

Varied views on integration of faith & learning persist

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By Ken Camp

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WACO—Calls for the integration of faith and learning that once polarized Baylor University’s constituencies now appear to unite them. But while they rally around the “faith and learning” banner, varied groups seem to use the term in different ways and for a variety of reasons.

Bill Underwood

“Everyone I know on the Baylor campus embraces the concept of integrating faith and learning, but there are very different perspectives on what that means,” observed Bill Underwood, former interim president at Baylor and president-elect at Mercer University.

Nobody wants to be seen as being against either faith or learning at a school like Baylor, but those umbrella terms can cover drastically different visions of what constitutes a Christian university, some faculty noted.

“When you’re using words like ‘faith’ and ‘learning,’ it’s hard to argue against it. But there’s a lot of disagreement about what it means,” said Scott Moore, director of the Great Texts Program in Baylor University’s Honors College.



Mike Beaty

How those words are interpreted shape how Baylor fulfills its vision of being “a Christian university in the historic Baptist tradition,” some observers have noted, drawing a distinction between two models for Christian universities—one focused on creating a Christian atmosphere and the other devoted to the intentional integration of faith into learning.

The atmospheric approach views a Christian university primarily in terms of high moral expectations for students and a religious culture evidenced in campus life—the so-called “Baylor bubble.” The integration approach, on the other hand, emphasizes that the Christian faith—and a way of viewing the world shaped by it—should permeate classroom instruction and discussion.

During Chancellor Robert Sloan’s tenure as Baylor’s president, he promoted the integration model and created the school’s Institute for Faith & Learning. Pointing to the historic example of once-religiously affiliated universities such as Harvard, Yale and Brown, some proponents of the integration of faith and learning presented their approach as the only way

to keep Baylor from slipping into secularism in its quest to become a top-tier university.



Scott Moore

“To put the matter plainly, history shows that following the atmospheric model at the university level leads, without exception, to a secular university,” Provost Emeritus Don Schmeltekopf said in a paper presented at a 2003 colloquy on “the Baptist and Christian character of Baylor.”

Joe Armes, a Baylor regent and layman at Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, underscored that theme at a meeting of the Baylor Business Network last month. A campus atmosphere of good will and high moral expectations is important, but a Christian university should do what a state school cannot—view subject matter from a Christian worldview, he said.

“We don’t want to lose the atmosphere, but that’s not enough. We have to go further and say there is something distinctive about our Christian ethos,” he explained in an interview later. The intentional integration of faith and learning “offers a lens through which you see the academic disciplines.

We all have our presuppositions and worldviews, and the secular viewpoint is not equivalent to being neutral,” he said.

Integrating faith into the learning environment also makes good business

sense, he added. A clearly branded Christian university is a marketable consumer product.

“It’s not only the right thing to do. Also, ‘distinctively Christian’ is the right marketing niche for Baylor,” he said.

While he affirmed traditional Baptist doctrines about soul competency and religious liberty, Armes emphasized he did not feel the intentional integration of faith into the learning environment threatened them. Rather, it addresses what he sees as a larger threat—secularism.

“The dominant culture fully embraces personal autonomy. A more eminent threat to our children today is seen in the forces of secularism, relativism, consumerism and hedonism,” he said. “These are the snares that are so prevalent in our society.”

History demonstrates an inevitable drift toward secularism in higher education unless universities make a concerted effort to integrate faith into the school’s intellectual life, asserted Doug Henry, director of Baylor’s Institute for Faith & Learning.

“Every single serious scholarly treatment of the subject acknowledges that secularism takes place,” he said.

Michael Beaty, chairman of Baylor’s philosophy department, agreed.

“In the atmospheric model, the conditions for secularism are there,” he said, but he insisted more important reasons exist for advancing the integration of faith and learning.

“The atmospheric model is a defective model,” he insisted. “We are to ‘take every thought captive’ to Christ. The integration of faith and learning model offers a richer, thicker notion of what it means to be a Christian university than the atmospheric model affords.”

On the contrary, emphasis on the intentional integration of faith and learning demonstrates a “lack of any depth of understanding about how faith is communicated—particularly to young people,” said Kent Gilbreath, professor of economics and layman at Seventh & James Baptist Church in Waco.

The expectation that faith and learning must be integrated into every academic discipline carries with it the notion that it must be observable and measurable, and that conflicts with the real experience of generations of Baylor students, Gilbreath said.

Lectures about faith tacked onto classroom lessons have little impact on students, but the day-to-day influence of Christian professors who model professionalism can shape lives in tremendous ways, he asserted.

“I contend influence can be incredibly subtle but that it can be much more powerful than if it is obvious and overt,” he said.

Gilbreath characterized as “absolutely ridiculous” the assertion Baylor was in danger of drifting toward secularism before the “integration of faith and learning” model came into vogue during the Sloan administration. The atmospheric model served Baylor University well for 150 years, he insisted.

Baylor President John Lilley emphasizes the need for a balance between the two approaches—atmosphere and integration.

“Atmosphere matters. It matters a lot,” he said. “It matters how we treat people.”

At the same time, Lilley has called on faculty and staff to be intentional about the integration of faith and learning.

“I have not heard anyone say that both heart and mind are not important,” he said.

“I endorse the integration of faith and learning, both in class and outside the classroom.”

Lilley has instructed all departments by March 1 to present their own ideas about how they best can carry out Baylor’s commitment to being a Christian university.

“It’s not about uniformity within departments. It’s about having students think about what it means to be a person of faith,” he said.

“We have academic freedom here. There are a lot of models, and people are going to be allowed to do what they feel most comfortable doing. But that doesn’t mean anything goes, either. There’s balance.”

Henry applauded Lilley’s initiative in calling for departmental self-assessment.

“If the departments follow through, it could be one of the most intentional commitments to the integration of faith and learning at a Christian university anywhere in the world. It’s visionary, in some respects,” he said.

Underwood—who ended his time as Baylor’s interim president and launched his time at Mercer with speeches about freedom of thought—sees definite value in the overt integration of faith and learning.

But he offers a word of caution about potential abuse.

“I agree one of the strengths of a Christian university is that we have the freedom and the incentive to examine issues from an overtly Christian perspective. I just don’t believe it’s the only way for the integration of faith and learning to manifest itself,” echoing Lilley’s observation that “atmosphere matters.”

For Underwood, a distinctively Christian university—particularly a Baptist one—should create an atmosphere that embraces all truth as God’s truth.

“A university has to make decisions about how free people are going to be—how tolerant the university will be of faculty and students when they come to conclusions that challenge the existing orthodoxy. It’s a question of exploring truth wherever the path leads,” he said.

“Artificial restrictions on truth-seeking interfere with a Christian university being what it can be. Baptist universities ought to be the greatest of all Christian universities. Our heritage of freedom should make us most sympathetic to the vibrant truth-seeking process.

“I really believe Baptist universities have the best chance to get Christian higher education right.”

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