TEACHING AS FORMATION

Arthur F. Holmes

In his recent provocative book, *Exiles From Eden,* Mark Schwehn discusses three possible accounts of the academic vocation—the transmission of knowledge and skills, the making of knowledge, and the cultivation of character. He complains that, while scholarship (the making of knowledge) has been promoted in importance in the modern research university, the other two have been demoted.

Not so, one would hope, in church-related colleges. We tend to regard ourselves primarily as teaching institutions, and what Socrates called "the improvement of the soul" has been a major concern throughout the history of Christian involvement in education. Moreover, care of the soul has traditionally been associated with the transmission of knowledge, particularly knowledge of the Christian gospel and its implications. And church-related colleges have given renewed attention of late to *moral* development, while a literature has been emerging on *faith* development by writers like James Fowler, Sharon Parks and Stanley Hauerwas.

In approaching our topic, therefore, I want to comment on the church's history of involvement in higher education, then to ask how the nurture of souls might affect how we teach, and finally to reflect on other aspects of the teacher's work. I find I cannot separate moral and spiritual formation either from each other, or from intellectual development, at least from growth in Christian understanding. Nor should this be surprising. If faith without works is dead, as the epistle of James declares, moral development is the natural concomitant of spiritual formation. And if, as St. Augustine found, faith is understanding's step and understanding is faith's reward, then faith development is both nourished by and nourishes understanding. His *Confessions* reveal the reality of "faith seeking understanding"; his intellectual hunger for the truth reminds me of Paul's prayer that God would give you "a spirit of *wisdom,* and of revelation in the *knowledge of him,* having the eyes of your hearts enlightened that you may *know* what is your hope" (Eph. I). So we shall have to consider all three aspects (intellectual as well as moral and spiritual formation), and their interrelationships as we think about "teaching as formation." There can be no compartmentalized spiritual formation.

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In its educational calling, the church historically pursued three interrelated emphases that reflect this. They are first, the improvement of the soul; second, the unity of truth; third, what some writers call the "doxological," praising God for his wisdom, power and goodness revealed in our studies.

Even at first glance we should not be surprised that both moral development and an integrated understanding are related to the spiritual life—for *integration* is what all three emphases have in common, plainly so with the *unity* of truth in relation to God, and with the doxological, but also with formed character, which is a matter of integrated moral identity, the same day after day, the same inwardly and outwardly. It's not just a motley array of actions and behaviors, nor of good intentions and even dispositions that never get implemented. Ethicists ask what is the unifying virtue, the disposition that motivates and draws into harmony all the other virtues that should characterize a person. And the Christian tradition answers, "The highest virtue that integrates one's life should be love of God, the highest good." Moral education, we are rediscovering nowadays, concerns more than decision-making and the resolving of moral dilemmas. It involves cultivating virtues, habits of the hearts, but Christian character is character integrated around love for God. Meantime the unity of truth means understanding how everything we know is related to God, and declares his glories. So the *doxological* arises as a wholehearted response of love to all we know of Him and his creation, as well as the response of love to

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Him as our highest good. Formation, then, is the shaping of an integrated identity, that draws all aspects of the person and his life into relationship with God— the understanding and the moral life, as well as spirituality itself. It means making Jesus Lord of all.

Look at this in context. The church's first known involvement in higher education was presumably in Alexandria in the second and third centuries, where, in conjunction with the catechetical school, Origen developed a Christian alternative to the gnostic schools of religious thought that existed then. It was a place of intellectual inquiry for those who wanted to understand Christian beliefs; it provided a liberal education, as that was then understood, with strongly Platonist influence, as a propaedeutic for theology and Biblical interpretation. When Plato recorded Socrates' defense against the charge of corrupting Athenian youth—"I did nothing but go about persuading them first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul"—he was voicing his own central concern: the soul's improvement is the purpose of politics (he criticizes Pericles accordingly) and the responsibility of poets (he criticizes Homer), and the educational proposals of the *Republic* are to that end. His theory of forms, the art of dialectic and his later cosmology are all introduced in support of this concern about the soul's pursuit of the good. Now Origen, like Clement of Alexandria before him, construed Plato's Good as the Christian God, Plato's *eros* (love)for the Good becomes love for God, imitating the form of the Good becomes the imitation of God, and the unity of all forms by the Good becomes the unity of truth in the divine Logos. So they talked of "gathering" fragments of truth from pagan sources so as to reunite them to the truth as a whole from which they had been torn. For it is the divine Logos, Jesus Christ, by whom and for whom all things were made.

Augustine developed this more clearly. Since God is the highest good, love for God is the highest virtue that undergirds the entire moral life. But the human soul is disoriented, torn between higher and lower loves, its desires misdirected, until love for God reorients it aright. At the same time Augustine, too, insists that all truth is from God, so that like the Israelites of old we may plunder the Egyptians of their treasures of wisdom and knowledge, for these rightly belong to Christ and to Christians. So in *On Christian Doctrine* he surveys the contribution of liberal learning to understanding Scripture, and his *Confessions* are punctuated with outbursts of prayer and praise as he reflects on his own quest for truth. God is Truth as well as the Good, so we love Truth as well as Goodness in loving God. Virtue is the ordering of the soul in harmony with that truth. So Augustine advocates a two-fold discipline for youth, one to guide the life (moral development) and the other to guide their studies (intellectual development), so that God may become the object of their desires (moral) and thoughts (intellectual), and so of their full worship.

A similar picture emerges with Anselm in his monastery school. Contemplating truth and seeing its unity lifts the soul to the contemplation of God, and so Anselm's writings, too, erupt in doxologies. In the medieval university, philosophy was not only *ancilla theologiae*, but it also nourished the soul: it can show how everything in creation bears witness to its maker by fulfilling a God-given function, so that we join the entire choir of heaven and earth in raising one magnificent paean of praise to our maker.

The three emphases are thus constantly interrelated: teaching as formation that nurtures moral development and reveals the unity of truth, also elicits doxology in love for God. George Marsden, in his recent work *The Soul of the American University*, observes these emphases in Puritan colleges, and in the nineteenth century a capstone course in Moral Philosophy served at least two of them: the development of morally responsible citizens and the integration of knowledge. The teaching of science, Marsden observes, still emphasized the wisdom and power of the Creator. But, as he makes plain, the religious neutrality of Enlightenment thought tended to exclude Christian perspectives and, combined with the growth of specialization, it obscured the unity of truth. Empiricist approaches to ethics separated fact from value, denuding life of any intrinsic moral goods, and so gave rise to the relativism that our generation has now politicized. If God is dead, *we* must give value to the world. And the doxological? Even in church-related colleges, it is often marginalized in optional chapels rather than being the culminating expression of intellectual and moral development it once was.

My point is simply this: teaching as formation needs to be holistic—the integrated improvement of the soul intellectually and morally as well as the spiritual life of faith. Faith is an ultimate concern, life-integrating, fundamental to everything we are and do.

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What then about teaching, if the intellectual is so intertwined with the religious? First of all, keep in mind where students are developmentally when they come to us. Erikson would call them either diffused (un-integrated) or foreclosed (pseudo-integrated) with regards to personal identity, while William Perry finds them often dualistic, compartmentalized, black and white thinkers, if they are not already at the relativistic stage. Erikson's goal for them is the achievement of integrated identity through commitment, Perry's that they move beyond dualism and rela-

tivism to commitment. They need to make beliefs and values their own, critically exploring alternatives in the process; or, as Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks both put it, we must educate the imagination to see possibilities not yet grasped. Our students need to see how everything can come together in relation to God, their liberal learning, their values, their entire lives. They need to understand how world views compete for their attention not only in their studies but in practical concerns of life. They need to reach conclusions and make commitments for themselves.

So consider with me three hypothetical college teachers, René, Freda and Martin. Which of them would you recommend as teaching for integrative formation? Let me introduce René first. He speaks with a French accent, and I am told he insists on a thorough clarity of thinking and is satisfied with nothing less than mathematical certainty in arguments. He takes nothing "on faith," but tells people to withhold judgment if there is any possible doubt. This certainly makes students think about alternatives, but everything is either black or white, right or wrong, and until you can prove the one or the other you have to withhold judgment. He sticks rigidly to his course syllabus, and never deviates to pursue the ethical or religious implications of a topic. His high expectations challenge students to do their best, and his disciples among them make a game of debating critical issues with detached, dispassionate logic. This is René. How do you think he contributes to those who doubt, or to the dualists in his classes, or those who are already foreclosed? What is he likely to contribute to their pilgrimage of the soul?

Freda, our second professor, has an accent, too: she is from Germany. Freda seems the antithesis of René, whom she ridicules: the very idea of objective certainty is ludicrous. The male can play his rationalist games if he must, but people don't decide what to live and fight for that way. So Freda rejects "linear reasoning" for a more relational kind of feminist approach. "Truth," she says, "is a woman." You can't approach it cold, unimpassioned and detached. Knowledge is a social construct, something we create, we make it true. So it is relative to the group, and there's no way of rationally settling disputes between different points of view. It's all a power struggle: the basic question is not whether what you hold is independently true but whether you are strong enough to make it stick. So everybody knows what Freda thinks on politics nationally and on campus issues, for in the classroom she intimidates the opposition and recruits students for her own causes. Her syllabus is a springboard for starting the course, not an agenda to follow. How effectively do you think Freda nurtures the soul intellectually? . . . morally? . . . spiritually?

And what about Martin? Ever since graduate school days he has questioned René's scholastic kind of approach. In most of our earthly affairs, he grants, the light of reason is enough: but in religious matters it falls short. Martin struggled for years with his own religious doubts before finally coming to the kind of commitment for which he is now so well known on campus. "Here I stand," he tells his students. "I can do no other." He has learned to live with the lack of logical certainty that René demands, without giving up on all reasoned inquiry as Freda often seems to have done. He had to work through a lot of questions himself, so he encourages students to do the same. He even builds into his courses at appropriate junctures issues he knows they are wrestling with. He spends time talking with them individually about their problems and struggles, and at commencement he has been seen to wipe the moisture from his eyes. He cares.

I've given enough clues in these brief profiles that you see now the game I am playing. Education is a developmental process, so the question is: who of these three teachers best contributes to nurturing a Christian understanding of the unity of truth (*i.e.*, a world view), to developing the values that can give life its proper focus, a love for God that pulls us together in thankful trust? Is it *René*, who embodies the tradition of René Descartes in insisting that the only knowledge worthy of the name is that whose logical and scientific basis excludes all doubt? Or is it *Freda*, who oddly reincarnates that male chauvinist, Friedrich Nietzsche, cynical about the role of reason and politicizing issues instead? Or is it *Martin*, named after Luther, of course, who doubted that reason alone can establish belief but whose faith still passionately seeks to understand? Who might best develop the imagination? . . . or provide the right degree of cognitive dissonance in a supportive context to elicit constructive growth?

In a day when, as Alan Bloom put it in *The Closing of the American Mind*, students talk as if there is no such thing as truth or falsity, right or wrong, and when the quest for truth is replaced with a will o' the wisp called fulfillment, or else just jobs, there is something refreshing about René's insistence on knowing whether a belief is true. Truth is, after all, independent of what we think about it: without it there would be, as Shakespeare said, "no hinge or loop to hang a doubt on" (*Othello*, III, iii, 366,) or even a hope, let alone truth to trust and build one's life on. But René creates exaggerated rational expectations, and his suspended judgment is not the real doubt that students wrestle with in their own development. It is more a training exercise than an existential experience. (I recognize that Descartes' theory of passions leads him to "instrumental reasoning" in ethics. But even there the mind remains at a distance from the life-world, disengaged, almost sans passion—like my René.) On the other hand, I sympathize with Freda, both the social concerns that egg her on and her criticism of

René. Plainly we are at root relational beings, and are formed in measure by the communities of which we are part: no one is an island. But if René overplays the role of reason, she underplays it: truth is not her concern, let alone the unity of truth. Her students remain adrift in a pluralistic sea, unless they become committed to some passing cause. But even then, will such a cause be sufficient to capture the soul's love or shape the character or integrate their learning? So what about Martin? He identifies more readily with student struggles:

> *He fought his doubts and gathered strength,*
> *He would not make his judgment blind.*
> *He faced the specters of the mind*
> *And laid them: thus he came at length*
> *To find a stronger faith his own. . . .*

Those lines from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* could well have been written about Luther himself, and Augustine, and others. It's what I want for my students, too. Martin models that kind of a commitment, as he occasionally tells his students what it is he believes, and why.

But have you noticed how Perry's three stages match our triumvirate? René comes across as a satisfied dualist, knowing for sure all the answers (at least those that can be proven). Freda goes beyond, to a more relativist stage, while Martin, of course, finds identity in critical and holistic commitment. You might also try matching them with Alasdair MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry;* the Enlightenment encyclopaedist who thinks all knowledge is religiously neutral, objectively demonstrable,and universally acceptable; Nietzsche, who takes reasoning to be a power tool of use only in power plays; and then Aquinas rather than Luther. But my point is that teaching as formation should avoid the extremes of both Enlightenment rationalism and the relativist postmodern stance. *How*, as well as *what*, the teacher believes and values affects the development of student—as any observant teacher knows. *How* we teach affects the development of what since Aristotle have been called "intellectual virtues." I'm thinking of qualities like intellectual honesty, conscientiousness in looking at evidence, fair representation of sources and viewpoints, wisdom in making judgments, and prudence that considers both ends and means. In these and other regards, the mind is being shaped, the character is being formed, even *moral* character, for honesty, conscientiousness, fairness, prudence and modesty are moral virtues, too. Yet college students will easily remain just fact-collectors, develop intellectual arrogance, jump to conclusions, read too selectively, or even fudge evidence, if we let them. Our own insensitivity in these matters gives them license. *How* we teach is important, how we reveal our own beliefs, whether and how we engage in advocacy in the classroom, how we handle their questions and struggles, how we show that we care.

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So far, then, two main points: first, the historical point that intellectual, religious and moral development were interrelated in student formation; second, the pedagogical point that teaching as formation will take a more dialogical, confessional, caring approach, rather than either claiming the certainties of a rationalist or disclaiming them with the cynicism of a relativist. I call it "confessional," being up front about my faith, my unresolved problems, my own commitments—and this while giving careful and honest attention to other viewpoints and other sides of an issue. If I play devil's advocate to ensure that my students face realistically some position I or they may reject, then it also makes sense at times to advocate a view of one's own in some appropriately modest way, while inviting reactions and admitting problems. So I suggest "true confessions" by the teacher about where she stands and why, wherever it naturally arises in context in either classroom or office. Our actual values show in our attitude to learning and to students, in how we regard ethical issues and the social applications of learning. If faith commitments and moral commitments play a role in our thinking, then both honesty and pedagogy require that we be open about where and in what ways this occurs.

It follows, I think, that we are obligated, particularly teaching in church-related colleges as we do, in a pluralistic culture as ours is, with students confused by conflicting options and their own ambivalencies, to show how alternative world views affect the regnant presuppositions, methods and theories in our disciplines, to suggest Christian perspectives on issues, and say how an overall Christian world view points to the unity of truth and so gives both direction and context to all our thinking. Consistency and intellectual honesty require it. A professor, after all, professes what he thinks. And the Christian college professor represents a community and its heritage. We speak not only for ourselves but for the long and worthy tradition of Christian higher education, Christian thought, Christian ethics and Christian faith.

Students who come to our colleges are, for the time being at least, auditing a community, drawing on a heritage, becoming part of a tradition. And it is by participation in both the thought and the life of communities and opening ourselves to their heritage that we assimilate beliefs and values and define our own identities. So representing and practicing community with integrity is a large part of formation—co-curricular as well as curricular activities contribute, as do traditions and ceremonies that build memories and become powerful symbols, along with student activities and service projects. We need to build bridges between the academic and student life that foster

the attitudes and habits we desire. Service-learning opportunities are one way of doing this. And what does the doxological element, in its relation to the unity of truth, suggest about the role and the content of college chapel and the role of the chaplain? But teachers have most contact with individual students in an advising role. Here, too, beliefs and values come into play, and here, too, caring counts.

I'm not satisfied with the term "advising": it seems to confine what we do to formal roles in preregistration and the like. So consider what we do as mentoring: helping the student think through what she's learning or helping her define educational goals in relation to her personal development; identifying personal strengths she could build on and weaknesses she needs to overcome; envisioning career and service outcomes; listening to and offering feedback about problems she is encountering—problems with her faith, relationship problems, moral and spiritual struggles— and keeping all this and more related to the formation of faith and character in a lasting personal identity. And we need advisory programs in our departments to track their development.

We will encourage character formation by encouraging her to watch her attitudes, to examine her values when facing decisions, to imagine who she could become in comparison to who she presently is, and in everything to be responsible. It's easy for young people—for all of us—to mouth ideas while behaving in thoughtless ways, but good character means accepting responsibility for one's actions. It means looking before you leap, acting reflectively rather than haphazardly, and freely rather than under peer pressure. It means taking responsibility not only for myself, but for other people, too: being helpful. We should encourage responsibility not only in studies but in service projects: both should be carefully planned, thoroughly prepared, regularly carried out, honestly critiqued and improved. We must tell students to nurture good habits of the heart: virtue is just such a habit, a settled disposition rooted in the conscious decision to be a certain kind of person. I have sometimes asked a student, "Have you thought what sort of a person you are becoming . . . ?" Or "What kind of recommendations will I be able to write for you?" Cultivating character takes this kind of nurture that a teacher can sometimes help provide. In the process we do well to draw on the resources of our particular Christian traditions for spiritual and moral formation, to point students to the means of grace, and to encourage spiritual disciplines. Mentoring can involve all of this.

Recently I ran across a list of five characteristics of a good mentor:

1. The mentor takes time for a one-on-one conversation on any issue at hand.
2. The mentor doesn't smother the student with answers, doesn't spare her the struggle.
3. The mentor admits not having all the answers.
4. The mentor listens a lot, asks questions, points new directions.
5. The mentor models an integral relation between learning and all of life.

The potential of teaching for formation was brought home to me in a powerful way this spring when, on retiring from 43 years of teaching at Wheaton, I received two thick binders of letters (141 of them) from former students, many of them deeply touching, for I remembered some of their struggles. With others I never knew, and wish I had, what they were going through. I read through one volume late that night through many tears; the other volume had to wait . . . until 6 the next morning. More recently I went through them more carefully to try and identify whatever it was they perceived I had done, often unwittingly, that contributed to their development, things which might be an encouragement to other teachers. Here is something of what they said:

On intellectual development:

• You opened our minds to the magnitude of a question. • You did not dodge tough questions but honestly confronted difficult issues while maintaining a Christian orientation.• You were the unprideful Socrates, without the taint of pride or dogmatism or even impatience that so often creeps into men or women of erudition. • No matter what topic was under discussion, you treated it justly and with care.
• You personified what it means to think critically to interpret charitably and to discuss ideas graciously.
•You led me to an intellectual humility I have never forgotten.• You encouraged me to aim as high as I could. I saw a man in whom dedication to the truth was really worship. • You gave me the gift of learning to think as a Christian.

On relationships with students:

• You never turned me away from your office door. Instead you would put aside whatever you were working on and focus your undivided attention on whatever my problem happened to be. • [A student whose sister was killed in a car accident]: I will always remember with gratefulness how you took several hours to talk with me. I remember sitting in your office until 7 or 8 p.m., but you didn't show any sign of being too busy or preoccupied to deal with me. It is for your humanness and openness and compassion during that trying time that I will always remember you. • My college years were primarily a time of struggling and soul-searching. I want to thank you for your acceptance of my intense inner life, which nurtured me and gave me space to heal and grow. • When Dr. W's little child was battling leukemia, you filled in for him, but offered a prayer for

the child, and were unable to continue. One of us picked up the prayer and finished it. That meant something to me. • Early one morning in your home, you (my professor) served me a bowl of oatmeal. For me, a Korean, it was like having my feet washed . . . It may seem odd that a student thank his professor for being his servant. But of course Jesus did turn the world upside down.

And then faith formation:

• During my student days, I abandoned Christianity . . . . As this became clear in my papers, you engaged me in scholarly and kindly dialogue. Before graduation you advised me "not to throw out the baby with the bath water" . . . It took me 20 years to return to Christ. Today, as a seminary student I have a model for my work. • [One man was so distanced from his parents that for a while he found he could not even pray "Our Father, who art in Heaven." But on a graduation picture he noticed my head in the background, and he found he could pray, "Our Teacher, who art in heaven. . . .] You showed me that God is bigger than our questions. • Your life was a model of faithfully using your God-given gifts in your daily work. • You gave me an understanding of what it meant to have a calling, to understand one's life as strategically invested for the kingdom of God.

I was amazed, humbled, floored at all this sort of thing. Of course, for the 140 or so who wrote, there were several hundred more who didn't. Maybe they had another story, parts of which I am more aware of because I'm closer to the negatives in me than I allow others to be. Yet willy-nilly, whether we know it or not, for better or for worse, we *are* mentoring our students. Our teaching *is* forming their minds, forming their values, forming their faith. Teaching is formation. And in this, too, we can join the doxology of the ages. ❑

Tore Up Good

In the song, he's lamenting a landscape
returned to, the tract houses thrown up
in a summer, plywood and cheap studs,
the fewest possible nails hammered in.
Saws whine like hornets with no nest

in sight. The meadow of timothy gone,
trees gone, the creek that sparkled clear down
to crawdads gone and gone. Till it rings
like a bell and you shake your head.
So it is with the heart's landscape, too.

Why catalogue the beauty of one April, one
this or that or the other? The flying free,
the side-by-side cockpit work that meant
you worked together like a team?
And first kisses, dinners, flowers—all

rummage now. What one blind soul holds up
for care, the other pitches out for curb-
side pickup on Monday. And you like
to think in ten years' time, oh yeah,
it'll be found in some dusty bin at some flea

market. Snapped up, treasured in a hail
of dust, but oh so faded and so late.

Patricia Clark