
Eruditio et Religio

Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12, Mark 10.2-16

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 4, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The hymn we've just sung is a very significant one in the history and identity of Duke University. The hymn is a prayer that God will come among us and at long last suffuse the fragility of our lives with overflowing grace, dispelling ignorance, giving us sacred discipline, healing the blindness of our hearts and minds and dispersing power and love through our lives. The third verse has a particular resonance in a university setting. It starts like this: "Unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety." The founders of Duke University were so taken with these sentiments that they paid them the highest compliment they could imagine: they translated them into Latin, and cast them as the motto of the university. Knowledge and vital piety became *Eruditio et Religio*, and this motto was enshrined in article 1 of the bylaws of the university, reproduced on the front of your bulletin, which sets out the seven aims of the university, beginning with the aspiration "to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Our forebears believed this first article was so important that they cast it in bronze and set it in stone at the true heart of the college: the West Campus bus stop.

This is one the most controversial documents at this university. I want to explore it with you from three perspectives today. I'm going to start by suggesting (1) such controversy is in many ways appropriate, and largely healthy. Then I want to suggest (2) that much of the controversy is based on a misunderstanding. And finally I'd like to suggest (3) the kind of community we might aspire to be if we were to read these words in the spirit in which they were written.

(1) Why should the phrase "faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion" be so controversial? There are a number of explanations. One arises from a certain conception of reason, which suggests that for knowledge to be objective, it has to arise from dedicated, dispassionate research, free from any prior commitment or overshadowing prejudgment of ultimate truth. In this view faith is a muddying influence on objectivity, a meddling influence on method, or, more charitably, an intuition one leaps to after the rational argument has run its course. A parade of examples of varying historical plausibility, from Galileo to Darwin, then files past to show how religion has sought to stifle the life of the mind. The second aim of Duke University is "to advance learning in all lines of truth," and this is a nod to the assumption that religion has been more of a hindrance to that goal than a help.

Another explanation for the controversy about *eruditio* and *religio* is more hostile, and maintains the reason there can be no "eternal union" is not just because religion muddies and meddles, but because religion is just plain false. In this view religion makes truth claims that don't stand up to historical and scientific scrutiny, and so it doesn't just not belong at a university, it doesn't belong anywhere in educated society. The third aim of Duke University is "to defend scholarship against all false notions and ideals," and some see religions as precisely the kind of false notions and ideals that are ripe for banishing from the university. Ardent advocates of this view are prone to get it tangled up with the first view, and thus tend to portray religion as some kind of social conspiracy to preserve a stranglehold on information and power. This has been the tenor of some recent widely-referenced published polemics against religion.

A more widespread pragmatic view arises out of the dust created by this tangled conspiracy rhetoric. It expresses no view on the truth or falsity of religion, but suggests that knowledge and religion have different methods of logic, and, since religion seems to be so emotive and divisive, it's better for a university to make no public claims on religion but restrict itself to matters that are finally open to rational and scientific verification. Better, it seems, to keep the warring siblings in separate bedrooms. Knowledge is public, says this argument; religion is private. Keep it simple. The fifth and sixth aims of Duke University are "to promote a sincere spirit of tolerance" and "to discourage all partisan and sectarian strife." I think it's fair to say many in our university in practice assume it's easiest to further these latter aims by playing down the eternal union promoted in the first one.

While such controversy is often full of stereotypes and misrepresentations, I see it as largely healthy. Why so? Well, because it keeps religion honest. Religion is forced, by accusations of meddling, to demonstrate what the fifth aim of Duke University calls “a Christian love of freedom and truth.” Religion is forced, by accusations of being false, to remember it must always be invested in claims of public truth, and can’t simply erect a high wall of institutional privilege or retreat to an insulated interior realm of private therapy. And religion is forced, by its marginalization to the realm of the private, to point out that, left to itself, secular reason has compiled a record of totalitarianism, catastrophic wars and a precipitous environmental crisis, and thus the signs are that when the eternal union of knowledge and religion is broken, all are impoverished. Once it was for scholars to show that their natural science was fit to stand aside the theological science of revelation. Today it’s for people of faith to show that knowledge and religion bring out the best in one another, and that an immersion in the one only increases one’s awe towards the other.

(2) Healthy as it may in many respects be, the longstanding controversy over the phrase “eternal union of knowledge and religion” is in one significant sense based on a misunderstanding. Look again at Charles Wesley’s hymn. And think about all we’ve just recalled about why the union of *eruditio* and *religio* seems problematic. Here’s the irony: almost all the real and imagined problems between *eruditio* and *religio* have arisen in the last 200 years, that’s to say *since* Charles Wesley wrote of uniting “the pair so long disjoined.” Wesley knew no Scopes trial, he knew no Darwin, he knew no Big Bang theory, he knew no First Amendment.

So what did he mean? Well, here we find what we can only call a mistranslation. The phrase “knowledge and vital piety” in the hymn became *Eruditio et Religio* in the motto and “knowledge and religion” in the bylaws. In the transition to Latin the meaning got changed. What “knowledge and vital piety” meant for Charles Wesley might better be translated “theology and ethics,” or perhaps even “faith and works.” Wesley wasn’t talking about the tension between secular reason and theological revelation. He was talking about our inability and reluctance to practice what we preach, our propensity to proclaim high ideals and live sordid realities, our tendency to discredit the faith we profess by the vainglory of the lives we lead – a reality the secular world calls hypocrisy but the church has traditionally simply called sin. Wesley’s hymn is a prayer that God may not only work in spite of our clumsy and obstructive nature but wonderfully transform our nature so that the glories of his kingdom in its power and love may come about even through such leaky vessels as us.

But there’s a second complication with the first aim of Duke University. It refers to “the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Many people read this and are deeply uncomfortable, because they assume the pragmatic approach I described a moment ago that like rival siblings, knowledge and religion should be kept in separate bedrooms – and the explicit naming of Jesus Christ therefore sounds like a lurch back to the muddying and meddling that suggests people who claim Jesus as their Lord belong at Duke more than those who don’t, which sounds inhospitable and oppressive and, if you’re feeling very cross, some kind of social conspiracy based on preserving the kind of institutional privilege that the sixties was supposed to have swept away.

My problem with this phrase is not that it’s too Christian, but that it’s not Christian enough. It’s a kind of period piece of 1920s mainline Christianity, that locates the essence of Jesus in his “character and teachings,” and regards “Son of God” as an honorific title rather than a philosophical claim. It makes no mention of Jesus’ birth, that’s to say his identity as fully human and fully divine, or of his death, that’s to say the cost of God’s love, nor of his resurrection, that’s to say his transformation of life beyond the confines of death. In other words it retains the parts of Jesus that are apparently most reasonable and certainly most easily culturally accommodated and downplays the parts that are unambiguously revelatory and depend specifically on faith. It’s trying to set Jesus as a low bar that people of all persuasions can jump. The trouble is, these days, they’re not jumping. Secular rationalists and people of other faiths see the word Jesus and cry foul, while Christians see the word Jesus and either lament a bygone era or shift uncomfortably and change the subject.

(3) But I want to suggest to you that if we read this first aim in the spirit of Charles Wesley’s hymn secular rationalists and people of other faiths may yet find in it a blessing and Christians may yet discover riches they never knew were there. In the last part of my remarks today I want to ask, “What kind of a community is ‘faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion’ calling us to be?” I’m going to suggest four things, which if I were to be grand, I might offer as “respectful addenda to the aims of Duke University.”

Number one, “Don’t just say it, do it.” In other words, that we be a community that strives for and celebrates the discovery that wisdom lies in the union of knowledge and empowerment. Knowledge amasses power, and the purpose of power is empowerment, setting others free to exercise their own gifts and develop their own skills and realize their own dreams. Today at Duke we often talk of knowledge in the service of society, and this phrase is an apt inheritance of Wesley’s call to unite knowledge and true piety, *eruditio et religio*. What seems to have happened in the modern university is that *eruditio et religio* has become *eruditio et ministerium*: knowledge and service. Service has taken the place of religion as the qualifier that makes the modern university feel good about itself. Service goes astray when it becomes detached from truth, becomes a substitute for learning, becomes an anodyne placeholder for what used to be called religion. But service comes alive when it puts feet on learning, when it turns knowledge into liberation, when it becomes a longing to encounter wisdom in unexpected places and unheralded people. Christians see this pattern of uniting theology and ethics in the incarnation of Christ, which shows us that God doesn’t just epitomize truth but turns truth into human flesh in becoming one among us. God didn’t just *say* it in the Word, but *did* it in the Word made flesh.

Number two, “Don’t just discover truth, deepen compassion.” Duke is a research university. The extensive time and attention that are given to the activity of research are at their best a gesture of love. Just imagine a person studied you for a stretch of years. That person would know your every quirk and curiosity and peccadillo. Their knowledge of you would give them power over you. Your desperate prayer would be that they would entertain that knowledge in love. But it is not always so. The aspiration to the eternal union of knowledge and religion is the union of knowledge and love. *Religio* means nothing if it doesn’t originate and issue in love. The prayer of true learners should be that their hearts expand with compassion at the same rate as their heads expand with knowledge. Only God fully knows, and only God fully loves, even despite what he knows. The motto *eruditio et religio* might inspire us to love, even when we know.

Number three, “Discover yourself in coming to know God and the world.” This is the insight of John Calvin, the great grand-daddy of all Presbyterians, in the very first line of his great work, the *Institutes*. Knowledge of God and the world is intimately and inextricably connected to knowledge of the self. *Eruditio et religio* means what contemporary words like “holistic” strive for: everything that our student affairs and athletics and community engagement dimensions of the university remind us every day. There’s an eternal union of discovering knowledge and discovering oneself.

And finally number four, the part that of Charles Wesley’s hymn that the bylaws leave out. The last line of verse three of the hymn reads “Thine, wholly thine, to die and live.” This is Wesley’s union of knowledge and vital piety confronts the secular separation of knowledge and religion. The secular view says we live, and we try to increase the sum total of human wisdom and wellbeing, and then we die. Wesley says the opposite: he says we die, and then we live, because Jesus’ death is the death of death, and Jesus’ resurrection is the birth of eternal life. The university’s motto means we must always be asking, “What is life, in the face of death?” Is a university a fantasy of life as perpetual youth and a doomed assertion of the eternal mind over the fragile body? Or is this a community where people of differing backgrounds and persuasions reflect seriously on what in life is truly of value in the face of death, of what is the voice of hope that truly speaks from beyond the grave?

I recall as a child staring at a window pane on a wet afternoon. (It was England, so I had plenty of opportunity.) I saw two raindrops trickle down the glass, and on meeting one another, suddenly combine and hurtle down so much faster. This is the picture I carry of an eternal union. Here, then, are the eternal unions I believe Duke can be committed to, in continuity with its Wesleyan heritage and in the spirit of its diverse future.

Acquiring knowledge and empowering others;
perceiving truth and growing in compassion;
knowing the world and knowing oneself;
receiving life and entering eternal life.

Christians may understand these aims one way, secular rationalists and people of other faiths in a myriad of other ways. But it’s in the sharing and refinement of such eternal unities that Duke will continue to discover what it truly means to be a university.