A View from London and Bangor: Encouragement for Multi-Disciplinary Enquiry

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Conversation? Well, yes. This book is a civilized discussion rather than an argument or a thesis or a manifesto. And it is a conversation that takes place within a broad Western tradition, in the senior common room perhaps, with a window that overlooks the landscape of the past and another that gives glimpses of the future.

One theme that stands out to me, and one that is not fully unpacked in the general summary given earlier in this issue, concerns the definition of Christian scholarship in the direction of epistemology, especially the epistemologies of Christianity and of science: it may be that modern science “could be shown to rest on a theological base” (p. 72) or it may be that the notion of objectivity should be thrown away and perspectivalism embraced (p. 109ff.). Or perhaps what is needed is epistemological humility that allows the “imbrication” or overlapping of disciplines—an architectural concept offered by Crystal Downing—to foster “Christian service rather than intellectual coercion” (p. 41).

I work at two institutions and will consider both.

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This is a large and prestigious Department of Education and Professional Studies situated within a school of Social Science and Public Policy in the federal University of London in one of the major capital cities of the world. Staff carry out applied research favouring social science paradigms and, in practice because this is where research funding is directed, seek to work at the interface between government policy and theoretically sophisticated understandings of the school curriculum or the educational process as a whole, including its social implications.

As part of its remit the department employs staff whose research will focus on religious education and church schools. These twin concerns are driven by public policy as well as by denominational priorities. This is because most church schools in England and Wales operate in what is called the “dual system,” which incorporates church schools within the state system and has done so since at least 1902, if not
1870. Church schools relate both to their diocesan authorities and to local education authorities and are maintained by public money, even though denominational religious worship and denominational religious education may be offered in them. This arrangement is not as odd as it sounds. The church schools have long learnt to carry out the educational policies of central or local government while, at the same time, offering a distinctive extra dimension as part of their provision to pupils. Most of these schools are either Anglican or Roman Catholic, since these were the ones in existence when this legal framework was set up. About 25 percent of primary school pupils and 10 percent of secondary school pupils are educated in church schools. There are, however, a few more recently founded Greek Orthodox, Muslim, and Seventh Day Adventist schools that function on the same advantageous basis.

Anglicans consider their educational provision to be at the heart of their mission to the nation while the Roman hierarchy continues to see its parish work in this light although, increasingly, Catholic teachers find themselves facing children who, though nominally Catholic, are ignorant of the precepts and practices of Christianity. The question at issue is how Christian scholarship of the kind discussed by Jacobsen and Jacobsen might make an impact on the self-perceived role and internal organization of church schools and hence on their curriculum, especially their religious education. And this question might then be extended to all the schools in the maintained (or state) sector, those that have religious foundations and those that do not.

So how might all this be reflected in the department? There are numerous possibilities best illustrated by a concrete example. An interdisciplinary research project needs public funding, and it can only receive this when a set of scholars, Christian and non-Christian, collaborate in the writing of research proposals on which they can all agree. Once the proposal is written, it is peer reviewed by another set of academics but, within the higher education system in Britain, an overtly faith-based proposal would be unlikely to receive support. So a Christian psychologist, philosopher, or educationalist might find his or her contribution submerged by secularity.

1 There were Education Acts in 1870 and in 1902. Technically, Local Education Authorities came into existence in 1902, but before this there were local boards that did much of the work later done by the Local Education Authorities. There were many boards, perhaps more than 1,000, and they were amalgamated into about 150 Authorities.