

# Scholarship and Christian Faith/Educating for Shalom

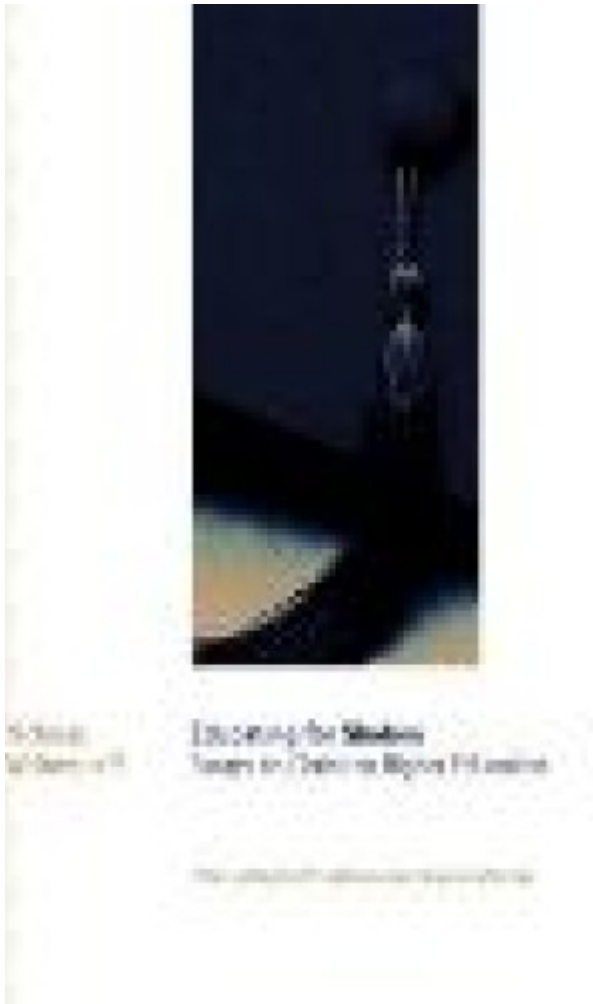
reviewed by [Robert Benne](#) in the [November 16, 2004](#) issue

## In Review



## Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation

Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen  
Oxford University Press



## **Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education**

Nicholas Wolterstorff  
Eerdmans

In higher education discussions about how faith claims should relate to secular claims, Lutherans like to say that they are not like the Calvinists, who want to transform the latter to fit with the former. Of course, this demur is often a cover-up for doing little faith/learning engagement at all. It's good to remember Billy Sunday's retort to those who criticized his evangelistic methods: "I prefer my imperfect approach, which I actually use, to your perfect one, which you don't."

In *Scholarship and Christian Faith*, faculty members from Messiah College, a Brethren in Christ school (embracing the Anabaptist, Pietist and Wesleyan traditions), offer the same demur. Featuring lead articles by Douglas and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, the book critiques the "faith-and-learning integration" model

associated with Calvin College. Calvin's Reformed approach analyzes the "worldview" assumptions of any field of inquiry, subjects them to a Christian critique, and "transforms" them and their claims into the Christian worldview. Secular knowledge is transformed into Christian knowledge.

The Messiah crew thinks there is altogether too much defensive whining about Christians not being able to do overtly Christian scholarship in both church-related and public institutions of higher learning. Their more positive agenda is stated straightforwardly: "The general flow of the [book's] argument moves from a critique of the most prominent existing model of Christian scholarship (called "integration of faith and learning") through a series of chapters exploring the personal dimensions of Christian scholarship, and the multifaceted character of scholarship in general, ending with a map of the complex terrain of Christian scholarship in all its many forms and manifestations."

In their effort to enlarge the conversation, the writers argue that Christian scholarship can include projects selected by authors motivated by religious concerns; approached out of a Christian sense of calling; characterized by subtle overlaps of religious and scholarly concerns ("imbrication"); arising from aesthetic or instinctive perspectives; and, certainly, operating out of different traditions of faith/learning engagement.

The essays amply demonstrate approaches other than the faith/learning integration model. Unfortunately, they leave out the liberal Protestant model, long regnant in places like the University of Chicago, which has insisted that the claims of faith must wrestle with and accommodate contemporary thought forms. (The recent discussion of James Gustafson's book *An Examined Faith* in the pages of this journal illustrates the continuing relevance of that model.) At times, the essays make the faith/learning conversation so multifarious and subtly variegated that almost anything can pass for Christian scholarship. At other times, perhaps prompted by their Pietist tradition, the writers seem to criticize the Calvinist model because it is systematically theological, and thereby too "rational."

Mostly, however, it seems that they just need to clear room for other approaches because the Calvinist model has been so influential. The folks at Calvin College have actually used their "imperfect" method while others often have not used their "perfect" one. The "integration" model is so influential because it has been courageously and forthrightly pursued. Its clarity and strength have made it seem

like the only game in town.

The man who has most fully developed that model is Nicholas Wolterstorff, who became its major theoretician during the 30 years he taught at Calvin College. In *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education*, his essays spanning many years have been collected and edited by Clarence Joldersma and Gloria Goris Stronks. "What Is the Reformed Perspective on Christian Higher Education?" is a fine summary of the integration model. Other essays explore the epistemological issues involved in claiming a place for Christian perspectives in scholarly conversation. Wolterstorff's reflections are so subtle, wide-ranging and excellent that one realizes the Messiah authors must be taking aim at some of the more wooden derivatives of the integration model rather than at the master theoretician himself.

However, Wolterstorff now has moved on from the Calvinist humanism that he had such an important part in shaping. Radicalized by some vivid experiences of oppression among South Africans and Palestinians, he now believes that Christian higher education should have an activist thrust. It should aim at "educating for Shalom," as the title of the book indicates. Resonating with Calvinist commitments to building the kingdom of God, Wolterstorff believes that Christian higher education should train students to be engaged not only in intellectual battle but also in the struggle for social justice.

Though I deeply respect and admire Wolterstorff's contributions to Christian higher education, I hope Calvin doesn't take up his activist suggestions. Certainly it is commendable for a Christian college to form students to have concern for the poor and oppressed, but it is another thing to politicize education with a partisan agenda. Unfortunately, Wolterstorff seems to be proposing just such a program. He has joined his social justice concerns exclusively to the thoroughly anticapitalist "world systems" approach of Immanuel Wallerstein. This turn leads Wolterstorff to make this dubious claim: "We must, in my judgment, reject the notion that the fundamental structural reality of capitalist economies is a free market and that domination and exploitation are purely personal and accidental. That should be seen as a heresy, in the strict sense of heresy." And no doubt heresies should be eliminated from Christian colleges.

There is some truth in the Marxist theory of dependent capitalism (the riches of the West are won at the expense of the South), but certainly any intellectually respectable college will avoid banishing competing economic interpretations from its classrooms, let alone shaping its students to be anticapitalist (or antiglobalization)

activists. The sorry upshot of this could be the transformation of Christian education into political correctness with a vengeance. It is unlikely that Wolterstorff—or Calvin College, for that matter—would give up their confessional heritage for a mess of politically correct pottage, but such has been the fate of many liberal Protestant colleges. For all his wisdom on “faith/learning integration,” I think Wolterstorff has taken a wrong turn.