FAITHFUL THINKING: THE ROLE OF THE SEMINARY IN PROMOTING A THOUGHTFUL CHRISTIAN FAITH[1]

DR BRIAN HARRIS
PRINCIPAL
VOSE SEMINARY, PERTH, AUSTRALIA

ABSTRACT

Noting that two common accusations against the Christian faith are that it is morally bankrupt and intellectually vacuous, *Faithful Thinking* explores ways in which theological educators and the seminaries and theological colleges of which they are a part, can help develop a morally robust and intellectually responsible understanding of Christianity. Noting that there is often a link between faithful thinking and faithful living, the paper identifies some toxic expressions of faith, and urges seminaries to take seriously their role in producing graduates who are both pastorally and prophetically sensitive. It then explores ways in which theologians can do theology not only for the church, but also for the marketplace.

It is alleged that George Bernard Shaw once quipped "5% of the people think, 15 % of the people think they think, 80% of the people would rather die than think!" If Shaw was even remotely accurate, we might well question the need for our topic "Faithful Thinking: The Role of the Seminary in Promoting a Thoughtful Christian Faith 101." Many of us who are engaged in theological education are conscious that our intellectual efforts are often viewed with suspicion—even antagonism. I well remember a sermon I once endured when the preacher of the day flung a copy of Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* from the pulpit, ordering one of his elders to burn it immediately because of its supposed heresy.[2] I've no doubt that many copies of Rob Bell's *Love Wins* are facing a similar fate.[3] Generally speaking, when theologians raise new questions or point to problems with old answers, they are greeted with little enthusiasm. Not that a thinking Christianity would uncritically accept new ideas, but it would be refreshing to operate in an environment that was not instinctively opposed to and threatened by the new.

And so the question for today: Do we need a thoughtful Christianity and if so, what role do theological educators and the seminaries they are part of, have to play in promoting faithful thinking?

While we could argue as to what constitute the current major missiological blocks to the Christian faith, my suggestion would be that two significant obstacles are that Christianity is increasingly portrayed as being morally bankrupt and intellectually vacuous. While Anselm argued that faith should seek

[1] Paper presented to the Commission on Theological Education and Leadership Development of the Baptist World Alliance, meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 7 July 2011. A modified version of this article has been published as Brian Harris, "Faithful Thinking: The Task Ahead for Christian Higher Education," in *Vose Seminary at Fifty: From 'Preach the Word' to 'Come Grow'* (eds. Nathan Hobby, John Olley and Michael O'Neil; Preston: Mosaic, 2013), 233—244.
[2] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (trans., James W. Leitch; London: SCM, 1967).
[3] Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

understanding, we seem to have birthed a generation where faith simply seeks new experiences.[4] The morality and relevance of those experiences is often uncritically embraced, and over time this frequently leads to toxic expressions of faith. There is a link between thinking and doing—and faulty theology leads to blemished lifestyles and flawed faith communities. While we might lament the manner in which the new atheists are ridiculing Christianity, we need to be willing to explore our role in having provoked the onslaught.[5]

On its own, exploration is never enough. We need to find the courage and will to change where change is necessary. Let's then look at the accusations of moral and intellectual poverty and explore the possible role of the seminary in turning this tide, as it promotes a thoughtful Christian faith.

BEYOND MORAL POVERTY

While in the past atheists were usually content to justify their lack of belief in God's existence on the basis of *intellectual* objections, it is now increasingly common for that justification to be based on *moral* objections. To quote from the title of Christopher Hitchen's bestselling book, it is alleged that *God is not great* and that *religion poisons everything*. Some would have us believe that religious faith is an evil akin to greed, poverty and disease and that it is a significant social problem to be obliterated if we are to attain a more utopian existence. While the famous G.K. Chesterton paradox claims "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried," a growing tide impatiently dismisses the sentiment as escapist and is unwilling to endure what they claim is the poisonous harvest of religious faith.

That harvest is described in different ways, but ten common components (in no particular order) include:

1) Religious warfare
2) Colonial exploitation
3) Racial bigotry
4) The oppression of women
5) Homophobia
6) The exploitation of the environment
7) Retarding the progress of science, especially medical science
8) Academic censorship with a resultant intellectual dishonesty
9) Intolerance of anything new
10) Hypocrisy

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[4] See my article, "Beyond Bebbington" where I argue that contemporary evangelicalism is in danger of being reduced to a movement of passionate piety. Brian Harris, "Beyond Bebbington: The Quest for an Evangelical Identity in a Postmodern Era," *Churchman* 122, no. 3 (2008): 201—219.

[5] Examples of the work of some of the new atheists include Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Sam Harris, *Letters to a Christian Nation* (New York: Random, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

Clearly there is nothing attractive about this list, and if it is seen to be the normative result of religious faith, evangelists should expect audiences who are increasingly hostile to their message – presupposing they can find any audience at all.

David Kinnaman's study of the attitude of 16–29 year old Americans towards Christians saw six recurring images.[6] They considered Christians to be:

1) Hypocritical
2) Interested in 'saving' people rather than in relating to them
3) Antihomosexual
4) Sheltered
5) Too political
6) Judgemental

Again, the list is far from winsome, and represents significant barriers to the likely receptivity to messages about the love and mercy of God.

We could argue that these negative images are the fruit of the Christendom era, when membership of the Christian faith was assumed for almost all who lived in the Western World. Christendom was often more about sanctioning the status quo than following Jesus, and we could be hopeful that its demise might free the church to find more authentic expressions of faith in this "after Christendom" era.[7] If the harvest of Christendom was our poisonous list of ten (and I acknowledge that it is excessively one sided to suggest that the list is fair),[8] is it possible that in the post Christian era a Christianity that more closely represents and reflects the teaching of Jesus might emerge?

For this to occur, it is important that we recognise and renounce those elements of religious belief that leave us vulnerable to developing a toxic faith. Given that the seminary has a key role in affirming what constitutes valid Christian faith, is it too much to expect the seminary to have a comparable role in stemming the tide of dysfunctional counterfeits to the message of Jesus?

To be fair, not all the fruit of Christendom was negative. Christians can claim credit for many of the positive social advances made in the last 2000 years. While multiple social factors are invariably at work in societal evolution, it is not fair to explore the abolition of slavery, the protection of the rights of women and children, the development of the welfare state or the shift in focus from retributive to restorative justice, without repeatedly referring to the Christian faith that motivated and inspired most of those who championed these causes. And they represent a small selection of an impressive array of humanitarian achievements.[9]

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[6] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

[7] For a discussion of and rationale for the conclusion that we live in a "post-Christendom" era, see Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004); Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

[8] For a very different (and far more positive) interpretation of the churches contribution to society, see Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

[9] A simple but thought provoking introduction to the topic is found in Dave Andrews, *People of Compassion* (Blackburn, VIC.: TEAR Australia, 2008).

Sadly, there is also a shadow side. There have been many times in the history of the church when it has been supportive of an oppressive agenda, which on occasion has revealed itself in racism, sexism, homophobia, militarism, ecological and economic exploitation, cultural insensitivity and more beside.[10]

Even if not actively supporting exploitation, faith can easily wear unattractive masks.[11] Let's explore three masks which will have to disappear if a more authentic Christian faith is to be birthed, and let's ponder the role of the seminary in ensuring their demise.

First, there is faith as escapism. While it is perhaps understandable that African American slaves longed for the day when the sweet chariot would swing low to carry them home, it is more difficult to understand why those whose lives are saturated with material abundance are sometimes so heavenly minded that they are of little use to those on the fringes of life, indeed those who are specially dear to the heart of God. A thoughtful Christian faith will ensure that eschatology is used not as a crutch justifying escapism, but as a motivator of daring obedience. As people who have been privileged to see the end of the story, we know that ultimate victory belongs to the people of God. This should give us the courage to live in the light of God's coming Kingdom in the present. Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz suggests that all theological construction should be eschatologically oriented, and his insight is important.[12] Allowing the future to guide the present will see a radically new form of Christianity birthed. Imagine, for example, if we truly lived backwards from the Pauline insight that the ultimate reality is that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"—to quote Galatians 3:28. This would indeed birth an infectiously different Christianity, one worth following. That this vision flows from good theology must not be overlooked. While it is true that many in the pews are enthralled by the *Left Behind* series, those of us in the seminary have a responsibility to extend their eschatological horizon. Our silence when profound doctrines are reduced to silliness is not acceptable. In the end, error is best combated with truth. We need to paint a compelling portrait of a thoroughly engaged and incarnated Christian faith, one able to strive in the present because it has had a glimpse of the future.

A second caricature left over from the Christendom era is that faith is often confused with the status quo. This mask bears no resemblance to what's required to be an authentic Christ follower, but nonetheless for many people things are good provided they've been around for more than 20 years. Nostalgia, rather than a commitment to a daring faith agenda, is the driver. Onlookers fail to find it inspiring. Perhaps we should stop thinking of ourselves as Christians, but as Christ followers. This is not a pedantic quibble. To stop viewing ourselves as static nouns and to introduce images of action might help to remind us that the Christian vision is of a

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[10] So, for example, Jim Wallis, speaking of the mixed legacy of Evangelicalism, laments, "Evangelicals in this century have a history of going along with the culture on the big issues and taking their stand on the smaller issues. That has been one of the serious problems of evangelical religion. Today, many evangelicals no longer just acquiesce to the culture on the larger economic and political issues, but actively promote the culture's worst values on these matters." Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (Herts: Lion, 1981), 25.

[11] The following three paragraphs are a slightly modified form of part of a brief newspaper article I wrote in 2007. Brian Harris, "When Faith Is the Problem," *The Advocate* (April 2007): 2.

[12] See for example Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty First Century* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993); Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

daring journey of discipleship. It is a journey that does not bypass the Cross and it is one that would never be undertaken without the assurance that resurrection follows crucifixion. If any of this sounds like the status quo, then the status quo is not what it used to be!

Again, the role of the seminary in this paradigm shift is critical. For years we have focused on producing *pastorally sensitive* graduates. Without sacrificing these gains, perhaps we can evaluate how effective we have been in producing *prophetically sensitive* graduates. If we are not satisfied with the harvest, perhaps we can look at what we have been planting. After all, we reap what we sow, and if our own vision of the radical agenda implicit in being a Christ follower is inadequate, the harvest will reflect the shortfall.

Third there is faith as smugness and self-righteousness. While most have renounced the wagging finger, the image of Christians as people who see themselves as morally superior to lesser mortals and who tut tut at the folly of those who don't share their faith, persists. That is not to suggest that we are people without a moral vision. However, a thoughtful Christianity is not proclaimed in "Thou Shalt" terms. It is portrayed invitationally. It recognises that it is one vision amongst other competing visions and that it needs to woo others by the winsomeness of those who have been captured by its contours.

Yet again, the seminary has an important role to play in brokering this change. By our own hospitality and willingness to think through the likely outcome of alternate moral visions, we model an engaged involvement in the issues that matter to those around us. Rather than simply saying no, we thoughtfully explore the moral issues of our day with the community in which we are incarnated. Because it is a genuine exploration, we do not proclaim our answers in advance. We will indeed be guided by the biblical text and the traditions of the church, but at times we will be surprised at the way in which contemporary issues highlight areas of biblical truth we have previously not observed. Clark Pinnock has alerted us to the possibility of discovering not only past, but also future meanings in the biblical text and his insight is one with which we should creatively engage.[13]

These three false masks—faith as escapism, faith as the status quo and faith as self-righteousness—alert us to an important truth. Faith can spark life's loftiest journeys but paradoxically, can also accompany and bolster its most misguided and tragic detours.

Because of the potentially abusive nature of faith it is important that the seminary highlights some of the warning signs that it is at risk of proving toxic. Many of our students start with the quaint assumption that so long as something is cloaked in Christian language, it must be good. The harvest of this naivety is often devastating. While an exhaustive list is beyond the scope of this talk, danger signals that point to toxic faith include an insistence on unquestioning faith, or faith as compulsion instead of faith as invitation, or where there is legalism without love, or any form of faith that aims for power and control and attempts to justify the unjustifiable in the name of God. By simply alerting Christ followers to the possibility of toxic faith the seminary makes an important contribution to its destruction. Robust Christ following is the call of

[13] Clark H. Pinnock, "Biblical Texts—Past and Future Meanings," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000): 71—81.

the day. Nothing less will persuade a cynical world to revise its largely negative verdict on the previous 2000 years of church history.

BEYOND INTELLECTUAL POVERTY

If the seminary has a role in pointing towards a Christian faith that will move us beyond our moral poverty, its role in articulating a thoughtful Christian faith to move us beyond our intellectual poverty is even more important. Not that it is a role we automatically embrace.

I saw it in an ethics class I taught at an institution I'll leave unnamed. Prior to lecturing on some of the ethical issues raised by genetic engineering, I asked the class of around 50 students how many of them were in favour of this growing discipline. While I had expected the majority to express reservations, I was a little surprised that without exception they all declared their opposition. Wondering how I would provoke interesting discussion in a class with such a homogenous view, I asked if someone could tell me a little bit about genetic engineering and what it involved. An awkward silence settled over the group. It soon became painfully obvious that the only thing the class knew about the subject was that they were opposed to it. While I would like to think that such examples are rare, I fear they are not.

Don't misunderstand me. As I got to know the students in that class I discovered them to be delightful, spiritually committed, good hearted and intelligent human beings. They had simply never realised the need to seriously engage with the issues of the 21st century—indeed, they didn't really know what those issues were. Being taught from a syllabus that had seen little development in the last 30 years, and being educated in an environment suspicious of all things new, their response was hardly surprising. My sad conclusion was that the institution they were part of was actually acting as a brake on their intellectual development. Rather than producing faithful thinkers ready to engage the questions of our time, they were forming pious graduates best suited to an intellectual ghetto where they could hibernate in splendid irrelevance. It was such a waste of excellent potential. Stephen Carter has suggested that the great problem with religion in the United States is not its neglect, but its trivialization.[14] There is no need to limit his observation to the USA, as this example makes clear.

This is all the more disturbing when we remember that we live in an era of the democratization of knowledge. In my country, Australia, the second recommendation of the Bradley review into Higher Education is that by 2020 40% of Australians between the ages of 25-34 should have at least a first degree—and it outlines the steps the country must take to make this possible.[15] Several countries already exceed this target, including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden and Finland.[16] Globally we are seeing an explosion of higher education. While old timers might lament that the quality of graduates is not what it once was, the reality is that more and more people are highly educated and capable of evaluating ideas. This trend is not

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[14] Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
[15] Denise Bradley and others, *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: DEEWR, 2008), 21.
[16] *Ibid.*, 20.

limited to some of the planets more privileged countries. In China the number of undergraduate and graduate enrolments quintupled between 1998–2005, and there is no sign of this slowing down.[17] By its emphasis on higher education, China is pointing the way to the many countries who aspire for a better future for their population.

With increasingly well-educated congregations, preachers can no longer stand in pulpits "six feet above contradiction" and must expect their views to be challenged. This is especially true when they move to areas outside of their expertise. Are pastors the font of all wisdom on raising children when there are six psychologists and four social workers in the congregation? Views expressed from the pulpit will no longer be accepted uncritically.

In the light of this it is particularly disturbing that some denominations are downplaying the importance of a rigorous theological training for their pastors. While we undoubtedly need to review what is taught at seminary, it is clear that we need clergy who have a depth of biblical understanding and who are theologically insightful. This depth cannot be gained via attending the occasional inspirational seminar or conference. At a time when the training demands for all professions are increasing, it sends an awkward message to the community if we appear to think that our clergy need less training. Are we implying that we are propagating a faith with little substance and content, and that the only skills required in furthering it are those of being able to motivate the credulous?

Not that the seminary should only train potential clergy. With the democratization of knowledge, an increasing number of lay people long for a depth of understanding of the Christian faith that it is unrealistic to expect the local church to provide. We should welcome this development, and ensure that we have sufficiently flexible training pathways to allow for the participation of thoughtful laypeople in our programmes.

If we accept the need for thinking faith, we should ask to whom the seminary should speak.

First, the seminary should do theology for and on behalf of the church.[18] We might need to overcome some suspicions here and will sometimes come across a "Jesus yes, theology no" mentality. Rather than lament this, those of us in the seminary need to be willing to work at finding the right tone for our communication, or put slightly differently, how to find our voice. At present the theologian's voice is sometimes portrayed as a pedantic whine. The unspoken fear in many congregations is that what starts as a quibble will escalate into an unseemly brawl—with a church split not far off. Rather than discuss issues, we therefore often bury them. Only the lowest common denominator of completely non-controversial beliefs remains, and as a result we become used to never exploring anything in depth. It is only a small step from here to assuming that we never explore in depth because depth does not exist. The seminary can help reverse this trend by speaking respectfully of alternate views, by welcoming the richness of nuance, and by validating the

[17] Yao Li and others, "China's Higher Education Transformation and Its Global Implications," *Vox* (2008): http://www.voxeu.org/article/china-s-higher-education-transformation accessed 2 Sept 2013.
[18] This is why Grenz named his overview of theology *Theology for the Community of God*. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

importance of exploring new ideas. We need to do this in tones of humility. Let's remember that 2000 years of church history support the hypothesis that we might be wrong!

Second, the seminary should do theology for the market place. We live at a time of a hardening secularism. Most secularists will tolerate faith communities so long as they remain in their ghettoes. It doesn't take much thought to realise that secular atheism is as much an ideology as is religious faith. It makes no sense to allow the one into the public arena while we banish the other to the religious cloister. If faith communities abandon their role in the public arena, this trend will continue to harden. It is only stating the obvious to note that if the seminary, which employs those who are the best educated in the insights of the Christian faith, says nothing about the major issues of our day, people will conclude that it is because the Christian faith has nothing to say.

For the seminary, the entry to the marketplace will often be via the academy. Rather than only speak at theological conferences, we should prepare ourselves to present papers at conferences on education, philosophy, business ethics, public policy... the list goes on and on. George Marsden speaks supportively and enthusiastically of "the outrageous idea of Christian scholarship" and we should be willing to support this quest.[19] It should not be limited to conference participation. Why should theologians only teach theology students? Should we not raise our hands to teach courses in ethics, and philosophy or to participate in class debates about the care of the environment, the eradication of poverty and the appropriate use of wealth? Belief in the Christian God makes a significant difference to the way in which each of these subjects is handled, and if we do not make ourselves available to explore this difference, who will? As we contribute relevantly in this arena, it is only a matter of time until we will be invited to contribute in yet wider arenas. Why should the new atheists be the only ones who get a public hearing?

Embarking upon this journey will take courage. It involves transforming the seminary from a place of quiet reflection (and sometimes escape) to an active participant in the hurly burly of life. I love Philip Dick's words in *The Dark Haired Girl.* "I finally reduced all human virtues to one: BRAVERY. ... if you aren't brave, it doesn't matter what other virtues you have, because you aren't going to act them out. What good does it do to be able to see the truth if you're too [scared] to act on the basis of what you see."[20]

Let me summarise. If we are to promote faithful thinking, the seminary must

1) Believe in the importance of an educated, thoughtful clergy. If we don't believe in what we do, or worse still, if we don't produce skilled, faithful thinkers, we will vote ourselves out of existence.
2) Create pathways for thinking laypeople to engage with the training provided by the seminary.
3) Work on the interface between the seminary and the church. The seminary should help the church deal with complex issues of faith and practice, and in doing so should model appropriate ways of dealing with difference and nuance.

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[19] George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[20] Philip K. Dick, *The Dark Haired Girl* (Shingletown: Mark V. Ziesing, 1988).

4) Work on the interface between the seminary and the marketplace. The initial entry point will often be via the academy, but there is no reason why it should be limited to this arena. The goal should be active involvement in all of life.

Increasingly people dismiss the Christian faith as morally suspect and intellectually shallow. It is not enough for us to lament such lop sided caricatures. Those of us in the seminary are well placed to serve the church by promoting faithful thinking. Faithful thinking is usually a pre-condition of faithful living, so in birthing a thoughtful Christian faith, the seminary can help combat two of the great missiological stumbling blocks of our day. If we don't meet this challenge, who will?