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Richard T. Hughes: How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind

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BOOK REVIEW

Richard T. Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI; 2001.

Tom Christenson

Richard Hughes' book addresses a number of vital and engaging questions, questions about pedagogy, about the difference between preaching and teaching, about the place of tragedy and death in the learning / teaching context, etc. But the main thrust of the book is to argue that the Christian faith is not only compatible with an open pursuit of the truth, but that faith is a means to such a pursuit, that faith can sustain the life of the mind. Hughes begins, rightly I think, by addressing what he calls a "stereotypical assumption" about faith; that it is dogmatic, close-minded and inclined to thinking of teaching as indoctrination. I think Hughes would have done well to talk more about the sources of this stereotype and why, in spite of many of our best efforts, it is so common. I frequently hear people talk about our Lutheran institutions saying things like this: "They are faith-based, but surprisingly open to diverse points of view." "They require religion courses, but don't try to convert you to a particular religious point of view." "They have chapel, but don't require attendance, and they actually encourage people to practice their own religions even when they are not Christians." The unspoken text of all such comments is "Contrary to normal expectation here are religious people and institutions that are open-minded, questioning, and who create an open, non-coercive space for learning. Certainly they can't be very serious about their faith claims!"

Hughes locates this requisite openness in what, quoting Tillich, he identifies as "religion breaking through its own particularity." Using as example, the Bible, Hughes explains:

The Bible points us not to itself, but rather to the infinite God whose understanding no human being can fathom and who stands in judgement on all our claims that somehow we have captured ultimate truth. Can the Bible, viewed in these terms, sustain the life of the mind? It can indeed, for if the Bible points beyond itself to the infinite God, we have no choice but to search for truth. ...when we view ourselves in relation to God, we understand how abysmally ignorant we really are. [34-35]

For Lutherans, of course, this should not be a new argument. How else, we might ask, should a tradition grounded in reformation, i.e. in an act of faithful criticism, be related to the truth? How else should the call "*semper reformanda*" be understood if not as the claim that all our forms and formulations are in need of continual critique and rethinking? Yet Lutherans have been dogmatic and close-minded. Luther himself, at the same time that he plead for an open hearing and debate of his views, condemned most unsympathetically the views of many of his contemporaries including fellow reformers. So this temptation, to argue from the absoluteness of God to the absoluteness of our own view of God, is not just something that has beset others.

Hughes raises the issue whether openness and a commitment to hearing a diversity of voices doesn't lead to relativism. He asserts that it does not, that we needn't end up accepting every view on the grounds of universal toleration, but he does not map out that border territory very clearly. Perhaps another chapter was needed, one in which he could explain or model the difference between a commitment to an absolute truth that transcends (and relativizes?) all human truths, and a post-modern abandonment of the idea of truth altogether. Even better, it would be interesting to have seen what the difference would be between the community of discourse in two institutions focused on these differing paradigms. My guess is that most Lutheran institutions currently find themselves navigating that border, and not the border between affirmation and dogmatism, that may be more focal in other traditions.

While Hughes does not just address institutions like ours, he does raise issues which we need to be talking about. At the November meeting of academic officers of North American Lutheran colleges and universities, Hughes' book was the one most frequently cited. So we know that such conversation has already begun, and we hope that it will continue and be broadened.

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