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Cruciformed: In the University

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Everything about this topic is difficult when you are situated in the heart of a great university. This is not to say it is any easier writing from the heart of a megachurch or a minor church! Cruciform living is not the American way of living and it is certainly not the way of living within the university.

So what might cross-shaped living involve in the heart of the university organized around the study of science and technology? Three ideas immediately come to mind.

First, cruciform living means not bowing to the idols that human beings raise to worship whether they be the idol of accomplishment measured in Nobel prizes or the accomplishment of being the best in a field of inquiry. Simply put, the God of the Bible remains beyond the accomplishments of science and the accomplishments of Christians in the academy who view religion and the Bible in a strictly scientific way.

Secondly, cruciform living does not involve the exercise of power but instead the willingness to serve. All our measures of success revolve around recognition. Even in the university this is true. Does a department grow? Are prizes won? Do people know how a particular department ranks? Do people recognize how good we are at what we do? Those who take the Bible seriously surely recognize that being the chosen people was not a recipe for success. And Jesus certainly did not leave this world feeling his ministry had been all he wished. “Thy will be done” was not a hymn to accomplishment.

Finally, cruciform living is not a form of triumphalism. While there will be victories and noteworthy accomplishments, the final measure of success is to be read in the lives of students who find the truth in the words of James Killian, former president of MIT, describing the MIT chapel:

> This building gives embodiment to the responsibility of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to maintain our atmosphere of religious freedom wherein students may deepen their understanding of their own spiritual heritage, freely pursue their own religious interests and worship God in their own way.

An “atmosphere of religious freedom” is the mark of a great university because such a university will entertain the presence of religious traditions that challenge our sense of virtue and value, recognizing that the key to a good education is an environment where learning about the *other* is important and where the stranger is welcomed, clothed, and fed. This is the role of servants who respond to the needs of students rather than to the demands of institutional promotion.

This essay is more autobiographical than I had intended, but reflecting on what I have experienced and learned in my career at MIT has given deeper meaning to the points I wish to make.

When I first came to MIT, I felt keenly that I had been called to be here so when my application for a job here was rejected, it was a great disappointment. I called a dean involved in the search and asked if we might talk about how I could have made a better impression as I sought the job. She agreed to talk and we had a good conversation and I learned new insights into job hunting. Emboldened I asked if there was a possibility I might be reconsidered; she said no.

This year I will retire after thirty-seven years at MIT. That I was reconsidered is apparent. That my sense of calling was confirmed is also true, but the notion that I had been called to the job includes recognition that there was more to getting the job than simple skills and aptitude. All of the preparation, all of the encouragement that led me to apply for the job, and all of the promises that I would get an interview went out the window when the application was received. Human reason has no name for the path I walked. I felt God's hand at work and that sense of special Providence is not a factor usually cited when one is employed by MIT.

I sensed that I was a fit for the role of a counselor at MIT because I drew on resources needed but not commonly acknowledged at the Institute. I was a practitioner of the scientific method. I believed one makes critical assessments, draws conclusions, tests them, and solves problems. It was the rationalism I had been taught in Sunday School to utilize when reading the Bible, but I also knew that there was more to problem-solving than lining up facts and drawing conclusions. One needed to listen to what was being proposed and one needed to be concerned with why we were problem-solving. What were the implications for the larger picture? These skills made me a good fit for the role I was to play, but there were still plenty of blind spots because in general I tended to presume that an orderly intellect was a precursor to proper problem-solving. So I thought I would fit into the MIT way. I was right, but note that I have also suggested that what I learned in Sunday School prepared me for the job.

One of the chaplains I had occasion to know and appreciate as I found my way into the Institute in 1979 was the Reverend Scott Paradise. He had come to MIT from Detroit, where he had been involved with the UAW local 600 and the Detroit Industrial Mission. He had preached, published articles, and become an activist on the nuclear arms race, the ecological crisis, and the gap between the rich and the poor. While demonstrating, he had been arrested for civil disobedience.

When he came to MIT, he described his role at the Institute as being a visitor in the temple of a foreign god—the god of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. (You may recognize them as the source for the acronym *STEM*.) This was the god of MIT and, in the 1960s and 1970s, many chaplains in American colleges and universities positioned themselves as "in but not of" their institutions. Their job was to remind the academy of other measures of success, indeed other gods to be heard. Even today mention of William Sloane Coffin, for example, can still cause administrative hands to shake and temperatures to rise.

Scott kept asking questions throughout his career. He often came to work after spending an early morning hour demonstrating outside a local think tank for the military–industrial complex. He left early to stand and be seen as the day ended and workers left for home. These were not career-enhancing moves but exemplified the essence of what it meant to be in but not of the Institute while answering to a higher power. When he retired in 1986, he was given the Billard Award with this citation: "Your untiring efforts to promote public conversation on wide-ranging, complicated issues has reflected your steadfast belief that we at MIT must understand how our work affects society. . . . Your wise and compassionate counsel has been invaluable." Apparently Scott had gone to a different Sunday School than I had!

I was interested in my own reaction to his work. I had thought of myself as socially responsible. Our local church had a long history of social justice interests. In fact, I was particularly concerned with matters related to racial justice and gender equity—but Scott's outspoken support for economic justice and his willingness to take on the leadership of the Institute gave me pause and it slowly occurred to me that I had more in common with the orientation of the Institute than I thought. Racial justice and gender equity made sense to me. They were the reasonable outcomes from being grounded in a common sense reading of the Bible. However, broader issues were not so clearly "reasonable" to me.

The ethics of the military–industrial complex, i.e. what government dollars might fund, demanded a sensitivity that was foreign to my way of thinking. I tended to think that the exercise of power grew naturally as leadership matured. I find still that my default position too often gives credibility to those in power. Perhaps this is the reason Lyndon Baines Johnson remains my favorite recent president.

Johnson, a member of the Disciples of Christ, had a favorite text he often quoted: "Come let us reason together" (Isa 1.18). When it came time to persuade friend and foe of his position he was inclined to figurative and literal arm-twisting.[1] "The Johnson Treatment," as it was called, was not unlike the preaching style common

among Churches of Christ when convinced of the truth of a position. I too often do not ask the hard questions my friend Scott was inclined to press because I was comfortable with the notion that being right made might!

In 2007 my career at MIT took a surprising turn. Having never had a chaplain on the payroll, the Institute suddenly asked if I would be the first chaplain hired by the Institute. As senior associate dean of student life, I had pushed the Institute to take seriously the role of religion in the life of students. Now I was given the opportunity to make more effective the responsibilities chaplains exercised. I was no longer a Christian who might make common cause with other Christians; I was the one responsible for the varied expressions of religious life on campus. Now that I am retiring, the announcement includes this judgment: "As chaplain—and throughout his career—Randolph encouraged MIT students and community members to consider issues of justice, integrity, and ethics in their academics and research, and their personal and professional lives. To take a moment from exploring and inventing to discuss and reflect on their natures, motivations, and beliefs."

I like to think that this essay offers insight into what it means to be cruciformed in the context of the university. Being trained in a tradition which owes its existence to the influence of the Enlightenment on Thomas and Alexander Campbell was critical to whatever I have accomplished, but there were other forces at work as well and some of those forces are not commonly recognized as important in the academy. And they are not forces given the attention they deserve within the religious tradition that I learned about in Sunday School.

The call to be the chaplain to the Institute was more than just being a Christian presence on campus. Others did that, holding services for particular denominational communities and serving parachurch organizations. I was asked to represent all of the religious communities within the Institute and to make sure they lived up to the expectations of the Institute. MIT expected them to play by the rules and the notion that there were rules governing their presence on campus is worth noting. At issue was the truth that many groups existed for the purpose of winning converts from other groups so the first task was set standards of respect. Groups might differ from one another, but their interactions needed to be transparent. The creation of a board of chaplains was the beginning for, in order to be on the board, each chaplain had to agree to a covenant of respect for the beliefs and practices of others. Triumphalism from the outset was an issue that had to be confronted.

The communities that had the most difficulty with these expectations were those who were most ambitious when it came to proselyting. By definition a university is a place where ideas are discussed and different views are examined. Could this be done with respect and could people agree to disagree? And when they did, could they still work together to define a space where conversations could take place? And could those conversations end with no clear winners or losers, and work so that supporting the education of students could continue? Success is measured when the conversation continues; ideas are challenged and minds are always changed, but student well-being is the end desired—not the success of a particular community or ideology.

At the same time, the very comfort I found when serving as a dean in the Institute had grown a bit sour as I realized that the academy was all for discussion of ideas unless the ideas put forth mentioned the notion of God, the idea of the divine as a category of conversation. As Scott Paradise had noted, the Institute worshipped in the temple of science and, for some, the notion that there was something beyond the temple was an unacceptable idea.

In an odd way this was something I had also learned in Sunday School. Our rationalism led to the creation of a shadow organization called "The Church," grounded in our rationalism when reading the Bible. We defined what it meant to be Christian by the conclusions we reached on doctrinal matters. We talked about those who reached the same conclusions as we did as members of The Church. We did not define *others* as Christians, but rather asked, "Were *they* part of The Church?" Our contention that our understandings and conclusions created boundaries that defined the way we talked about The Church were similar to those put forth by scientists who thought they defined the realms of knowledge. The Church was a guild much like the world inhabited by the scientists I knew. No wonder I was comfortable!

But I also discovered a lively conversation about *scientism* on campus. Think of scientism as a form of the "one true church mentality." Professor Ian Hutchinson, author of *Monopolizing Knowledge,* has been an outspoken critic of fundamentalist scientists. Other resources such as Mikael Stenmark's *Scientism, Science, Ethics*

1. See Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson Master of the Senate* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2002), 612–613.

and Religion have proven helpful as I have come to understand that there are many forms of fundamentalism and the study of science can create rigidities matched by those I have known in religious communities.

Stenmark notes in his introduction that he shares with John Polkinghorne that we must find "a path between an exaggerated view of science's importance . . . and an impoverished view of science's importance."[2] Stenmark then carefully lays out a challenge to those who think science has all the answers. Change a few words and he could be talking about my religious tradition and their view of church.

Over the years new voices have spoken up and many of those voices have been heard at MIT, thanks to an MIT chaplain, David Thom, who has developed the Cambridge Roundtable on Science, Art and Religion. I encouraged David to bring his program to the chaplaincy at MIT; it did not fit the usual pattern for chaplaincies for it focused on faculty rather than students. His work has modeled thoughtful engagement on serious points of difference between believers and non-theists. The willingness to listen to one another, to cultivate relationships with other viewpoints, and to still remain in conversation is a critical component of a healthy institution and challenges the orthodoxy promoted by scientism.

Among the voices Thom has brought to campus was Marcelo Gleiser of Dartmouth who acknowledges that science may only take us so far. He suggests that there will always be more to know and he argues for a notion "based on how an understanding of the way we probe reality can be a source of endless inspiration without the need for setting final goals or promises of eternal truths."[3] This very notion was criticized by his peers for suggesting limits for what science could achieve. We do well to remember that scientists, like theologians, may not corner the market on arrogance—but that does not keep them from trying.

Alan Lightman, here at MIT, is of the same spirit as Gleiser. Alan is the first academic at MIT to receive a dual faculty appointment in science and the humanities and, while an atheist, he recognizes how much we do not know and argues that many of our unanswered questions will be answered one day by our research. Nevertheless he is a respectful conversationalist and invites ongoing interaction with those who differ with his conclusions. His modesty is matched by his social responsibility as he pursues projects aimed to open doors to education and economic security for young women in Cambodia.

Gleiser and Lightman stand in contrast to many of my conversation partners in matters of religion from my own tradition and beyond. The suggestion that the Bible is not a book of facts to be read like the morning newspaper moving to conclusions on doctrines of modest importance is rejected out of hand by many in the conservative wings of the Stone-Campbell tradition, those who still speak of The Church as if it were a lodge with a secret handshake.

Leonard Allen's thoughtful reminder that Alexander Campbell was a child of his time is important. To illustrate, Allen cited Campbell from 1839: "If nature be a system religion is no less so. God is 'a God of order,' and that is the same as to say he is a God of system." Systematic like nature, the "Bible is a book of facts, not of opinions, theories, abstract generalities, nor of verbal definitions. . . . The meaning of the Bible facts is the true biblical doctrine."[4] We all are children of our time. Today I think we are more aware than ever of the fine line between taking the Bible seriously and worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. The Bible points us to God; it is not God no matter how fine we parse its words and ideas.

Now let me try to tie some things together. The evangelists of scientism and the evangelists of a simplistic gospel have far more in common that they know. Each wishes to capture the elusive flag that allows them to win the day and each of them ends up shouting into a vacuum. Or, as elaborated upon more hopefully, in the words of Alan Lightman:

> Thus, to explain what we see in the world and in our mental deductions, we must believe in what we cannot prove. Sound familiar? Theologians are accustomed to taking some beliefs on faith. Scientists are not. Such arguments, in fact, run hard against the long grain of science. All we can do is hope that the same theories that predict the multiverse also make other predictions that we can

2. Mikael Stenmark, *Scientism, Science, Ethics and Religion* (Alershot: Ashgate, 2001), ix.
3. Marcelo Gleiser, *The Island of Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), xxiii.
4. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciformed Church* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2006), 43.

> test here in our local universe. But the universes themselves will almost certainly remain a conjecture. "We had a lot more confidence in our intuition before the discovery of dark energy and the multiverse idea," says (Alan) Guth. "There will still be a lot for us to understand, but we will miss out on the fun of figuring everything out from first principles."[5]

That is why Lightman thinks science will fill in the gaps in our knowledge. He is probably right.

I am confident that our friends in the sciences will continue their work and do it well. The more they learn, the more there will be to learn. From time to time someone will make the argument that science has established the limits for what we can know. And some of our religious peers will rise to the challenge and offer equally limiting notions. I see no reason to endorse either extreme: the process will continue so long as humankind remains curious. This dynamic conversation that I have found in the academy gives me hope that thoughtful voices will respectfully engage and learn from each other.

When I became chaplain to the Institute, I invited Rabbi Jonathan Sacks to campus to speak about the tensions between science and religion. He came and spoke on the book of Genesis and the implications of the accounts of creation found there. It was a remarkable and provocative occasion. He made the case that what made Abrahamic monotheism unique was that it gave meaning to life. Later, in his book *The Great Partnership*, he elaborated on the notion:

> We make a great mistake if we think of monotheism as a linear development from polytheism, as if people first worshipped many gods, then reduced them to one. Monotheism is something else entirely. The meaning of a system lies outside the system. Therefore the meaning of universe lies outside the universe. Monotheism, by discovering the transcendental God, the God who stands outside the universe and creates it, made it possible for the first time to believe that life has a meaning, not just a mythic or scientific explanation.[6]

Those of us who are professionally engaged in these conversations have tried to make our myths carry the day and they cannot. And scientists have done the same with their scientific explanations. It is better, I think, for us all to step back and listen to one another.

My experience tells me that there remain realms beyond our knowing that, from time to time, force us to rethink what we think we know. That happened to me when I came to MIT. Whatever success I have had since has been due not to the exercise of power but rather the *relationships* I have cultivated and *the willingness to listen* rather than talk.

Our curious natures demand that we ask hard questions—and we do—and very often our search for truth begins with "Yes, but . . ." as another question is posed. I doubt that will stop until creation grinds to halt, but we must continue to carry on the conversation. That continuation demands relationships and self-understanding.

I have found Jonathan Sacks's insight about the difference between scientists and religious thinkers to be very helpful. "Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean."[7] The cross calls us to stand between these two ways of thinking with arms stretched out to hold these world views together. This is God's work in the university and it is a privilege to be part of it.

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5. Alan Lightman, *The Accidental Universe, The World You Thought You Knew* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2014), 22.
6. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership* (New York: Schocken Books2011) 9.
7. Ibid., 6, 55.