

Common Myths Surrounding Faith Integration

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Abstract

Faith Integration is a requirement for most professors at faith-based colleges and universities. The idea of beginning to devise methods to integrate faith into a course can sometimes feel like an impossible task, especially for those who are early-career educators. This paper seeks to expose a few of the common myths that prevent professors from beginning to incorporate faith-learning integration ideas in their courses. Through addressing and providing counterarguments to these myths, the paper will provide support and encouragement for anyone that desires to begin or to continue to engage in the process of integrating faith into their specific discipline. The professor does not need to be an expert before beginning to incorporate ideas of how faith and their discipline coexist. Faith integration should not be an exercise that is engaged in once but should be intentionally explored and implemented throughout one's career. Many professors feel that they lack a support system as they attempt to incorporate faith into their subject area, but we are all surrounded by a network of colleagues, potential mentors, and even our own students who each have something to contribute as we learn and grow today, in hopes of becoming successful practitioners in the future.

Key words: Myths; Humility; Intentional Integration; Networking; Faith Integration

Introduction

For many full-time and adjunct faculty members at faith-based colleges and universities, one component of our job description is that we “embrace and promote a decidedly Christian world view that seeks to integrate faith and learning” (California Baptist University, 2017). It is easy to sign a contract agreeing to this directive, but many of us have found ourselves stuck when it comes time to implement this idea in our courses. I have found that there are several myths that prevent well-meaning faculty members from truly embracing the ideal of faith and learning integration. This paper seeks to expose a few of these myths, so that more full-time and adjunct faculty members at faith-based institutions can feel empowered in this area of their teaching.

Myth: You must be an expert in the field of faith-learning integration before attempting this in your classroom.

As faculty members, many of us hold degrees that required us to spend years and years becoming an expert in our field of study. We spent years in school gaining knowledge and then we spent more years attempting to make a significant contribution to the knowledge base in that field in order to obtain a terminal degree. Once hired as university or college

faculty, we entered the classroom where our students sit in awe of our level of knowledge.

Most of us teach courses that are directly related to our degrees. Even if we are teaching a course that does not fit our expertise exactly, we know enough about that subject that we can still portray ourselves as experts in front of the students. This is understandably the comfort zone for most professors. As a synthetic organic chemist, I could teach a Biochemistry course with a slightly lower level of confidence than when I teach Organic Chemistry courses. On the other hand, if asked to teach a course on Music Theory, my level of confidence would plummet, and I would spend the semester struggling to stay ahead of my students.

Many professors feel this way when it comes to integrating faith and learning in their courses. We feel total confidence when teaching their core course content but may feel less confident or even scared to try to bring faith into the course in any meaningful way. So, we revert to the process we used before- spend years gaining knowledge on the subject of faith and learning integration and only implement faith integration once sufficient knowledge is gained. The myth of “required expertise” holds many of us back from beginning to explore what faith-learning integration could look like in our courses.

Matthias (2008) surveyed seven professors from Wheaton College that were known on that campus for their exemplary integration of faith and learning. She found that the common trait held by these professors was their humility. Despite having many accomplishments and awards, none of these professors held an air of arrogance. In the survey, one professor, wrote, “Well, I certainly don’t have a complete handle on integration of faith and learning. I still have a lot to learn...I don’t know that I do it all that well...There are tons of people who are much more adept at this than I am” (Matthias, 2008, p. 151-152).

Faith integration does not require you to be an expert. It is totally fine to not know everything. It is totally fine to acknowledge that you have more to learn. It is totally fine to spend your entire career growing and learning more each semester and each year, while simultaneously implementing what you learn about faith integration in your classroom.

As a professor, you hold a position of distinction and influence. Pride and arrogance can enter our hearts easily if we do not hold this in check. Humility must be intentionally pursued by each one of us. Matthias (2008) writes that this principle of seeking humility “counters any tendency to consider humility as merely a personality trait that some people have and others do not.” We must approach every aspect of our teaching in humility, including attempts at faith-learning integration.

Jesus said, “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14b *New King James Version*) In James 4:6, we read, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (*New King James Version*). We must resist the pride that can accompany our high standing as professors, and instead seek to humble ourselves. Pride says, “I am an expert. I have all knowledge and operate in total perfection.” Humility says, “I am no expert. I have some knowledge and am seeking to grow in that knowledge, by the grace of God. I am not perfect but am striving for excellence as I rely on the grace, strength, wisdom, etc. of God.” Pride seeks to glorify self, while humility seeks to glorify God through a total reliance on Him.

Sharing your faith can be scary. Sharing with your students how the course content informs a Christian world view can feel like a daunting task. Some might feel a fear of saying the wrong thing or misleading students when it comes to topics related to faith. No one is asking you to be an expert in theology though. You are not solely responsible for the spiritual growth and development of your students.

As the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 3:7-8:

It’s not important who does the planting, or who does the watering. What’s important is that God makes the seed grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same purpose. And both will be rewarded for their own hard work. (*New Living Translation*)

The faith-learning integration that you attempt in your classroom might plant a seed of faith in some students’ hearts. Your faith-learning integration might water a seed previously planted in other students’ hearts. Your faith-learning integration could also fall on deaf ears in your classroom. No matter what the outcome is of your effort, know that ultimately God is the One who makes these seeds grow in our students’ hearts. We need to be faithful to the charge given to us by our Institutions and by God when He called us to this vocation, but we also need to remember that we are not in control of the outcome of our efforts as we integrate faith in our courses.

You do not need to be an expert to begin to integrate faith in your course content. You do not even need to be a near-expert. You might not ever become an expert in faith and learning integration and that is okay. The important thing is for you to begin today to explore and attempt new methods for faith integration. Maybe you have tried some things and they all felt like failures. Do not give up! You do not need to do everything perfectly the first time or even the hundredth time that you attempt faith-learning integration. Stay humble and prayerfully ask God to help you to learn and grow in this area. Know that each attempt—successful or otherwise—helps to make you a better practitioner.

Myth: You only need to consider faith and learning integration once, the very first time you build your courses.

We are all at different levels as it pertains to integrating faith in our courses. Some people have never explored faith and learning integration in their courses, others have made a few attempts over the years, and yet another group of us consistently explore and apply faith integration skills and techniques in the classroom. Lyon, Beatty, and Mixon (2002) surveyed faculty at various “religious” universities and found that “generally, the integration of faith and learning is typically more popular in theory than in practice” (p. 337). Most of us can agree that faith-learning integration is a worthy pursuit, but few of us put in the time and effort to pursue effective techniques in this area.

Beers and Beers (2008) write that faith-learning integration involves an “intentional re-integration of all truth (‘sacred’ and ‘secular’)” (p. 52). This re-integration “distinguishes the experiences of Christian college students. Ultimately, the

process of integrating faith and learning must be done intentionally. To be intentional, one must understand it." In order to intentionally re-integrate faith and the secular topics most of us teach, we must actively seek an understanding of how these truths are integrated. Most of us trained in secular universities to receive our degrees, so we are well-versed in those secular truths. We must be intentional about developing our ability to convey the truths of our disciplines, as viewed through the lens of the Christian world view.

For some, it is time to move beyond the view that prayers in the classroom are tantamount to faith integration. Beers and Beers (2008) write:

Some Christian educators facilitate prayer or other spiritual disciplines in the classroom. In so doing they may intentionally or unintentionally equate integration with praying before class. Interspersing the spiritual disciplines within a chosen teaching method may assist the student in grasping the material, but it falls well short of the full meaning of integration...We must avoid simply tacking on a spiritual discipline to our classrooms or our campus programs, thinking this constitutes integration. All we have accomplished is to produce more or less an integrative veneer that strengthens the misperception that our faith and learning do not mix.

It is good for us to pray for our students, just as it says in 1 Timothy 2:1. The point that Beers and Beers are making here is not that we should not pray for our students, but rather that prayer time in the classroom is not a substitute for true faith integration.

There are many different approaches to the integration of faith and learning, but a discussion of these approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. Beers and Beers (2008) do a good job of exploring some of these approaches, along with giving examples of how these approaches can be applied in different disciplines. Conducting your own literature search will yield hundreds of articles on the subject of faith and learning integration in general and as it relates to your specific discipline. In a survey of 2,313 CCCU faculty, it was reported that the most common faith integration methods employed were "incorporating Scripture, utilizing interpretive views, selecting specific curriculum, employing unique methodology, cultivating personal spiritual growth, promoting ethical thoughts and behavior, assimilating a Christian worldview, and utilizing theology" (Kaul et al., 2017, p. 174). Though there is a wide range of methods employed by faculty, there are differences in efficacy based on a number of factors. Some methods might work in a certain discipline or even a certain course, while falling flat in another. It is up to you to

experiment, to explore which methods work for you and your students, and to determine which techniques work best with your content.

Though this paper does not explore the "how" of integrating faith and learning, the point here is to dispel the myth that faith integration should only be considered once, if at all. Remember that you should be intentional about integration. You should be continuously evolving as you intentionally implement integration in your courses. This evolution occurs as you grow in knowledge of your discipline and as you grow in your own faith. Paul's prayer from Ephesians 1:16b-17 is my prayer for you: "I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God" (*New Living Translation*). You should be continuously increasing in knowledge of both Biblical interpretation and advances in your discipline as a scholar.

Faith-learning integration calls for each one of us to couple the passion we have for our discipline with the faith we have in God. Faith integration exists as an overflow of the time you have devoted to exploring your discipline and the time you have devoted to exploring your walk with Christ. When faith and learning are integrated, you share with your students how you have personally seen the interplay between the course content and the Christian world view, while also inviting the students to make their own observations.

Beers and Beers (2008) state that the basic task of faith integration "is the acquisition, organization, and presentation of knowledge informed by a Christian worldview." This task requires continuous effort on our part, as we strive for excellence in this area, by the grace of God. We cannot address faith integration once and believe that the work is finished. We must be intentional about growing in our understanding of how to apply a Christian world view to the knowledge we possess about our discipline. In the words of Beers and Beers: "Let us take seriously the real work of integration."

Myth: You are alone in the pursuit of faith-learning integration in your discipline.

Many faculty members desire to pursue the integration of faith in their courses, but they feel like they lack the support to do so. Some faculty feel like they are alone in having an interest in such pursuits. Others feel lost when it comes to identifying those who can act as mentors in this area. The truth is that you are not alone in this! There are many individuals in your department or college, at CBU, and at

other Christian universities that are exploring what it means to effectively integrate faith in their discipline.

As you seek to integrate a Christian world view with your discipline, you should be grappling with these issues with others in your department as well. These conversations might not be occurring regularly right now, but you can be the one to inspire others to open the lines of dialogue about faith integration in your field. Everyone in your department and college should be working to help one another to grow in the knowledge and skills necessary for integration. There should be a steady exchange of ideas in your department/college, as members of the team help one another to pursue excellence in this area. This is the ideal, but don't be discouraged if this is not the reality for your department or college. Just as you must grow as an individual in the area of faith integration, we must also grow as a community of professors. Fearlessly initiate these conversations and I am sure you will be surprised with the positive responses from others.

You can go beyond those in your department or college and work with other CBU faculty or faculty from other Christian colleges and universities as well. There are other perspectives and viewpoints that can inform and enhance your perspective on faith integration, but you must get out of your bubble to discover them. There are lessons from the application of integration in other disciplines or at other universities that can be adjusted and applied to your specific situation in your classroom. Networking is integral for this type of collaborative and interdisciplinary exploration of faith-learning integration. Truthfully, I personally hate networking in the moment, but networking can bear fruit that far outweighs the discomfort of meeting new people.

As you seek to grow in your skills in the area of faith and learning integration, seek out mentors. A mentor can hold you accountable to fulfill the goals you set for yourself in this area. A mentor can provide guidance and wisdom from their own years of wrestling with the subject. A mentor can act as a sounding board for your ideas for what faith integration looks like in your courses. A mentor can be in your discipline or someone in a totally unrelated discipline, but a mentor should be someone who has demonstrated an intentional pursuit of the integration of faith in their field of study. They do not need to be an expert, but they should be someone that you recognize as humbly striving for excellence in integration.

As you progress in the field of faith integration, you should also seek to mentor junior faculty or adjuncts also. So often we forget to train and support our adjunct faculty, but they are held to the same standards as full-time faculty for the integration of faith in their courses. Again, as you mentor

others, there is no requirement that you be an expert and you should not approach the mentorship relationship in arrogance or pride. Share with them all that you have learned and be open to learning something from them as well, as you approach the mentorship relationship in humility.

You can learn from your peers, but you may also learn from your students themselves as you integrate faith in your course content. There is no need to speak to the students from your pulpit when it comes to faith integration. Be humble enough to allow for a two-way conversation to exist between you and your students. It is important to not only speak, but to also listen as we teach. Listening helps us to understand our students as individuals with their own distinctive backgrounds, influences, thoughts, ideas, and experiences. Some students have been wrestling with faith integration before entering your classroom and can provide a unique perspective that you had not previously considered in your own studies. The student-professor relationship is another example of mentorship.

There are many around you who would love to partner with you as you explore what faith integration looks like in your discipline and in your specific courses. Do not feel like you need to go it alone. Do not buy into the myth that you are the only one that cares about the pursuit of integration. Network and find mentors and mentor others, as you stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before you and give a hand-up to elevate those who are following in your footsteps.

Conclusion

The pursuit of the integration of faith in your discipline does not end with yourself. As we seek to develop our own Christian world view, we must also seek to help our students to develop their own. Your task is not merely to communicate the truths about your discipline, but to also communicate truths about God in your discipline for your students. Karl G. D. Bailey (2012) writes that students need to develop the skills needed for independent faith integration in their discipline. According to Bailey, both the student and the professor have a role to play in the faith integration process: "Christian educators must not only show students the results of faith-learning integration, but also train them to be active, skilled participants in the craft of integration, reconstruction, and restoration" (2012, p. 168). As professors, we model the process of faith integration for our students. As we integrate faith into everything we teach, we train students that it is important and necessary to consider how these secular and sacred truths can be re-integrated and restored. As we demonstrate the ability to share our wisdom and also listen

to the wisdom of others, no matter their level of education, we train our students that they do not need to wrestle with faith integration alone. As we pursue faith integration in humility rather than with an arrogant attitude of being an expert, we train our students that they likewise do not need to be experts in order to attempt to integrate faith in their discipline.

Do not allow these common myths to hinder your progress and growth any longer. Make a commitment today to seek to deepen your understanding of faith integration. Make a commitment today to attempt to incorporate faith integration techniques into your courses each semester for the next five years. I guarantee you that at the end of this time, you will be better at integrating your faith than you are today, no matter what level of proficiency you currently possess.

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