

A Sacred Journey: Faithful Presence in the Secular Academy

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Reviewed by Andrew Hansen, Anselm House, St Paul, MN

The body of literature exploring Christian academic vocation grows larger each year. Newer books such as David Smith’s *On Christian Teaching: Practicing Faith in the Classroom* and Paul Gould’s *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor* join older classics such as George Marsden’s *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*.¹ Much of this literature is produced by faculty at Christian colleges and universities – unsurprising, perhaps, given that such institutions often encourage faculty reflection on the integration of Christian faith with academic work. Yet the fact that so much of the discussion of Christian academic vocation is developed within Christian educational settings means that the many Christians working in secular universities often need to adapt such resources for the particular opportunities and challenges of their contexts.

For this reason, Paul Nicholas Wilson’s book *A Sacred Journey: Faithful Presence in the Secular Academy* is a welcome addition to this literature. Wilson is University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Arizona. In 1982, while finishing his PhD at the University of Minnesota, he was among the founding members of the Association of Christian Economists. Wilson’s book distills lessons learned from his 36-year career as a teacher, researcher, and colleague at a public research university. While some resources for Christian faculty at secular universities tend to focus almost entirely on the opportunities for evangelism within the secular academy, *A Sacred Journey* takes a more holistic approach to academic vocation, broadly in line with the “faith and work” movement among Christians in recent decades. While not overlooking areas such as scholarship and teaching, Wilson especially focuses his discussion on “relationships with colleagues and staff in the academy” and how these “professional and collegial relationships, within departments and colleges, can bring glory to God” (p. xiii).

Wilson structures his book as an extended metaphor of a journey. An initial chapter sketches his own biographical journey in academic vocation, including what he sees as his successes and failures in living

this calling faithfully. The first main section, “Travel Alerts,” provides faculty and prospective faculty with a view of the greatest challenges and dangers for Christians seeking to live faithfully within the secular academy. Among the many hazards for Christian faculty, Wilson identifies the greatest challenge as “the dualistic mind-set of the Christ follower that disconnects vocation and faith to the point that she travels an alternative route that is closely similar, if not identical, to her fellow, non-Christ-following cohort” (p. 31). Wilson notes that while hostility toward religion in general, or Christianity in particular, on secular college campuses receives much popular Christian attention, the far more dangerous and subtle threat for Christian faculty is the temptation to segment their lives into ‘spiritual’ and ‘secular’ arenas that remain separated from one another.

The book’s second section, “Merging into Academic Traffic,” helps to situate reflection on Christian academic vocation within more general theological reflection on vocation. Chapter 4 explores how Christians, especially since the Reformation, have long cultivated theological resources to resist the dualism trap that Wilson identifies earlier. Chapter 5 offers a brief overview of the core theological elements of a Christian worldview that Wilson thinks motivates Christian professors to seek the common good of those around them within the university. Chapter 6 draws from the concept of “faithful presence,” developed in James Davison Hunter’s influential *To Change the World*, to support Wilson’s main argument that Christian faculty are called to give themselves sacrificially for the good of their neighbors – Christian and non-Christian – in the university settings to which they have been called.²

The final and longest section of the book – “Rules of the Road for a Faithful Academic Presence” – elaborates selected virtues and practices that Wilson sees as especially appropriate to Christians in the academy. Where the previous two sections remain more theoretical and theological, Wilson draws more concretely in these chapters on his own particular experiences at the University of Arizona to illustrate his recommendations. In addition to discussing how the fruits of the Spirit might apply within the academy, Wilson gives particular attention to the challenges of right speech within departments and among colleagues. Also noteworthy in this section is his attention to how Christian faculty should allocate their time. Of particular interest to economists within these chapters will be Wilson’s description for how Christian

faculty should use their time and energies. From Jesus's parable of the talents, he develops an "excellence ratio" ("Our Use of Our Talents / Our God Given Talents") and encourages faculty to always be pursuing an excellence ratio of 1 (p. 118). Furthermore, he elaborates upon an idea suggested by another member from the Association of Christian Economists: that "the distinguishing characteristic of Christians in the academy is their willingness to produce public goods" (p. 135). This idea of creating public goods that are available and open to all members of the university dovetails well with Hunter's *To Change the World*, which calls for Christians to contribute to the common good in society in ways that help establish what Hunter calls a "new city commons."³

A Sacred Journey is a helpful contribution to the literature on Christian academic vocation, especially for focusing as it does on a theology of vocation that extends to all life and all aspects of academic work. It rightly highlights the dualism into which many Christian faculty fall, especially in secular universities, in separating their "secular" work from their "spiritual" responsibilities and concerns. It is also helpful for drawing together old and new Christian resources on work and vocation to combat such divisions between sacred and secular in the lives of Christian academics. What I appreciated most about the book was its sense of conviction and honesty. In part because Wilson is so transparent in the first chapters about his own spiritual and vocational journey as a professor, including the challenges and failures, the book feels like a conversation with someone who has spent years thinking, praying, and wrestling through many questions of Christian faithfulness within the secular academy. Wilson's chapter on love, in particular, is refreshingly counter-cultural in his exhortations to patiently attend to the needs of *all* members of the university community, including not just faculty colleagues but students, staff, and administrators. In just one instance of the texture that his own lived experience brings to the book, Wilson describes the process of coming to the conviction that attending student graduation ceremonies mattered and warranted his prioritizing them over what had earlier seemed like more pressing things.

Another notable contribution of the book is Wilson's concern for the institutional dimensions of Christian faithfulness within the academy. Hunter's *To Change the World* focused especially on the role of institutions in shaping culture and what institutional "faithful presence" might mean for Christians. Wilson follows Hunter in his exhortations for

Christians to be faithfully present not only within the large institution of the secular university but also within a myriad other smaller institutions on and off campus: churches, campus ministries, student groups, Christian faculty groups, and so forth. As is clear from the book's account of his own career, Wilson has invested significant time and energy building institutions of Christian faithfulness at the University of Arizona and nationally, through his involvement and leadership with groups such as the Association of Christian Economists, InterVarsity campus ministry, and Food for the Hungry, and by establishing both a Christian faculty group and a recurring Veritas Forum on Arizona's campus. Indeed, Wilson's own biography speaks so much to the importance of such institutions that the book likely would have benefited from an entire chapter on how Christians can think and act institutionally within the secular academy. The penultimate chapter of the book does discuss institutions, but more in terms of how churches and seminaries can better support Christians in the academy than how Christians might work institutionally within university contexts. From my own vantage point within the Christian study center movement, I was especially struck by Wilson's observation in Chapter 1 that "faculty ministries, with dedicated staff, are a necessary condition to successfully move forward with faculty-engaged campus endeavors" (p. 18) and I would have appreciated further reflection on the most effective ways for faculty and such ministry staff to partner together in such endeavors.

Beyond further institutional reflection, a few small changes might have improved the book. While Wilson's extended metaphor of the journey serves as an organizing principle for the book, at times I found it more distracting from the book's content than helpful in illuminating that content. (I thought the same of the computer software/hardware metaphors used to deal with concepts of worldview and sanctification.) And since most of the theological resources used in the book were drawn from Protestant (and often Protestant evangelical) sources, presenting a wider range of theological resources – e.g., Catholic social teaching on the dignity of work and secular vocation – would perhaps have increased the book's appeal and accessibility to a wider range of Christian faculty. Finally, given the declining numbers of tenure-track faculty positions and the ballooning numbers of contingent faculty within universities, a book dedicated to "the professorial vocation" might have benefited from consideration of what new challenges and

opportunities arise from these shifts in the landscape of higher education, especially for the graduate students and early career scholars who are navigating these changes as part of their discernment of Christian academic vocation.

None of these minor points should diminish our gratitude for what Wilson has so clearly given us in *A Sacred Journey*: the accumulated lessons drawn from a lifetime of pursuing Christian service within the academy. Graduate students and early career scholars in particular would do well to read carefully and heed Wilson's wisdom, avoiding pitfalls and seizing opportunities identified by one who has traveled the road before them. That Wilson has taken the time to reflect upon and share this traveling wisdom in *A Sacred Journey* is itself testament to the fact that he still practices the kind of sacrificial academic vocation to which he calls others.

Notes

1. David I. Smith, *On Christian Teaching: Practicing Faith in the Classroom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018; Paul M. Gould, *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014; George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
2. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.
3. Hunter, *To Change the World*, p. 279. ■