

**GENERAL EDUCATION RELIGION COURSES
IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM**

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General education in the humanities, sciences, social sciences, fine arts and certain skills occupies a permanent place in American undergraduate curricula. Where applicable, religious studies, including philosophy, ordinarily belong with the humanities. The purpose of general education is to give the student such breath of knowledge in all areas of human experience as is expected of an educated person.

Christian colleges and universities, on the other hand, typically give the study of religion a special, distinct place within general education. Here the objective is to expose the student to the religious perspectives on the world held by the church supporting the college or university. In this case, therefore, the study of religion does not occupy a place along side secular subjects as though one of them, but stands in apposition to all other subjects of study and provides a way of looking at them. We will explore further this understanding of general education in religion with special reference to Adventist tertiary institutions.

I.

The Bible and Secular Subjects in Adventist Education.

Early Adventist educators were struggling from the beginning with the proper relationship between the Bible and secular subjects. Thus the first Adventist school (Battle Creek College) offered a curriculum with subjects in classics, mathematics, science and literature but provided little or no formal study of the Bible (Hodgen, School Bells, 17-20). The subsequent reorganization and relocation of that college to Berrien Springs, Michigan and the establishment of other institutions, e.g. Healdsburg Academy (later Healdsburg College and Pacific Union College), South Lancaster Academy (now Atlantic Union College) and Avondale School for Christian Workers (now Avondale College), introduced a new concept of education, subsequently referred to as true education. It emphasized a rural setting, enabling the educational institution to break with the surrounding culture. The Bible became a focal point in the curriculum, and the classics were dropped from it. Education and church life (missionary activities) were interwoven with the intention that students would commit themselves to service and seek employment in the church following graduation. Manual labour (rather than sports) became an important part of student activity, and college industries developed.

Such a radical educational reform needed philosophical undergirding, and that was found in the principles of the Bible as explained by Ellen G. White. She wrote: "Above all other books, the word of God must be our study, the great text-book, the basis of all education" (6T, 131). "If used as a textbook in our schools, it (the Bible) will be found far more effective than any other book in the world, in guiding wisely in the affairs of this life, as well as in aiding the soul up the ladder of progress which reaches to heaven" (FE, 131). "We should make the Bible our study above every other book" (FE, 133). The ensuing discussion among Adventist educators around the turn of the century focussed upon the degree to which the Bible actually could serve as a textbook for all study in Adventist schools which had opened with a curriculum emphasizing the classics, mathematics, science and literature just 25 years earlier. Only a radical reform, many felt, could modify such a curriculum to one based on the Bible alone, and some were ready to promote just that. For example, in 1902 E. J. Waggener proposed a "new order" of education in Emmanuel Missionary College according to which no other books than the Bible were to be used (Knight, Myths 141) and J. H. Haughey of Battle Creek and Emmanuel Missionary Colleges in 1906 opposed the study of mathematics, French and even piano, on the grounds that these subjects were of little use to someone with the third angel's message to proclaim (Hodgen, School Bells, 195-97). However, in time several Adventist educators, including E.A. Sutherland, himself reform-minded, adopted a moderating position. They explained their commitment to the "Bible only" in Adventist education by distinguishing between the Bible as textbook and as study book. Understood this way, the Bible provides the principles or the truth about a subject, whereas the facts and all the details must be added from other sources. However, since the principles or truth of a subject mark the first step in any study of it, true education must always begin with the Bible (Hodgen, School Bells, 191-93, 197-99)

Sutherland's distinction between textbook (E.G. White's term) and study book eventually took hold and was advocated widely in our Church. Consequently, the need of additional Adventist-produced or approved study books became recognized. And as a result Adventist educators had to come to terms with the practical relationship between the Bible and other books used in the college curriculum. How could the respective functions of these two sources become integrated in the lecture room? According to a current formulation of the matter, the Biblical perspective should provide the foundation and context for the study of all other subjects in the Adventist curriculum (Knight, Philosophy, 193-213; Myths, 147-8).

The conclusion that the Bible should provide only a perspective on the secular subjects, to be followed by "regular" studies of each of them, led to

the introduction of indigenous Bible subjects within the college curriculum, something for which the educational reformers and E.G. White had called all along. In due course the standard liberal arts curriculum developed with its three parts: Bible, general studies and concentrations or majors in education, nursing, ministry, science, humanities, etc. The Bible subjects typically included studies in the life of Christ, Daniel and Revelation, Bible doctrines and surveys, E. G. White-- subjects that would prepare a lay person to become active in church life, to give Bible studies and the like (See R.W. Olsen, "Teaching Bible," 493-96). Meanwhile, following the established formulation, the study of all other subjects was to proceed from a Biblical perspective.

However, the theory of this formulation is far easier to adopt than its practice. In theory it holds that a Christian curriculum of instruction does not represent merely a modification of a secular curriculum, but constitutes a radical transformation of it. Specifically, the study of every subject requires integration between its content and the Biblical perspective on it. Such integration would involve the collection, organization and evaluation of data, the hypotheses postulated for their understanding and finally an application to the living context of the interpreter, in short the whole method of interpretation, or the so-called hermeneutical circle, on which learning moves from subject to object and back in a spiral movement leading to ever higher understanding. The secular subjects in turn would contribute to our understanding of the Biblical perspective, thereby setting in motion a second hermeneutical circle, this one between the Biblical perspective of the learner and the secular subjects to be learned (Dyrness, "Theological Studies," 1972-84). Thus the Biblical perspective on the study of secular subjects always develops with learning, and is never entirely complete. However, in practice this educational process must begin somewhere specific, at a vantage point from which the student may view the entire horizon of Christian learning. That is to say, a vantage point from which, surrounded by new vistas and their elusive limits, learning may resume with renewed or even transformed, approaches, values and goals.

II

The Vantage Point of Christian Education

The vantage point for integrating the Biblical perspective and secular subjects must accord with fundamental Christian theology as understood by Seventh-day Adventists, but its precise definition can no longer be automatically assumed. The diversity of theological understandings and

religious practices in our time prevent us from imagining that an agreed upon vantage point already exists in the mind of most teachers and students.

Of course, Christian educators have attempted to describe in broad outlines what such a vantage point looks like and have produced summaries such as the following. (a) That the whole world is God's creation and does not exhibit separate secular and sacred realms. (b) That the world is permeated by evil in consequence of sin. (c) That humans reflect God's image and are of inestimable value and the object of God's love. (d) That truth, revealed in God word and world, is unified by its divine origin, and rightly understood will not be self contradictory. (e) That human life is culturally conditioned, that it uses language, social structures, art and technology, and that cultural expression is subject both to God's grace and to human sin, so that it can be both affirmed and corrected by Christian faith (See Blamires, Christian Mind, 66-188; Holmes, Christian College, 13-22; Knight, Philosophy, 156).

This summary sketch, however helpful to some, is neither exhaustive, sufficiently specific nor generally subscribed, so as to offer a practical vantage point for the integration of the Biblical perspective and specific secular subjects in Christian education. To remedy this situation we turn to the general education curriculum in religion.

III

General Education in Religion.

It must be underscored that whereas within the secular college curriculum general education requirements in philosophy/religious studies are intended to give the student breath in the humanities, within the Christian college curriculum general education requirements in religion serve quite a different purpose as well. That is to identify the vantage point for all education, namely the Christian/Biblical/faith perspective from which all other subjects are considered. Since that vantage point cannot be reduced to just a few cardinal points of common agreement, but remains a general perspective, a way of thinking, a set of presuppositions, it can best be communicated in a series of college courses forming a unique religion curriculum required of all students. Its structure and content should take into consideration the religious and cultural backgrounds of the students, as well as the secular subjects or majors they plan to pursue.

(a) The religious and cultural backgrounds of the students vary greatly, but certain characteristics do emerge. Accordingly, we may divide the student population in a Seventh-day Adventist college on the North

American continent into three segments. (1) A relatively small group of students who claim to "walk with the Lord." They make decisions about life in accordance with God's will, enjoy an active devotional life, are very familiar with certain doctrines and follow a strict Christian life style, but frequently know little about the Bible. (2) A large group of students who enjoy some general information of the life and faith of their church, but do not often consider these matters in planning their life. The most dominant forces in their life are friends, activities, studies and planning for their careers, and their knowledge of the Bible is limited. Religiously speaking they are nominal Christians, though they follow their religious practices quite regularly, even faithfully. (3) A third, small group of students who come with a non-Christian or non-Adventist background, or no religious interest or background at all. Some are curious about religion, others bewildered by it. In short, the religion curriculum serving as a vantage point for Christian education must take into account these backgrounds with which students arrive in college.

(b) The academic interests of the students appear to fall into three general categories as well: About one third studies some type of business, accounting or management. Another third looks to a health care or related profession. The last third (probably a small third) prepares for some service profession, including, teaching, law, ministry, counselling or the like. Only a few have purely academic interests in mind. This precludes a highly philosophically, theologically or historically based sequence of religion courses, and recommends studies oriented to the experience and practice of religion, though taught with academic rigor. What type of general education religion courses will offer them the best vantage point and most effectively orient them to a Biblically based Christian education.

IV

Course Selection and Content

In light of students' backgrounds and professional interests summarized above, the following general education religion curriculum containing a selection of different subjects, on varying academic levels, within each of four discreet areas of study, is proposed (see F. Guy, "General Studies in Religion," 343-46).

(a) Religious beliefs. Courses on different levels are designed to meet the needs of non-Christians, non-Adventists, practicing Christians and devout believers. They may be Biblically or systematically organized. As a result of following courses in this area students must learn the meaning of religious faith, spirituality, devotion, religious life, the fundamental church teachings

and the essentials of the gospel. The goal is to explore how Christians think about and experiences religion in relationship to other types of learning and experiences

(b) The Bible. Courses may treat the gospels, the New Testament letters, the Old Testament prophets, Daniel and the Apocalypse, or may be simple Bible surveys. As a result of following courses in this area students must discover something about the way the Bible (as a whole or in part) came about, its historical setting, its inspiration, and the means of its interpretation. The goal is to uncover the basis of all Christian learning, its reference point, by reading the Bible as the living word of God and by considering its role in the life of the church and of individuals.

(c) The church. Courses may focus upon the first church, its life, mission and organization, or upon the long history of Christendom, its failures, reforms and victories, or upon the Adventist church, E.G. White and her role in it. As a result of following such courses students must gain a clear understanding of the nature of the church in general and of the particular mission of the Seventh-day Adventist church, and should know what it means to a church member. The goal is to examine the social and historical context of Christian life and thought

(d) The Christian life. Courses treat practical issues and may focus upon Christian ethics, personal and family life and problems associated with them, Christian standards and decision making in the students future professional life. As a result of following such courses students must understand practical Christianity, its privileges and responsibilities, the Biblical bases for decision making and the Christian way of thinking about and relating to the issues and "isms" of the world. The goal is to observe points at which Christian values collide with the values in the world and to develop appropriate responses to them.

These four areas of study, taken together, will convey to students a Christian/Biblical/religious perspective from which to approach their secular subjects, making the study of them thoroughly "Christian." The perspectives concern God and His world, revelation and the knowledge of God, the individual, the church and society, human history, the future and eternity. Moreover, these four areas of study represent a breath of exposure to religion that will facilitate the interconnectedness between the religious perspective and the variety of secular subjects and majors to which students become exposed in their chosen disciplines.

The choice of terminology, religion rather than Bible, is deliberate and may require a word of explanation. Early Adventist educators referred almost exclusively to the Bible as the foundation and context for Christian education, and that has been continued until the present, at least in theory (Knight, Philosophy, 158-60, 198-206). In practice, however, these Biblical principles are now being communicated under a number of rubrics well recognized in both educational and religious contexts. Each of these rubrics focus on particular Biblical perspectives in helpful ways to students. For example, ethics taught in an Adventist college will focus attention on the unique Biblical concept on right conduct; theology systematizes Biblical understandings of God, mankind, salvation, etc., mission studies examine ways to connect the gospel and particular social contexts, church history relates our church to its predecessors and ultimately to the Biblical community of faith. The rubrics for the general education requirements in religion (faith, the Bible, the church and the Christian life) are chosen to communicate the Biblical principles to students through experiences with which they are familiar from home, school, church and social life, and which represent the avenues through which the Bible enters their consciousness in our time. Bible study does remain an important avenue for acquiring a Biblical perspective, but also Christian fellowship, church activities, and decision making contribute markedly to the formation of a Biblical perspective in the young of our age.

V

Conclusion

Christian education is defined as a certain way of studying. Accordingly, every subject is examined from a single perspective provided by the Christian canon of Scripture mediated through the life and faith of the Christian community in general and the Adventist community in particular.

Since this perspective is Biblical, that is, belonging to sacred Scripture, it cannot be reduced to a single set of propositions, but remains a vibrant, living, developing approach to every subject of study. Hence it is best acquired, not through a preliminary set of definitions, but through a series of learning experiences. In the Adventist college, those learning experiences should occur especially during the general education requirements in religion, and they should continue throughout the four years of college.

As the students develop a Biblical perspective in their study of religion courses, they ought never to assume an air of superiority as they approach their other secular subjects. For the insights they gain in these other subjects, also taught from a Biblical perspective, will correct, enlarge, alter

and enrich their understanding of the religious subjects. Indeed it must be anticipated that such integration of Biblical perspectives and learning will impact the students' Biblical perspectives as much as, or even more than, their other learning. Nevertheless, that mutually beneficial exchange between religious and secular subjects must begin somewhere, and that beginning point is enhanced by the Biblical principles uncovered and refined in the various general education courses in religion.

In light of these suggestions, Adventist colleges and universities should take seriously their general education requirements in religion. They must not be confused in concept or content with the religion requirements in the ministerial training program, for the purpose of general education religion courses is not simply to produce miniature ministers with a modicum of pastoral skills, nor is it merely to expose students to religious phenomena in human culture. Rather the purpose of these general education requirements now, as in the earlier period of Adventist education, is to instill "Christian formation" (Dyrness, "Theological Studies," 175) and to formulate a Biblical perspective pervading all other study. Such an educational endeavor holds out the promise of producing mature and confident Christian who can articulate their convictions intelligently before the world and share them with others in a personal and convincing manner.

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