

Minding the faith

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind. By Richard T. Hughes. Eerdmans, 172 pp., \$18.00.

In this beautifully written, sermonic essay Richard Hughes begins by defining the virtues needed for sound scholarship and good teaching: devotion to the rigorous search for truth, willingness sympathetically to entertain diverse viewpoints, unfettered creativity and imagination, and allegiance to critical thinking applied to all perspectives, including one's own. He proceeds to offer a theological line of reasoning to demonstrate that "Christian scholars can embrace the very best pedagogical practices and the highest standards of scholarship and do so precisely because of their allegiance to the Christian faith."

Among the many theological arguments Hughes advances, the paradoxical character of Christian belief and the implications of human finitude carry special weight. A Christian who takes his or her theology seriously, Hughes argues, learns to think paradoxically—that is, to think in a way that sustains openness, diversity and academic freedom. "If we are comfortable with paradox, we no longer feel compelled to resolve a dilemma, to foreclose on a student's question, to eliminate ambiguity, to transform all shades of gray into black or white, or to tie up every loose end before the class concludes," Hughes states. "If we are comfortable with paradox, we can be comfortable with creativity and imagination on the part of our students, even when their creativity forces us to occupy unfamiliar ground."

The Christian faith and serious academic exploration are both characterized by an awareness of human finitude. To hear the gospel, we must confess our finitude, limits and shortcomings. To be serious scholars, we must confess that our understandings are inevitably flawed, incomplete and likely to be supplanted. Hughes believes that asking his students to face the ambiguity of the human situation, to confront Paul Tillich's ultimate questions of fate and death, of guilt and condemnation, of emptiness and meaninglessness encourages in them a "healthy skepticism, not only about their own self-sufficiency, but also about the presumed

self-sufficiency of others,” and frees them to question the wisdom of all human authorities (including teachers) and to doubt the finality of all human solutions, especially “final solutions.”

Themes of finitude and paradox run through Hughes’s insistence that Christian faith can sustain the life of the mind. Christian faith calls believers simultaneously to affirm and to break through the particularities of religious tradition. For example, finite particularities (including the paradoxical fact of the incarnation) point us to an infinite God who transcends all particularities. The Bible points beyond itself and demands that we wrestle critically, imaginatively and cooperatively with others who seek to understand God’s eternal truth. God in Christ took the paradoxical form of a servant, and Christians who follow Christ’s example of service must take all peoples seriously as human beings with their own unique stories, histories, cultures and religious traditions.

Though I deeply sympathize with the thrust of Hughes’s argument, I’m inclined to be more cautious about the academic utility of Christians’ paradoxical thinking. *The Shorter OED* defines a paradox both as “a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition which when investigated or explained may prove to be well-founded or true,” and as “a proposition or statement that is actually self-contradictory, absurd, or false.” The paradoxes of Christian faith fall into category one, while what Hughes terms paradoxes within the academy may fall more into category two.

But I heartily endorse Hughes’s case for the significance of the Christian awareness of human finitude in nourishing the life of the mind. We Christians confess that we are sinful and wholly dependent on God’s gracious initiative to bring us to faith and right living. We confess that as human beings we are embodied, located and limited. And we confess that God accommodated our human finitude by becoming embodied, located and limited in Jesus the Christ, who lived among us, was crucified, died and then transcended our humanity by rising from the dead. God’s accommodation to our human finitude continues in the divine provision of the words of scripture, the sacraments of the church and the gathered body of Christ. If we believe that the God of truth has accommodated God’s self to our finite limitations, on what incorrigible grounds do we declare that God has not accommodated God’s self to the situated finitude of others who believe or think differently than we? As Hughes powerfully and persuasively argues, the Christian scholar has ample Christian warrant to be humble in the face of diversity, open to the challenge of

competing perspectives and fully engaged in the cooperative, rigorous and imaginative search for truth.