

How Many Degrees Does it Take to Be Educated?

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Getting along with family can be challenging. Getting family members to get along with each other can be downright impossible. Especially when they come from opposing sides of the relational isle. You've been there—holding your breath as your hardcore Republican uncle meets your ardent Democrat Aunt. *Please*, you whisper, *don't bring up politics*. My sister-in-law calls such dreaded meetings “worlds colliding.” After years of steering incompatible people clear of each other, she's become something of an expert on the topic and I believe her advice on the subject is sound: Avoid these cosmic clashes at all costs. If you can't avoid them, just hang on and brace for an impact.

That's exactly how I felt three months ago at my own college graduation party. As newlyweds, my wife and I just wanted everyone to get along. Members from both families attended. I knew that my grandparents had disparate views from my new in-laws. They were all Christians, but they varied sharply when it came to the value of intellectual pursuits. Since it was a college graduation party I knew the topic would surface. And it did...like a dead body.

“I'm glad Drew is starting his Masters program this summer,” my father-in-law intoned, once everyone was seated at the dinner table. “I think he should go right through and get his Ph.D.” My grandfather is hard of hearing. Maybe he didn't hear, I hoped. No luck. He was shaking his head and scowling, as he worked down a mouthful of steak. “No, no I think that would be a mistake. Knowledge puffeth up. Too much worldly wisdom can distract us from Christ.”

Awkward silence.

“More juice anyone?” My offer was ignored.

“I'm sorry, but I disagree,” my father-in-law countered. “I think higher education could actually help him grow in his faith.”

Several more exchanges—the fuse was lit and shortening rapidly. Luckily others intervened before it hit the dynamite. Though no consensus was reached, they both gracefully disagreed and moved on from the discussion. I started breathing again.

At the time I was too busy sweating bullets to consider how conflicted I was on the topic. But when it came to the relationship between my intellect and my faith I found myself doing an awkward dance.

Both sides had good points and I straddled the divide. Throughout my undergrad career at a secular university I had clung to the exclusive claims of the faith, unpopular though they were. Though immersed in pluralistic thought, I never discounted the words of Jesus himself. Christianity was not merely one of many paths to God, I insisted. All worldviews and philosophies were not equally valid. The softheaded brand of “tolerance” so popular on campus was not only philosophically incoherent; it was theologically dangerous. On the other hand I saw much wisdom in the western philosophical tradition and I justified higher learning with the hopes of growing adept at conveying my faith to fans of postmodernism.

It was as I pursued my higher degrees that I slammed into the debate again. It had been raging for centuries, I learned, with its most ancient reification coming in the writings of two early church fathers, Justin Martyr (c.150) and Tertullian (c.160-240). I set out to examine the arguments of both men and determine who was right. The fight between these two couldn't be called on the specs alone—they were both heavyweights. Both were philosophers and lawyers with towering intellects. Both were adult converts who became apologists for the faith. There was only one difference. Tertullian shed his philosopher robes. Justin Martyr did not.

Though they didn't directly correspond, their writings, when placed side by side, read like a lively debate.

Justin Martyr: We are taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have shown that He is reason (Word) of whom the whole human race partake, and those who live according to reason are Christians ... Next to God, we worship and love the reason (Word).

Tertullian: It is this philosophy that is the subject matter of this world's wisdom, that rash interpreter of the divine nature and order. In fact, heresies are themselves prompted by philosophy.

Justin Martyr: Whatever has been uttered aright by any men in any place belongs to us as Christians...all the authors (Philosophers) were able to see the truth darkly, through the implanted seed, of reason dwelling in them.

Tertullian: Wretched Aristotle!...ever handling questions but never settling anything. What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? What between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Away with all projects for a 'Stoic,' a 'Platonic' or a 'dialectic' Christianity! After Christ Jesus we desire no subtle theories, no acute enquiries after the gospel.

Both arguments were compelling. Tertullian viewed philosophy as inimical to Christian theology—a pernicious diversion from the only truth. Justin Martyr however agreed with other early Christian writers like Clement who portrayed philosophy as a “schoolmaster to bring the Greek mind to Christ.” Nearly two millennia later the battle still rages in churches, lecture halls, and, in my case, at family parties. Should we pursue the knowledge of the world, seeking advanced degrees in secular institutions, gleaning truth from other ideologies? Or should we concentrate on Christian doctrine alone?

I'm tempted to agree with Tertullian. Why should proprietors of divine truth mess around with what the world has to offer? In his writings, Tertullian derides the Philosophers with surgical precision. He pops holes in the most popular systems of his day—Neoplatonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism—you name it. As I read, he had me so convinced I almost missed the fact that his erudition was implicitly undermining his own point. He needed knowledge of these Philosophies to write his brilliant apologetic of Christianity.

Of course I should go easy on Tertullian. After all, he's not around to defend himself. Besides I have 20,000 reasons to agree with Martyr. That's the number of dollars I took in student loans to pay for my education. Over the course of the next decade, as I choke down macaroni and cheese while paying them off, it would be deeply troubling to think it was all for nothing. Still I see other reasons to agree with Martyr. Turning a blind eye to secular modes of thought has given rise to the anti-intellectualism plaguing the church. Relinquishing all intellectual pursuits to the world betrays the church's rich heritage as a bastion of light and learning. I also believe that Christians have a responsibility to understand the ideological climate of our day in order to express the gospel in a clear and relevant way.

Yet as I consider years of further education, I inevitably hear my grandfather's voice. He's no intellectual slouch. In fact I have yet to meet a more scintillating theological thinker. But he is quick to remind me of the vanity of man's wisdom. And his caveats are well taken. For my college graduation he handed me his favorite commentary. On the inside cover he wrote me a note, finishing with a quote from Martyn Lloyd Jones:

“But knowledge in the truly Christian sense is never merely intellectual. That is so because is it the knowledge of a Person. The purpose of all doctrine, the value of all instruction, is to bring us to the Person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

No matter how much knowledge we acquire or how high we ascend in academia, I think this is a vital reminder for us all. It's given me a yardstick by which to measure every intellectual endeavor in my future. The end goal of learning is not a cold set of beliefs or impersonal philosophy; it's the warmth of Christ's embrace. I'll never forget. Thanks, Grandpa.