

# The Integration of Faith and Learning

David I. Smith, September 2004

9:00 a.m. A group of unsuspecting students start their day with German 202 – just a core language class. (We pity the poor language profs at reappointment, a student once commented to me – after all, grammar is grammar, so how can they integrate faith and learning?) Out of the blue, I hand them copies of a German poem. Standard pedagogical practice would include pre-reading activities to orient them to the theme and activate relevant vocabulary. Today I decide to give them the poem cold. It goes like this:

catch a dear blackbird  
take scissors, tender and fine  
cut off both of blackbird's legs  
now blackbird can always fly  
climbs higher and higher  
until I see it no more  
and almost die with joy  
that must be a true bird  
that would never think of landing  
(my translation)<sup>1</sup>

We check comprehension. Then I ask them to form groups. I tell them to imagine that their group will lead German Chapel, and must prepare a brief meditation in German. Their text will be Jandl's poem. Bemused expressions meet my gaze. I refuse further guidance and wander among the groups as discussions in halting German stagger into motion.

There are six or seven groups, but the results are surprisingly uniform. A representative one:

“The true bird ... speaks about our freedom in Christ. Christ finds us. He cuts off our legs. Our legs hold us down on the ground of sin. And then we look up and fly higher and higher.”

Jandl's poem has become a hymn of redemption, a call to fly free on wings of grace, an allegory of salvation. This is, of course, a time-honored version of Christian reading – it echoes the well-known patristic tactic of allegorizing pagan texts to give them meanings that might be edifying to Christian readers. In this case, the results are dubious – a poor reading of the poem and a gnostic vision of salvation as the rejection of creation. Time, perhaps, for another model of Christian reading.

Christian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that: “The valued manifoldness of Being as human...can present itself only to loving contemplation...Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient attention to slow down and linger intently over

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The true bird’, by Ernst Jandl, cited from Ernst Jandl, *Poetische Werke 8: Der Gelbe Hund/Selbstporträt Des Schachspielers Als Trinkende Uhr*, *Poetische Werke* (München: Luchterhand, 1997).

an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute.”<sup>2</sup> To read with charity, he urges, may be to resist the temptation to impose a ready-made schema onto a text so that one always knows already what it will say. We need to slow down, linger, give of ourselves. Through a series of questions, I invite my students to do just that.

Is it natural or comfortable for a bird to have its legs amputated? Could that be part of God’s intentions? Could it be an act of love? What about the style - the sing-song, violence of a children’s rhyme mixed with the callous matter-of-factness of a cookbook recipe - does it suggest loving care for the bird? Can mutilation be liberation? If the bird cannot land, then it cannot rest, eat or mate – what is the future but exhaustion, starvation, extinction?

By now my students are ready to retract their initial readings. This would hardly be the place to stop, however. Unlike some forms of critical pedagogy, the aim of the Christian classroom cannot be a permanent unsettling of students’ identities. If an underlying aim is Christian maturity, students need not only deconstruction of their naiveté, but also a more mature set of connections. We talk some more.

Jandl reminds us that while poets or their readers might like to dream of birds ever soaring, time spent on the ground is as much part of the bird’s essence as time spent in flight. And my students’ initial response identified a real theme – the poem echoes an older poem depicting an eagle that flies over the sea and then cannot find its nest and “must climb higher and higher/to see if heaven might be open”<sup>3</sup> – a Romantic image of salvation as soaring free from the earth. Jandl evokes this image, successfully drawing in my students, before puncturing the heady vision by drawing us firmly back down to earth.

On this reading, Jandl’s text puts to us some hard questions. How often does our Christian rhetoric resemble Jandl’s bird? It has its own stirring tones, thrilling imagery of a kingdom coming, a spiritual war, or a world and life view sweeping all before it. Occasionally we soar on rhetorical wings until our hearers almost die with joy. But does our bird think of landing? Do we not too often prefer other-worldly inspiration to concrete implementation? Jesus warning about crying “Lord, Lord” but not acting in obedience; the Epistle to the Romans reminds us that appropriate “spiritual act[s] of worship” involve offering our “bodies as living sacrifices”.<sup>4</sup> Jandl’s poem places faith under scrutiny, but its challenge can in the end be put in a faith-affirming way.

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I have dwelt at length on this small slice of teaching for three reasons.

First, at my last reappointment I concentrated my commentary on language instruction. My views in that area continue to evolve, but have not changed fundamentally. I decided to focus this time on literature. I have been attending in the past two years to what it

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Alan Jacobs, "Bakhtin and the Hermeneutics of Love," in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, ed. Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Eichendorff, cited in Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Der Wahre Vogel: Sechs Studien Zum Gedenken an Ernst Jandl* (Wien: Edition Praesens, 2001)..

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:22; Romans 12:1.

might mean to read Christianly. This has led to changes in my teaching (e.g. introducing discussion of different models of Christian reading in an upper level literature survey course, and moving away from the drive-by reading typical of survey courses to assigning repeated and meditative forms of reading). It has led to research projects (e.g. a recently published paper on reader response theory and spiritual development). It has also led to the establishment of faculty working groups this year at Calvin and at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego that will examine issues surrounding faith, reading and interpretation, inquiring into the ways in which students' beliefs are brought into play as they interpret texts in classrooms.

Second, I think Jandl has a point. Too often discussions of Christian higher education are couched in terms of general principle rather than close examination of particulars. It is relatively easy to inspire one another with what ought to be in general terms, and the tendency for discussions of the relationship between faith and learning to gravitate toward epistemology more often than toward pedagogy does not help matters. Tracing the connections between departmental or institutional vision statements and particular class periods remains an important challenge. I wanted to talk about the particular rather than offer a collection of generalities, offering a working example of faith at stake in the mundane processes of the intermediate German classroom.

Third, and this connects closely with my change of role since being appointed to direct the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning, most writing about 'faith-learning integration' in North American Christian higher education has focused on scholarship – 'learning' as a body of knowledge. There is comparatively little about how faith informs the processes of learning, and the ways that teaching brings particular kinds of learning to pass. More work is needed on the kind of questions raised by the class described above. What were the effects of omitting the pre-reading activity? Why was this task effective in bringing students' worldviews into the open? Once student beliefs were on the table, what should be done with them pedagogically? How can teaching both provoke critical thinking and affirm faith? Can we more compellingly describe the role of faith in teaching and learning interactions, and the ways that these shape people? Can we get away from assuming that teaching is just a set of tips and tricks and trace how it is shaped by commitment? Such questions remain my central area of interest; I have tried to offer one small example of where they can lead.

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In terms of my research, I continue to explore how faith intersects with pedagogy in general and language pedagogy in particular. Instead of seeing teaching as method or technique, a technology practiced upon the learner, I suggest we let our minds play with an image from thirteenth century France. In his history of the concept of schooling, Hamilton mentions in passing that the boys who studied at the nascent University of Paris were accommodated in hospices. These hospices, in which boys both learned and lived under a communal rule, were known, among other names, as 'pedagogies'.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is helpful to think of a pedagogy as a home, a holistic environment in which learners undergo both intellectual and spiritual formation according to a common rule as the teacher decides who talks to whom, how often, about what and under what terms of

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<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, D. (1989). *Towards a theory of schooling*. Basingstoke, Falmer Press, p.39-40.

engagement. Teaching and learning are always more than what shows up on a test of acquired skills.

Alongside this may be placed the biblical metaphor that Barbara Carvill and I elaborated in *The Gift of the Stranger* - the idea that foreign language education should be practiced and experienced as a form of hospitality to the stranger. Welcome towards strangers was, for Jesus, one of the differences between sheep and goats; I believe that hospitality to strangers should be a clear characteristic of education that claims to be Christian. This, like the idea of pedagogy as the formation of a communal home, suggests that teaching and learning are as much about ethics and spirituality as they are about information transfer and skill development.

Accordingly, I am continuing to investigate the implications for language learning of seeing the spiritual and moral dimensions of teaching and learning as inseparable from the more technical, measurable aspects. In a recently published study I traced the ways in which the interpersonal interactions that occur in relation to a particular learning activity change as that activity is transferred into various kinds of computer-assisted learning environment. Making such a switch does not simply yield gains or losses in terms of efficiency of language acquisition (although it may well do that); it also changes the nature of the exercise in ways that have as much to do with the ethics of interpersonal communication as with the mechanics of linguistic processes. This last summer I have begun to survey the emerging literature on the ecology of language acquisition. There has been a broad recognition for some time that “method” is an unhelpful term to describe whatever it is that happens when teachers teach, and a number of researchers are turning to ecological metaphors as an alternative that places greater emphasis on the many factors that interact to produce dynamics of a particular classroom. For some researchers, such metaphors are wielded in the service of a biological determinism in which learning is a very complex form of environmental conditioning. For others the idea of classroom ecology opens up space in which to discuss factors commonly neglected in studies of language education. My own interest is in how this new language for describing language teaching enables or hinders description of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of teaching and learning.

Some of this research finds its way back into my annual class on foreign language pedagogy; my research is, however, much more broadly symbiotic with my teaching, for it is the process of teaching and learning that I am trying to understand. Jerome Bruner has recently put the matter this way:

“Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and may, in time, be adopted by him or her as the appropriate way of thinking about the learning process. For a choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message.”<sup>6</sup>

Bruner here puts his finger on some key reasons why the idea of integrating faith and learning can never be adequately dealt with in the context of an institution of higher education if it focuses only in the relationship between faith and disciplinary theories. It

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<sup>6</sup> Bruner, J. (1996). *The Culture of Education*, Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press. p.63.

is not only the course content that teaches. My classroom therefore remains my laboratory; my students, who bring their own approaches to faith and learning to the classroom, continue to do and say things that spark fresh curiosity concerning one or another aspect of the mystery of teaching.