

INTEGRITY *IN* SOLIDARITY: CHRISTIAN PROFESSIONALS IN A PLURAL PUBLIC SPHERE

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Introduction: Discerning the gap

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to open our discussions on the theme of "Bridging the Gap: Connecting Christian Faith and Professional Practice in a Pluralistic Society"—the first such gathering of its kind for Protestant Christians in Europe. The conference title assumes there is a gap to be bridged, a connection needing to be established, or perhaps re-established, between the "faith" of Christian professionals and their professional "practice." Your awareness that there is indeed such a gap is the reason why you have come to this conference, in some cases at considerable cost. In fact any Christian, whether classed as a "professional" or not, who has been meaningfully inducted into the disciplines of their own faith tradition—who has been "discipled"—must be acutely conscious of such a gap. They will have undergone a learning process in many ways akin to professional formation—a process in which they will have been trained in what it means to "profess" Christ; indeed, that religious sense is the original meaning of the term "profession." The classical Christian name for this process of Christian training is catechization, which includes not only formal but also many informal dimensions. Any Christian who has indeed been well catechized will have become aware of the gap between the demands of their faith and those of the culture in which Christ has called them to serve. Some Christians are, sadly, not so well catechized, either due to lack of opportunities for effective Christian formation, or due to indifference to their inherited tradition, or perhaps due to malformation, where what passes as catechism is in fact capitulation to the demands of the wider society. Such Christians will discern no gap between their faith and their professional practice, but only complementary spheres of activity in a spiritually seamless and harmonious life. In this talk, however, I address those who by their presence here show that they are conscious of the gap but also bothered by it, challenged by it, compelled to reflect critically on it, and who want to do something about it.

This conference asks us to address the theme in the context of a "pluralistic society." So let us note that the experience of a gap between the requirements of faith and the demands of professional practice is not only a Christian problem but one experienced by members of many other minority faith communities, whether "religious" or "secular": Orthodox Jews, Muslims, radical ecologists, anti-globalizers, extreme libertarians, for example. All of these minorities stand over against westernised secular public realms as dissenters in some respects, even though most wish to contribute to their society's common good according to their own lights. They too struggle to hold together the twin call of integrity and solidarity. We may have insights and challenges to offer to them, as they may to us.

My talk has two sections. In the first, "diagnosing the gap," I try to identify what this gap is, especially as experienced by Christian professionals. I begin by identifying the most fundamental "gap" we encounter in Christian existence, and then address the specific kinds of tension we face in professional practice, distinguishing five strategies for dealing with them. In the second part, "negotiating the gap," I point to two kinds of discernment we need in order to make our way as Christian practitioners in response to this gap: first, discerning where prevailing norms deviate from the imperatives of Christian faith and what distinctive contributions Christian professionalism can bring; second, discerning what it means for Christian professionals and their organisations to offer these gifts within a secularised and plural sphere.

I. Diagnosing the gap

How shall we understand this "gap" to which the conference title refers? The first thing to say is that it is not a gap between the all-too-familiar polarities, which often cloud discussions like this: between spiritual and material, theoretical and practical, natural and supernatural, sacred and secular, church and world, or eternal and temporal. These polarities can mislead us in many ways. For example, they can suggest that we are talking about an inherent tension between distinct spheres of created human life—emotional needs versus bodily needs, or ideas versus reality, for example. Or they can lead us to see the tension as one between the norms of our "natural" or created life and those of our redeemed life in Christ. But in a biblical worldview there is no tension between different parts of created order, nor is there a tension between anything that God has given us in creation and anything that God achieves in redemption. Rather, redemption is the restoration of the broken harmony of created order, and we can already experience something of it even in "this present age," including in our professional lives.

At the most fundamental level, the gap we are talking about is the result, not of creation or redemption, but of the fall. It is occasioned by conflicting spiritual orientations, different existential stances toward God. It is a conflict between what God calls his creatures to be and what they, in their rebellion, strive to be; and so the Bible speaks of "spiritual warfare" being waged between God and all the forces that oppose his good purposes in creation and redemption. For understandable reasons, this is unpopular language in European churches today. But if we are to take stock of the challenge facing us today, we would do well to reinstate it.

So this is the most fundamental "gap" in Christian existence; indeed in human existence. And such a gap, of course, cannot be bridged by human effort. We are only ambassadors of reconciliation. The work of reconciliation itself is God's alone. But, as we seek to fulfil that ambassadorial role, as we take up the complex challenge of Christian discipleship today,

we encounter many kinds of tension between the demands which flow from our faith in Christ and the expectations placed on us by a secularised and pluralistic culture. In a society, which is both extensively secularised, but also culturally, morally and religiously plural, such tensions inevitably and frequently arise for any informed and self-conscious Christian professional. We find ourselves pulled between maintaining the integrity of our unique faith commitments, and sustaining our sense of solidarity with the wider society in which we practice our profession. At many points, the prevailing norms and practices of such a society will impose pressures on any Christian to subordinate the integrity of what their faith requires to demands, whether professional or otherwise, which seem to conflict with those requirements. And because the line of spiritual warfare also runs through each of us as Christians, this tension is often difficult to identify correctly.

One of a limited number of strategies will in fact resolve this basic tension. Let me distinguish five: withdrawal, accommodation, compartmentalisation, subversion, or critical transformation. Let me say simply that the strategy of withdrawal is not an option for adherents to a missionary faith like Christianity. Nor is the accommodation strategy—what I earlier called “capitulation.” In such a strategy the goal is simply to blend in, to merge invisibly with whatever the mainstream seems to require, perhaps pursuing otherwise valid reasons of professional advancement. Again, I assume that the reason we are all here is that we also reject that strategy as an inadequate response to the call of the Gospel.

The interesting discussion is between the three remaining options: compartmentalisation, resistance, or critical transformation. In the compartmentalisation strategy, we divide our lives up into two zones: one where Christian faith generates distinctive demands, the other where spiritual orientations are thought to make no difference, with the result that norms of behaviour are supplied by the dominant professional culture and adopted by Christians unreflectively and uncritically. Again, most of us will wish to reject this strategy, but we do well to remember that we can all easily slide into it by default. This happens when we operate, consciously or unconsciously, with arbitrary limits around the zone where faith is thought to give guidance. For example, it might be thought that a Christian school or college should develop an “ethos of care” to clarify its identity over against secular schools driven by the goal of maximizing measurable academic outcomes. That is a laudable aspiration, and a Christian school, which did nothing else, would already have justified its existence. But such a school might still be ignorant of, or even resistant to, the notion that it should also produce *curricular content* any different to that in mainstream secular education. But Christians who have been catechised into recognising the comprehensive Lordship of Christ over all of life will not rest content with such compartmentalisation, even if they cannot immediately overcome it (it can take years to develop a new curriculum, and once the ink is dry we need to review it all over again). Such Christians will be striving to discern the meaning of that Lordship in every area of professional practice.

So much for compartmentalisation. What about the strategy of subversion? I am not talking here about illegal or unconstitutional action *per se*. By subversion I mean what might be called, not a strategy of withdrawal, but rather what might be called “strategic withdrawal”: not a mere distancing

of ourselves from society in order to preserve a faithful Christian professional identity, but rather a stepping back from immersion in the professional mainstream in order to establishing a completely alternative form of Christian practice. The idea here is to live in a way which is uncorrupted by mainstream culture but close enough to it to voice an audible challenge—to present a “prophetic witness,” as it is often described. Some of us will have heard Christians decry the very idea of “professionalism” as if it were entirely a product of secularised modernity; they would be an example of this view. In English-language theology it is associated today especially with the neo-Anabaptist thought of Stanley Hauerwas, and it is well represented in the recent collection he co-edited, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*,¹ which has provocative and insightful chapters on several areas of professional concern. One of the most striking chapters is entitled “Giving Grief to Management.” This contains a pun which those whose first language is not English might miss. In English, to “give grief” to someone is to give them trouble, to be a “pain in the neck” (to use another English idiom). But by “giving grief to management” the author of this chapter means “to infuse secular management techniques with an awareness of human suffering”—a radical challenge to the dominant contemporary professional view which, he claims, generally tries to suppress suffering by managing it out of sight.

Let me say two things about this strategy of subversion. First, anyone who has been properly catechised to grasp the comprehensive Lordship of Christ will know that the Christ they follow is, as Mary prophesied, in the business of “bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly” (Luke 1:52)—that is “giving grief to management” in a very big way. If that isn’t “subversive of prevailing norms,” I don’t know what is. But I don’t want to endorse this strategy uncritically. For, second, in order to identify *who* in today’s professional sectors actually are “the powerful,” those needing to be brought down, and who are “the lowly,” those needing to be raised up, and if we are to know what this might mean in professional practice, we will need to cultivate very careful skills of discernment. But this cannot be done at great distance from the professional mainstream. The prophets never simply denounced, they always first discerned. And they acquired their skills of prophetic discernment from a standpoint of solidarity—from *within* the society they felt called to critique and whose sins they acknowledged themselves to share. They too strove for integrity *in* solidarity.

Which brings me to the fifth strategy, critical transformation. There are no prizes for guessing that this is one I favour. I noted already that Christianity is a missionary faith, one which strives to testify to the Gospel as public truth. Let me put that in different words: Christianity is a faith that strives to offer the distinctive gifts of Christian faith to society at large, and so to shape its professional and public realms in the light of those gifts. Christianity *of its nature* seeks the critical transformation of its host society. This is done not to secure a position of superiority for itself but rather for the sake of the common good. Well-catechised Christians will therefore be propelled into transformative activity wherever they find themselves. Critical transformation is, I believe, the strategy most in accord with a biblical vision of creation and

¹ Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

redemption, of culture and society. It is the strategy which best enables us to diagnose the gap we are talking about and negotiate our way through it. The term critical transformation points to the challenge of seeking what I am calling “integrity in solidarity”: how to strive for Christian faithfulness in all dimensions of our personal, and professional lives *just as* we commit ourselves to the common good, as we seek to show solidarity with friends, neighbours, colleagues, and fellow citizens.

II. Negotiating the gap

So much for my reflections on diagnosing the “gap” between Christian faith and professional practice. In the second part of the talk I want to point to two kinds of discernment we need to cultivate if we are to negotiate this gap reliably.

The first kind of discernment we need to cultivate is the ability to identify where dominant professional norms deviate from the requirements of Christian integrity. We all understand that this is no easy task. To do it requires that we have at least some intuitive ideas about what those requirements are. The point of Christian education, of course, is to develop those intuitions into the best systematic knowledge available. But the identification of a distinctive Christian professional perspective cannot be learned from textbooks alone, even Christian ones. It requires sustained exposure to professional practice, whether that of those who teach us, or our own, as we begin to reflect critically on our own continuing professional experience. Indeed, it is often the case that we are only alerted to what is distinctive about a Christian perspective as we immerse ourselves in current practice and run up against its pathologies. We then need to engage in what liberation theologians have called “critical reflection on praxis.” Now that is a controversial term, so let me add that such “praxis” is never simply neutral experience, but is already oriented to goals inspired by faith. So for Christians to reflect critically on their professional “praxis” is to *reflect Christianly*, on *Christian experience*.

I just said that we “run up against the pathologies” of prevailing professional practice. But as we immerse ourselves in such practice we will also encounter its many strengths and achievements. We should welcome and appreciate these as creaturely wisdom acquired by those who do not share our Christian faith—just as the sages of Israel freely incorporated the insights of their ancient near-eastern contemporaries into the law codes and wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Indeed, our own view of what counts as a Christian view of a professional practice will very likely be deepened and corrected in such an encounter. This is another example of how we are to strive for Christian integrity from a position of solidarity, in this case solidarity with other members of our own profession.

Let me mention two brief examples of the kind of discernment we need, both relating to the meaning of personhood. One I mentioned earlier was of a school governed by a secularist ethos giving exaggerated priority to maximizing measurable academic attainments, thereby neglecting an “ethos of care” based on a holistic idea of personal formation. This issue is being actively debated in relation to British schools but I suspect others will recognise the same forces at work on their own contexts. The pattern is that bureaucratic and utilitarian performance indicators (in the UK imposed by central government), increasingly promote a shrunken view of “achievement,” skewing the

school curriculum away from the formation of a holistic type of “wisdom,” setting financially punitive targets for schools to meet, and in the process demoralising both students and teachers. Huge amounts of money are pumped in; the numbers look good; but what kind of people emerge from such a process?

Parallel examples could easily be found in the health care professions or social work. In the latter, for example, there was recently a harrowing case in the UK where a child officially designated as “at risk” was killed by parents even after 60 home visits by diverse professionals. In the aftermath it became public that many social workers are now spending as much time entering data into their computers as they were actually talking to their clients—and this, in the interests of “accountability.”

These are just two examples of how, in this case reductionist views of personhood and the management systems corresponding to them, are damaging professional practice by forcing it to advance a narrow, and often only a quantifiable, range of performance targets. In these cases the key task for Christian professional discernment is to articulate a sophisticated, Christian-inspired conception of the person, and spell out its implications in detail in the relevant professional field.

The second kind of discernment I want to mention is the ability to negotiate the wider context of engagement in a religiously plural and secularised public realm. This requires not only an advanced Christian understanding of one’s own profession but also a grasp of the larger cultural, political, and increasingly global, demands and opportunities, which it faces. Many issues arise here, but I mention just three.

One is the need to be fully alert to creeping erosions of conscientious professional freedom, for Christians but also for other minorities, within public institutions governed by an ideological secularism. There are many examples of where this is taking place, but regrettably one of the main flashpoints today—at least in the UK and North America—concerns the desire of theologically orthodox Christians to maintain what they take to be biblical views of human sexuality. To give an example: two years ago, Catholic adoption agencies in the UK found themselves in a conflict with the government when they were refused an exemption from recent equality and anti-discrimination legislation. Such legislation was held by the government to require all adoption agencies to be willing to make adoption available to gay couples, something incompatible with Catholic moral teaching. It was not even enough for Catholic agencies to refer gay couples to some other agency. To its credit, the church refused to back down, but the government steamrollered ahead, with the result that such agencies have had either to conform to government policy and separate themselves from the church, or face closure.

This is to twist the valid principle of non-discrimination out of all recognition. It is an act of pointless egalitarian bullying by government, an example of how human rights, originally intended to protect individual freedom against an encroaching state, are now being used by governments to refashion free associations in its own image, and thereby erode the distinctive ethos of independent professional service providers. It reveals how secularist egalitarianism is actually not a friend of pluralism but its enemy. European

Christian professionals should prepare to defend themselves and their institutions against more instances of this anti-pluralist secularism in the future. Sometimes they may find themselves up against the European Court of Human Rights. (And even Christians who take difference views of sexual ethics should be very concerned about this kind of case.)

Now the immediate impetus to such defensive action is obviously a desire to maintain our own professional integrity within public institutions. But I want to emphasize that we should wherever possible act in ways that also show solidarity with others. Such action is in the first instance an act of solidarity with our fellow Christian professionals. But it also an act of solidarity with other minorities who are facing the same constraints. We should be ready to defend freedom of conscience for them as well. And, beyond that, it is also an act of solidarity with society at large, since upholding freedom of conscience is defending a fundamental pillar of a just political community in which we all have a stake. Presenting that argument in a publicly convincing and non-sectarian way will be a major task in the years ahead. We will need to develop an appropriate political language for that purpose—one which expresses Christian integrity while speaking in a way that others can grasp.

A second challenge I want to mention is the ability to judge when it may be right or necessary to seek to establish distinct faith-based professional organisations alongside public institutions, or to maintain them where they already exist but are under threat. A negative justification for doing so is, of course, a judgment that the constraints on conscientious freedom have become so tight that the most basic Christian practices are being prevented or seriously inhibited—such as where Christian medical professionals face sanctions if they refuse to participate in abortion or euthanasia, or where they are surrounded by a culture hostile to an ethos of true healing, such as a utilitarian ethos in which medical decisions about vulnerable individuals are regularly subordinated to crude cost-benefit calculations.

But there is also a powerful positive justification for establishing distinct Christian professional institutions, even in the absence of such constraints on conscience. Sometimes critics suggest that founding separate institutions is an act of withdrawal from—even a betrayal of—mainstream culture. That can become true if an institution comes to be preoccupied solely with its own interests. But there are numerous historical examples of where such institutions—schools, universities, hospitals, welfare organisations—have led the way in offering to the public at large pioneering and humane professional practices which are then imitated by others or taken up by government. And there remain excellent examples today of Christian-inspired institutions at the forefront of areas of professional practice which are badly neglected by secular public institutions; I think for example of the British hospice movement which continues to offer exemplary care for the terminally ill. Setting up or maintaining such institutions with a view to promoting the common good is a courageous demonstration of solidarity with wider society—a desire to offer distinctive gifts not readily available elsewhere. Given the growing penetration of secularist professional views in many European countries, I think we are going to need more not fewer such institutions in the years ahead. The aim is not to abandon or subvert mainstream institutions but to serve society better. And given the poor state of health of some mainstream institutions, it

may even be that governments will actively turn to faith-based institutions to raise the overall level of professional performance in society. That is, at least, one reason why the British government is currently quite supportive of faith-based schools.

The third challenge presented by our society is to understand both the limits and the opportunities of secularism and pluralism. First, secularism. We are all aware that a pervasive secularism within professional life means that bringing a Christian influence to bear will be an uphill struggle; we may have to content ourselves with marginal improvements, or resisting a further downward slide in standards. On the other hand, many are now suggesting that we are entering a “post-secular” age in which religion is returning to the public square, and even winning a degree of legitimacy it lacked for so long. What is driving this tendency is an ever-deepening doubt about the very foundations of modernity—its faith in reason and science as the exclusive keys to truth. We need to be alert for the openings that post-secularism offers in making our case for the Christian perspective on professional practice.

Second, pluralism. There is no doubt that we live in a *de facto* condition of worldview pluralism and that this is not going to change. As Christians, we need to distinguish between acknowledging the fact of pluralism and endorsing a relativism in which all options have equal validity. But having done so, we still need to respond to *de facto* pluralism *justly*. Two responses should be avoided. One would be to seek a reversion to a former age of Christian privilege, or to cling on to such privilege where it still exists. Governments should be urged to relate to plural worldviews impartially, where possible, and within the limits of law and public order. And Christians should positively encourage governments to do so—and thereby keep democracy open to Christian (or other minority) influences in public life. The second would be to confuse Christian influence with defending the character of our particular national traditions (English, Dutch, and Hungarian etc.). The European nations we hail from are a confusing mixture of Christian and other influences, so that the goal of seeking (or protecting) a “Christian nation” is misplaced. In seeking a just response to pluralism, our goal should be to exercise Christian public influence alongside—and sometimes in common with—other minority communities. The success of that influence depends on many factors we cannot control but our task is to seek integrity before God not victory over rivals.

Christian professionals, then, need to cultivate these and other kinds of discernment carefully. Let me conclude by underlining the unique vocation of distinctively Christian educational institutions towards this task. They are not the only institutions we need. And they suffer from many limitations—of funds, expertise, or status. But at their best they can offer an irreplaceable, life-transforming opportunity for intense, concentrated exposure to the best available resources of Christian professional wisdom. Their goal is to equip those who pass through them to make an authentically Christian contribution to their profession and to wider society: to prepare them to live with Christian integrity from a standpoint of visible solidarity with their neighbours and fellow citizens. All of us here will wish to support each other in fulfilling this thrilling vocation to the best of our abilities. I thank IAPCHE for its invaluable leadership in helping us to do so.