

“Crown, Town, Gown:” A Philosophical Consideration of Some Issues and Challenges

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Abstract: This essay sketches some developments in contemporary society, with specific reference to secularization and the proliferation of messages. It discusses some consequent issues and challenges to the Christian message and to a faith-based academic institution. The author offers a suggestion as to why and how, precisely because of the distinctiveness of the Christian vision and mission, it should and can respond to these. A faith-based academic institution needs to focus on: 1) dealing with the question of comparability since in education, as in any other area, there is a need to establish common grounds— whether in its objectives, governance or programmes— so as to facilitate and promote dialogue and cooperation; (2) meeting the challenge of competitiveness insofar as certain standards in academia need to be met and upheld; (3) providing a critique of values and practices in society which hinder the full development of its citizens; and, more importantly, (4) establishing credibility so that its presence, role, and achievements are acknowledged to be not only distinctive but also truly positive.

Keywords: *faith-based education, secularization, Christian message, credibility, ethos, vision and mission*

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Introduction

The title of this paper takes its cue from a theological reference to Christianity¹ and from a well-known description, at least in Europe, of the relationship between society and academia.² These references and descriptions may rather be outdated, and I have my own reservations with their use today. Nevertheless, there is a ring to these words which sounds out a connection linking these realities together, thus making them still pertinent. Moreover, they serve my purpose here of setting out the specific subject-matter of this paper while the sub-title clarifies the particular angle from which it intends to examine Christianity, society, and education.

In looking at society and the Christian message, the theme of this symposium, I wish to describe at the outset a particular setting that the Christian message seems to find itself slotted into in today's society. There is seemingly a danger that that message remains hidden and ignored in the myriad of messages that proliferate and surround us these days. Next, I will trace a particular development in society, namely, secularization, which poses a greater challenge as to how that message is perceived. Finally, I will claim that this situation creates issues and poses challenges for any educational institution, and in this regard, much more so for any faith-based one.

There are obviously several considerations that need closer attention in the development of the topic. I will limit myself to describing and commenting on the situation and on suggesting how education, particularly a faith-based one, can play its part.³ Accordingly, I will offer towards the end of this paper some suggestions on how faith-based academia can position itself to meet the challenge of the Christian message in a secularized society.

¹ Christian thinking often employs the phrase “kingdom of heaven” drawn from scriptures and developed in its theology. One wonders, however, whether such a metaphor truly conveys in our days what the Christian message proclaims. See my *The Christian Message as Vision and Mission: Philosophical Considerations of its Significance* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

² The phrase “town and gown” describes the close connection between the university and the town where it is located, such as Oxford and Cambridge in Britain, Bologna and Sienna in Italy. Often, the relationship between the two is fraught with problem, but there is nevertheless an innate attraction between them. Leuven (or Louvain) in Belgium, is such a university town and is the setting for our philosophical novel. See, M.F. Sia and S. Sia, *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom: A Tale of the Human Quest for Knowledge* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

³ This paper draws from and develops further the discussions in my *The Christian Message as Vision and Mission*, op. cit. and my *Society in its Challenges: Philosophical Considerations of Living in Society* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, 2015).

A World of Messages

It is not an exaggeration to claim that our world today is inundated with messages in different forms and from various sources. The increasingly complicated development and sophisticated advance of information technology and the hard-to-resist and addictive lure of social media have brought about this situation. We welcome the tremendous benefits derived from faster and more efficient communications which have improved our lives and society in so many respects. Not only are we more informed but we are also better positioned by them to be able to respond favourably. Unfortunately, we also have had to cope with the many negative consequences of this new development, such as the clogging of our days with unnecessary and constant information, the spread of fake news or misinformation, and the incitement of unrestrained passions and hatred. There is need somehow to filter out these messages, to show some restraint, and to maintain constant vigilance.⁴

But what is of even greater concern are the types and forms of messages which are being fed—uploaded, if one were to adopt the new terminology—into our senses. Again, many of these messages, especially if these are accompanied by graphic images, have admittedly enabled us to have a clearer and more direct view of distant events. They have even strengthened human relationships insofar as it has become easier to stay in touch with one another. At the same time, however, there are messages which, without the new developments in transmission, would not have reached the vulnerable or caused them so much grief and distress, and in some cases, even driven them to suicide. Thus, regarding the messages themselves which have proliferated, we also do have to exercise some caution. It is a daunting challenge that will need our constant monitoring and vigilant attention.⁵

In the midst of all these messages and technological developments, one wonders about the status of the Christian message. Will it become just another message among so many others? Does it still have an importance that ought to be recognized in today's society? What does it have to offer to enable us to meet the various challenges which beset present-day living? Such questions indicate that there is now an even greater and more urgent need to re-focus on the Christian message and how to share it around. After all, it is not a simple message. It confronts us with a multi-dimensional challenge. The task in this respect is not merely to relay information

⁴ This is the theme of the message from Pope Francis for World Communications Day in 2018. Former USA President Barrack Obama specifically cited this challenge in his recent interview with England's Prince Harry for BBC radio.

⁵ See my "Images, Reality and Truth: Some Philosophical Considerations," *New Blackfriars* (UK), 96, 1063 (May 2015), pp. 295-310.

because the message is also intended to be lived—a way of life. Neither is it only an exhortation since it also holds out a definite goal. And in this context, and in such a world as ours today, we need to be reminded that the Christian message is not just a series of tweets, a trail of Facebook entries, a thread of text messages, a recording of phone messages or a stock of YouTube transmissions. In great contrast to all these, the Christian message is an enlightening vision and a challenging mission.

A Secularized Society⁶

Communicating and living out this message, however, is made more challenging and even daunting because its context is what has become a secularized society. Secularization is an epochal movement which marks a change in our understanding of ourselves, of the world, and of our relationship to God.⁷ It has led to secularism, a viewpoint and way of life that concentrate on this world with an explicit denial of God's existence or relevance. Secularism affirms the radical autonomy of human beings, and the intensified concern for this world is brought to the point of breaking away from any religious understanding of themselves and of their world. Focusing one's attention on the here and now, one narrows oneself down to such an extent as to exclude any thought of the beyond. Such a secularist accuses the religious believer of not accepting full responsibility for this world.⁸ For when life in this world presents problems and sufferings, religious believers are accused of hastening to explain them with theistic principles. Thus, secularism makes one shrug off traditional religion and not be bothered with it anymore. The secularist prefers to view reality without a, or any, God.⁹

Related to this phenomenon of secularization is a new understanding of our relationship with nature. Previously humans thought of themselves as merely creatures of God, endowed with dignity, no doubt, but still totally dependent on the

⁶ I have used this description rather than “secular” to highlight the process that has transformed society. It is probably more applicable to Western countries than to others, like the Philippines, but it is useful nevertheless to be alerted to it generally.

⁷ In his book, Charles Taylor distinguishes three senses of secularization: 1) the emptying of religion from autonomous social spheres; 2) the falling off of religious belief and practice and turning away from God and Church; 3) the acceptance that belief in God is no longer axiomatic and that there are other alternatives. Cf. his, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre makes an interesting observation on the impact of secularization on ethics in his *Secularization and Moral Change* (Oxford University Press, 1967).

⁹ There is a challenge here, too, for our concept of God. God was conceived as “gap-filler,” assigned tasks which in our crude knowledge of the world we ourselves could not accomplish. God had been performing the function of “filling the holes” which science at that time had not yet been able to do. Cf. Hubert F. Beck, *The Age of Technology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 15. With the growth, however, of our ability to explain the world by itself, this God became redundant.

Creator. Much emphasis was placed on human limitations and weaknesses. Human beings had to submit to the order in the world whereas in today's secularized society, one thinks in terms of human possibilities, not limitations. This is a major shift indeed in our self-understanding that seems to open the whole future to human endeavour. "Come-of-age" humans see themselves now as co-creators and not mere creatures, who are entirely subject to the perilous forces of nature. They have come to realize that nature is not complete to the minutest detail but needs their stamp to bring it to its fullness. In discovering that they have been left with the world in their hands, they have come to appreciate their creativeness. Having learned that they do not have to submit to the order of nature, they have become aware that they can change it—without any reference to a Creator.

Secularization has also brought about an appreciation that human beings are not a finished produce since they have to make themselves. This is their task for they are not just born into the world but they need to "create" themselves, so to speak. To be human is a task, not necessarily a burden but a challenge, a choice. The point is, human nature is essentially a becoming. Humanity is not a static concept, it is a dynamic entity. This is what marks humans off from other animals. Not only are they rational but they can also, and do indeed, change themselves and the world. This concept of human becoming leads us to human historicity, a point strongly emphasized by Karl Marx. Human existence, since it is dynamic, is history in the making. This means that humans do not only have history, but they are history just as they are flesh and blood.

In such a secularized society—where God and the religious view have been sidelined and even abandoned—those who want to take the Christian message seriously find themselves on the defensive. However, it is worth noting, even if only briefly in this instance, that the viewpoint that separates society and religion and that results in certain territorial claims regarding each other's respective interests is a view defended and perpetuated by many in our society, often in an unreflective manner, that "what is distinguishable is separable." What is an important conceptual distinction, traceable to David Hume, is mistaken to be the reality itself. Elsewhere I have argued that we should think instead that what is distinguishable is "distinctive but not separate;" that is to say, while we should rightly distinguish society from religion and vice-versa, and respect each other's territory, it does not necessarily amount to their separation.¹⁰ After all, we stand on common ground: our humanity and the need to transform it. There is much more that unites us rather than divides us.

¹⁰ Cf. Chapter Three: "Distinct, Not Separate: A Critique of Dualistic Thinking of and in Society," *Society in its Challenges*, op. cit., pp.42-64.

A Faith-based Education

This is where education, and in particular, a faith-based academic institution, has a crucial role to play regarding the status and credibility of the Christian message in today's society, whether secularized or at risk of becoming so. There is a multiplicity of misunderstanding as well as misleading perceptions. It is important therefore to address these. In this respect, given the focus of this paper, it seems to me that faith-based education, including one that is imbedded in the Christian message, has, first of all, to clarify for itself and to share with society its specific role and positive contribution. At the same time, it needs to find a common basis with such a secularized society that will enable itself to enter into dialogue with it and thereby work with and alongside it.

The questions now arise: What distinctive contribution can be made by a faith-based education, such as that which a Christian academic institution provides? In what way can its specific vision and mission, rooted in the Christian message, be implemented? Will it be in a position to meet the challenges and address the issues which the developments in contemporary society present to it?

I should like to suggest that that such a faith-based education needs to focus on: (1) dealing with the question of *comparability* since in education, as in any other area, there is a need to establish common grounds—whether in its objectives, governance, or programmes—so as to facilitate and promote dialogue and cooperation; (2) meeting the challenge of *competitiveness* insofar as certain standards in academia need to be met and upheld; (3) providing a *critique* of values and practices in society which hinder the full development of its citizens; and, more importantly, (4) establishing *credibility* so that its presence, role, and achievements are acknowledged to be not only distinctive but also truly positive.

To some extent, the questions above and the suggested areas to focus on, are really about whether the religious setting—faith-based education is a good example—is a welcome addition to our understanding and practice of life in society generally. How do religious beliefs, practice, and values enliven and enrich our appreciation of what it means to be human and how to conduct our lives in society? That is an important concern and challenge.

As a possible answer, I would like to claim that this religious setting which provides a distinctive vision and mission, in this specific instance, the Christian message, is its *ethos*. Ethos, understood today as a sociological term is “the fundamental character or spirit of culture, the underlying sentiment that informs the beliefs, customs, or practices of a group or society, the dominant assumptions

of a people or period." To a certain extent, the mission statement of an institution or organization is intended to capture and articulate its ethos. In a way, ethos is what gives a group its identity. Although ethos may not be tangible in the way buildings, institutions, and outward manifestations are, it should be *experienced* and *lived*, and not just proclaimed. As it has been said in another context, it is "not taught but caught."

This is not of course to exclude serious reflection on what it means and how it applies to individual cases. In the context of the faith-based university, college or institute, and school, it is important to bear in mind in this philosophical consideration that ethos refers to the general rather than to the specifics. It is first of all about clarifying, deepening, and strengthening the vision that makes the institution distinctive. It is that vision that acts as the gauge and guide to what it does. When that vision is translated into its mission by the faith-based institution, it will have to attend to the specific demands and challenges in the light of that vision. The problem is that the complexity of the concrete situation makes that task truly demanding. But the main thing to remember is that one should not confuse particular practices, strategies, and beliefs, just because they are entrenched or long-held, as necessarily reflecting the vision in the changing times and circumstances. They have always to be assessed and re-assessed against the religious vision.¹¹ This is just as true of the Christian message and how it is contextualised in a Christian educational institution.

The religious ethos of a faith-based higher education is its greatest asset. To some extent, it also defines its status and its role. Thus, faith-based educational institutions need to set out a certain educational programme that is meant to abide by, develop, and advance that ethos taking into account the four focus areas cited earlier. Given the developments in contemporary society discussed in this essay, the task of providing a distinctive education to learners and of serving the larger community should be characterized by respect for, and care of, humanity and the whole of creation—given its view that these stand in a personal relationship with the Creator. Moreover, it should champion human concerns and values and oppose any dehumanization caused by machines and technology precisely because it gratefully acknowledges and participates in the work of the Creator that it believes in. In this area, the challenge is to co-operate with all those, irrespective of belief-system, who are working towards achieving this goal. Here is also where faith-based education can ensure that human concerns are not regarded as exclusive to humanists, atheists, and secularists. It ought to convince others that its affirmation of transcendence is not

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the relationship between vision and mission, see Chapter Seven: "From Vision to Mission with PASS for Life," *The Christian Message as Vision and Mission*, op. cit., pp.119-137.

a threat to, but a fuller development of, human nature. Alongside other alternative educational institutions, they should implement a value system that identifies and supports whatever is good in society and creation. Furthermore, faith-based education should facilitate, support, and advance the formation of an international global community because it believes that all nations should stand in unison in promoting peaceful and harmonious co-existence since their relation to the Creator makes a community, and not just a society, of all of us.

Implementing its ethos—by articulating, communicating, and living in accordance with it—is the foremost challenge and issue for faith-based higher education.¹² It has its own vision and mission to abide by. For Christian educational institutions, it is grounded in the Christian message. If it is successful in meeting the challenge, it will have made an important contribution to, and will have justified its presence in, the secularized society that we live in today.

A Philosophical Consideration

But there is a philosophical understanding of *ethos* that can complement its sociological usage and which can assist us further in considering the *credibility* of the Christian message in today's society as set out earlier. The question in this regard is: In what way can the Christian message be made more acceptable or believable to others in our time? This is, of course, a wider concern since it involves all those who abide by the Christian message generally. This question is not the same as simply “window dressing” of what may not at first sight be perceived as attractive. Nor is it merely about searching for more effective ways of communicating it. Rather, the question is an enquiry into how its significance can be appreciated more realistically. In light of the questions raised earlier, one could, in fact, argue that the issue of the credibility of any claim, be it religious or otherwise, is even prior to the issue of its validity or truth and therefore should precede any attempt to investigate or establish those important

¹² Faith-based higher education has a particular challenge here with the emergence of digital learning world-wide. Given its ethos and the traditional campus environment which helps to promote it, how can it support and utilize such learning? How can its powers help to form an international community? How would one communicate and develop values which are established through more personal contacts? On this point, it would be instructive to learn from the experience of those who have implemented digital learning in their educational task. Cf. Tamar Levin, “Setbacks force new look at mass web courses,” *International New York Times*, Tuesday, December 12, 2013. The appeal of computer-based learning, such as gamification, has implications for education, too. How can it be harnessed to further the goals of faith-based education as well as education generally? See “Gamification is how we’ll live—and work—in the future,” *The Measure of Man GMA News-online*, January 27, 2014. Another challenge comes from the impact on education by what has been described by Klaus Schwab, the founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. See Jesus Jay Miranda’s article “The Fourth Industrial Revolution and Education,” in *The Manila Times*, 12 August 2018.

concerns. This is because if a claim can already be ruled out as unbelievable, there would seem to be no point in going any further to investigate its truth or validity. As an initial fundamental stage, therefore, it appears paramount that one would have to examine its credibility. This is definitely true of the Christian message in a secularized society contextualized in an educational establishment.

To assist us with this task we would do well to turn to Aristotle's advice regarding the communication of a message as set out in his *Rhetoric*.¹³ For a number of reasons, historical as well as technical, this work does not always feature even in philosophical discussions. There are some doubts about its authenticity and its composition. Our concern here, however, is more to note the content of the advice given and its applicability to the topic of this paper. Admittedly, the context in which this advice is set out is quite different from the way I am connecting it with this philosophical consideration of the Christian message in our times. Yet it will still be worthwhile linking them together not only as a possible point of encounter between religious belief and philosophical thinking but also because his discussion of the issue of the credibility of a message may have a bearing on what we are looking into here.

The relevant passage in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is worth quoting at some length:

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself. Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses. Secondly, persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions. Our judgements when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile. It is towards producing these effects, as we maintain, that present-day writers on rhetoric

¹³ A more contemporary and also applicable discussion is offered by Jürgen Habermas whose theory of communicative action states that in addition to the understandability of a communication, credibility revolves around truth, sincerity, and appropriateness. Cf. Jürgen Habermas, trans. T. McCarthy, *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. I: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1984); Vol. II: *Lifeworld and System* (Boston: Beacon, 1987).

direct the whole of their efforts. This subject shall be treated in detail when we come to speak of the emotions. Thirdly, persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question.¹⁴

There is something in the way Aristotle sets out the three areas which, in his view, need to be addressed in the art of speaking: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, which deserve a closer look as we consider the Christian message in our times, including the educational context. All three are applicable in this instance. Starting with the last one, *logos*, what Aristotle says is helpful advice to those concerned with the content of the Christian message and with its reception; namely, that they should pay attention to its reasonableness. For this reason, there has been a close connection between religious beliefs and philosophical thinking, at least in the Catholic tradition. The Christian message is more appealing to others if indeed it can be shown that the content of the message can be reconciled with reason. *Pathos*, on the other hand, directs our attention to the listeners of the message. Sharing the Christian message with them involves a certain sensitivity to the situation of the listeners. While for Aristotle this is more a matter of paying attention to the emotional receptivity of the audience, the important point here is that, according to him, the message is more “appealing” if indeed those who are listening to it are placed “in a position,” so to speak, to accept it. The Christian message becomes more attractive to those with whom we want to share it when we realize that the task is not simply about transmitting it or proclaiming it to others but is also about acknowledging the context in which it is being heard. It involves acknowledging and learning from the “the other” in their otherness.¹⁵ In both of these areas, *logos* and *pathos*, the attention is directed to the soundness of the message itself as well as to those who are listening to the message.

The first area that Aristotle identifies, *ethos*, is, as I see it, the one that is most helpful as we turn our attention to the Christian message in a secularized society.¹⁶ This issue of credibility, following Aristotle’s advice regarding what he calls *ethos*, shifts our attention to the messenger or messengers. Are they trustworthy? Can one rely on what they say or claim? Do their actions bear witness to the message? Why should we believe what they say?

¹⁴ Aristotle, trans. W. Rhys Robert, *Rhetoric*, Book I, Part 2.

¹⁵ See my “The Otherness of the Other: a Philosophical Contribution to the Discussion,” *Missio Inter Gentes*, 3, 2 (July 2017), pp. 71-90.

¹⁶ This follows the earlier suggestion that the philosophical consideration that is relevant here is its credibility even if we must also acknowledge the need for its truth to be established. Besides, there is a difference between the truth of a claim and its credibility. In the present context, philosophically, it would be rather hazardous to venture into a discussion of the truth of the message as this would involve more than logical discourse and empirical fact-finding.

Following Aristotle's discussion of *ethos*, credibility is really more about the speaker (while taking also due consideration of the content of the message and the listeners, as has already been noted). Aristotle was, of course, developing this point with reference to the art of persuasion, but what is notable for the present context is the turn to the speaker. *Ethos* then in this usage refers to the trustworthiness of the speaker in this particular instance. It implies a real grasp by the speaker of the content and scope of the message, personal experience of it, and relevant knowledge of its extent. Consequently, it is giving witness to the message.¹⁷

What bearing does this have on our philosophical consideration of the Christian message in a secularized society with particular reference to faith-based education? It seems to me that the challenge is actually being redirected to those who have committed themselves to bearing witness to the Christian message and to the context in which they are carrying it out. It means that its appeal and acceptability actually rest, to a large extent, on the shoulders of those who subscribe to it and to those who champion such an education. In general, how they bear witness to it, with their understanding of the vision and in its application in their mission, in their beliefs and in their practice, as evident in their distinctive education, is paramount. The biblical phrase "by their fruits you shall know them" is indeed pertinent here. The Christian message should be *evident* in the institution. In this way, it will have fulfilled a specific *credible* role in a secularized society.

Concluding Comments

In this paper, I have addressed the theme of the symposium by focusing on the status of the Christian message in a secularized society. Rather than delineating points of departure, such as the absence or decline of religious faith, I have suggested a point of encounter; namely, in education which concerns both those who subscribe to, as well as those who reject, the Christian message. For those involved in faith-based education, there are issues and challenges.¹⁸ But addressing them requires focusing on its distinctiveness rather than its separateness from a secularized society. Finally, I have set out particular issues *as* challenges to those who are tasked with ensuring the credibility of a faith-based education.**PS**

¹⁷ See my "Giving Witness to the Christian Message: a Philosophical Contribution to the Discussion on Mission," *Missio Inter Gentes*, 3, 1 (January 2017), pp. 27-47.

¹⁸ In his article, Jesus Jay Miranda, Jr. OP, asks about and reflects on similar concerns about the status of private colleges in the Philippines because of the introduction of free tuition at public universities. See his "Difficult Times?: Schools need to be moored on the basics," *The Manila Times*, July 15, 2018. This development would indeed be an added concern and challenge for faith-based academic institutions in the country.

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