WASC Accreditation, Faith Integration and You

WASC reviewers will be here at APU March 9 to 11 for the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR) reaccreditation visit. Faith Integration being one of the four priorities for APU’s Academic vision 2016, the WASC reviewers will want to know during this visit what you know and think about Faith Integration at APU! Through the Capacity and Preparatory Review (CPR), the WASC commission is able to determine whether an institution fulfills the Core Commitment to Institutional Capacity. Our two Faith Integration CPR questions are:

CPR Q4. In what ways does the institution ensure that educational objectives related to faith integration are actively used as guides for decision-making, resource allocation, and action?

Next year we will have the WASC Educational Effectiveness Review (EER) visit. The two Faith Integration EER questions are:

EER Q3. To what extent are students able to articulate a Christian perspective when addressing social and ethical issues?

• Each department/program will have at least one course in which students engage in a course writing activity on a discipline-appropriate ethical issue.

EER Q4. To what extent does the University ensure that students achieve core learning outcomes and competencies related to faith integration before they graduate?

• Students will articulate discipline-appropriate faith integration outcomes in class presentations, papers, and projects.

To become familiar with our current faith integration CPR report, which includes our two EER questions so as to be confident in your knowledge and responses, please go to: http://www.apu.edu/wasc/pdfs/Capacity_and_Preparatory_Review_Report.pdf (pgs. 14-19). We trust that you will give your preparation for the WASC "exam" your best effort, as we continue to work on your behalf in the Office of Faith Integration.

- Ben Nworie, Ph.D., MDiv, Faith Integration Coordinator,

Faith or Reason, Faithful Reason, or Reasonable Faith? — Steve Wilkens Ph.D.

Christian educators cannot avoid the question of how faith and reason are related. As Christians, we are grounded in affirmations that we call faith statements. As educators, we help students develop their rational capacities and grade their work based on the logical connections drawn from premises. The mere process of reading assumes rationality. Thus, we cannot be educators without employing reason; we cannot be Christian educators apart from faith. How we understand the relationship between faith and reason has a huge influence on how we view faith integration.

Although variations are endless, let me offer three general models, all deeply embedded in Christian history, for expressing the relationship between faith and reason:

1) Separate Spheres: This paradigm argues that reason is dandy if we want to cure a rash or develop an effective political campaign strategy, but it lacks sufficient resources to bring us to knowledge of God. At most, reason reveals its own impotence to establish our relationship with God. The latter relies on faith alone, which operates according to a completely different set of standards than reason.

2) Augustinian Synthesis: Reason can recognize truths about the eternal and divine. Apart from faith, however, this information only condemns us because we fail to relate it to the God who is the source of all truth. Faith is a form of knowing that transforms rational information into understanding and wisdom.

3) Thomistic Synthesis: Reason is a gift of God that, if used properly, reveals certain truths about God. These truths generate a thirst to know God more fully and point us toward higher truths, revealed in Scripture, that complete our knowledge and bring us to salvation.

Obviously much more can be said about these models. (If you want to know more about them, come to a Faith Integration Foundations Seminar on Jan. 27.) However, lurking behind our teaching likely will be one of the paradigms. Which one informs your teaching?
There are a wide range of possible connections between faith and reason and no text will address them all. Not all of the answers are particularly favorable on efforts to integrate faith and reason. Rather than reviewing a text which surveys the range of possible answers, I am going to discuss a text that takes a particular approach in a concise enough way that professors could read it during the semester, and is clear enough that one doesn’t need to be an expert on the topic to get something valuable for their efforts.

Faith and Reason, by Anthony Kenny (Columbia University Press, 89 pages, index) is the publication of a set of lectures in which Kenny sets out to examine whether faith can be rational. Kenny’s lectures have the advantages of being reasonably short and conversational, while still being aimed at an audience of professors. The book includes four lectures: The Virtue of Reason, The Justification of Beliefs, The Defensibility of Theism, and The Virtue of Faith. The text does a good job of looking at the fine grained nature of foundationalism and the way in which beliefs, including a belief in God’s existence, might be basic.

Kenny is a professional philosopher and shows it both in the way he approaches the explication of concepts and the scope of his understanding of philosophical arguments in epistemology. His work might at times be challenging, but with a little effort it yields a precise understanding of the material. Kenny attributes to Alvin Plantinga the notion that our belief in God can be a basic belief, one which operates to support our other beliefs, without itself being supported by beliefs. A basic belief could for example be a self-evident belief, an experiential belief, or a belief which functions in a particularly central way, for which arguments might be given but which was not held based upon those arguments. The problem that Kenny finds with Plantinga’s position is that it would allow too many types of beliefs to be basic, albeit for different people in different circumstances. So, while Plantinga himself might affirm belief in God’s existence as basic, I might not affirm it as basic, and yet someone else might affirm that God’s non-existence was basic.

One of the most interesting legacies of Plantinga’s arguments, one that according to some shakes the philosophical roots of the entire western intellectual tradition is that the proper and complete efforts of rational inquiry do not yield a unique answer to central questions such as, does God exist? Plantinga affirms that I might be rational in my belief that God exists and that a fellow philosopher might be just as rational in her belief that God does not exist. Kenny attempts to extend the work that Plantinga has offered by developing a more general conception of the virtue of rationality which will provide ground for assessing when a basic belief is justified.

Kenny claims to show that belief in God can be basic (provided it is defensible on the basis of natural theology), but it is not something that is unshakably certain.

By his own admission Kenny is an agnostic. In fact this is one reason I chose the book. His criticism is that theist and atheist alike maybe guilty of credulity. Some atheists might think that he has not gone far enough in criticizing theism, but his account can’t be claimed to be biased, nor is it an overly simplistic account of evidences. Because his account is agnostic I would like to mention two other books from an explicitly theistic point of view. Nicholas Wolterstorff’s book, Reason within the Bounds of Religion, has similar depth and insight in a short straight-forward approach. Like Kenny his point of view is closely tied to developments from Christian philosophers, working in epistemology. Dallas Willard’s book, Knowing Christ Today, is a more popularist approach.

As part of our commission to be “salt and light” it is essential that APU faculty be engaged in scholarly societies that are not oriented around our Christian identity. It is also valuable to be networked with fellow Christ-followers who are deeply committed to working out disciplinary content in a faith-based way.

Some examples of this valuable network with fellow Christian Scholars are: The Association of Christian Economists based at Gordon College and the Affiliation of Christian Biologists at Messiah are two such examples. The collegial network, working