." (p. 57)

Clearly Yale is not exempt from this kind of intolerance, and it would be good to know how NW thinks it should be dealt with. Indeed, what would be really helpful is for NW to provide the reader with a few examples of public universities in the USA which genuinely embody his proposal. I cannot think of one, and if there are none, then why not, and how realistic is NW's proposal?

## 2. In Defense of Enclaves and a Call for Dialogue.

NW acknowledges that like minded groups often need space to develop their views but notes that at some point one must re-enter the dialogue. I agree. However, the question is at which point and how? If Lukianoff and Haidt's analysis of what is going on at many American universities is accurate then such questions become very important. NW himself was deeply formed by his Reformed heritage and his time at Calvin, an – if you like – enclave institution. Thus, by the time NW joined Yale he had years of preparation for a pluralistic institution. Indeed, one doubts if NW's and Plantinga's seminal work on religious rationality would have emerged without Calvin College as the

background context. Of course, the situation with an undergraduate is entirely different. She is young and has none of NW's experience. How is she meant to find her way as a Christian scholar, likely on a highly charged campus and where in her courses she is subjected to what Gerald Graff appropriately terms academic volleyball, with different worldviews embodied in one course to the next?<sup>4</sup> Especially at the undergraduate level, it seems to me the Christian university or college has an indispensable role to play, providing the space for the student to develop her orientation in relation to her subject of choice.

However, having taught at a Christian University, and lectured at many, my concern is that while such institutions rightly withdraw to do their work, they too often fail to re-engage with the culture, which, after all, is their main reason for withdrawing. Thus, withdrawal becomes an end in itself. Here I find NW's call to re-enter the dialogue compelling. How might this look in practice?

If Christian institutions are secure in their identity, they need to ensure that appropriate dialogue is taking place with scholars and students of different persuasions. When my good friend, the Canadian philosopher and aesthetician, Calvin Seerveld, was teaching undergraduates about Marxism, he would advertise for and pay a Marxist to come to his class so that his students could check to see that what he was teaching them was what Marxists actually believed. Similarly, students could be encouraged to take one course a year on the campus of a public university, to engage with a diversity of students and to experience what they learn in class. NW is absolutely right that at some point one must re-engage the dialogue. Indeed, it would be great if written across our Christian institutions was "Preparing to Engage!"

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

Anyone interested in university education should read this book. Our public universities here and

elsewhere play a major role in forming our leaders and professionals and we ought to ensure that such education is just and fair. NW helps us to see that if it excludes religious perspectives it is not.

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