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Title: Present Tense. Christian Education in secular time.

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Abstract

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes our present secular society as inhabiting time differently. Our age is no longer embedded in what he describes as 'higher time' with a divine foundation and the idea that the society was constituted in something that transcended contemporary common action, or the 'present tense'. Institutions like the church and university are creatures of an older time, so how do we practice Christian Education in secular time? This chapter posits three conceptual distinctions that might serve Christian institutions of higher education well as we reimagine our vocation: Imagination rather than worldview, pedagogy rather than curriculum and, distinctively rather than uniquely Christian. (Pearl Jam fans should note that the 'Present Tense' reference is intentional).

Keywords: Higher education; Pedagogy; Faith

Our cultural moment

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (2004) posits that 'secularity has something to do with the way people inhabit time' (p.93). Our age is no longer embedded in what he describes as 'higher time' with a divine foundation and the idea that society is constituted in something that transcends contemporary common action (Taylor, 2004, p. 93). Taylor argues that what binds people together in secular time is common action, to put it another way all we have is the present tense.

Present Tense is the title of a song by the Seattle rock band Pearl Jam; it's grey literature but it is worth taking a closer look at the lyrics to explore the context in which the institutions of university and church find themselves in secular time imagined in this way. A quotation is included below but if you have the opportunity to do an internet search for the full lyrics this is a worthwhile exercise.

Do you see the way that tree bends? Does it inspire?
Leaning out to catch the sun's rays... a lesson to be applied...
Are you getting' something out of this all-encompassing trip?
You can spend your time alone re-digesting past regrets oh...
Or you can come to terms and realize
You're the only one who can forgive yourself, oh yeah...
Makes much more sense to live in the present tense...

(Vedder & McCreedy, 1996)

The institutions of church and university are curious creatures in secular time. To borrow Pearl Jam's description, they 'offer ideas on how this life ends... an approach and a way to live' that is becoming less and less convincing when society is able to imagine itself as a system, a set of processes independent of political, legal or ecclesiastical order (Vedder & McCreedy, 1996). Taylor (2004) explains that institutions are legacies of a society in which the normative order of things was embedded in higher time. It's almost impossible to imagine society any other way when the normative political order depends on being subject to monarch, or ancient or natural law. Taylor (2004) argues that the first 'independent take on society' is the economy in which society is imagined to be a set of interconnected transactions instead of the domain of a ruler (p.163). Major shifts like these in our social imagination cause dissonance; Pearl Jam's diagnoses for the resulting sense of disorientation is that it makes much more sense to live in the present tense.

Can social actors and institutions with a religious imagination, which need not only be Christian—although that is the focus of this chapter, have legitimacy in a society with a secular imagination? Taylor's work focuses on the ways we imagine the world that we currently live in and on the practices that produce it. He's not primarily providing an apologetic either for 'higher time' or 'secular time' and he's not prescribing a direction towards which society should be transformed. But Taylor's concepts of secular time and imagination are theoretical tools that have methodological implications for religious actors and institutions of education asking questions like these: (1) What is distinctively 'Christian' about Christian education? (2) Is it something to do with the content, or with the quality of the learning community, or with the institutional mission, or with the pedagogical process itself—or all of these? (3) What are the biblical and theological convictions that underpin our educational theories? (4) Is there room in our institutions for diversities of theological conviction, as well as diversities of educational theory and practice? (5) Is there one Christian worldview, or many? (6) Is there one type of education which is distinctively 'Christian', or are there many 'Christian educations'? (7) Can some types of Christian education be found in secular institutions as well? (8) And what is the relation between theories of Christian education and their practical implementation in our own educational institutions which are highly regulated and therefore 'secular' in many of their processes and requirements?¹

This chapter posits three conceptual distinctions that might assist Christian institutions of higher education to reimagine their situation and practice in secular time: Imagination rather

¹ These questions were the focus of the Association for Christian Higher Education Australia (ACHEA) Conference, Brisbane 2019 for which a version of this chapter was prepared, they can be found on the conference website [here](#).

than worldview, pedagogy rather than curriculum and, distinctively rather than uniquely Christian. Following Pearl Jam, for these distinctions to 'bend' and 'inspire' the present tense they need to connect with Taylor's description of how secular society imagines itself.

Imagination rather than worldview

The term worldview has been a significant concept for helping actors in Christian education, particularly in the reformed and conservative evangelical traditions, towards an articulation of 'an approach and a way to live' that integrates key doctrinal beliefs with curriculum content (Vedder & McCreedy, 1996). Wolters (2005) describes worldview as "the comprehensive framework of one's basic beliefs about things" (p.2). His book *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* sets this framework out at length. Instead of a Reformational worldview we could talk about a Catholic worldview or an Anglican one suggesting there is not a single Christian worldview but many; we can also talk more broadly about a religious worldview or a secular one. Worldview is a very useful concept, particularly for articulating the propositions and principles upon which knowledge and understanding rest and for challenging the assumption that these principles are neutral or innate. For conservative evangelical Christians in particular, the descriptor 'biblical' in relation to 'worldview' has been important for establishing authority and denoting that this worldview makes an exclusive truth claim. 'Biblical worldview' is therefore an important mechanism in evangelical Christian apologetics, or defence of the faith and, it has served as the backbone for curriculum development, institutional accreditation and ministry training throughout the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries.

We inherit our worldview from, amongst other things, our location in time. If we take the Reformation as an example, this was simultaneously a religious and social political event that helped to usher in what we describe as the 'modern age'. The Reformation operates for some Christian denominations as a very particular doctrinal framework, but for all of us in the Western world, whether we know much about it or not, the Reformation has profoundly shaped our moral and political order (MacCulloch, 2003). It's in this last point about the sculpting of institutional and social practices that the concept of worldview begins to reach its limitations. In secular time our social order can be shaped by multiple and competing worldviews without the understanding and assent of all social actors. Something about this suggests that the influence and shaping of 'an approach and a way to live' do not rest simply on intellectual assent to a set of principles (Vedder & McCreedy, 1996). It also suggests that 'worldview' may not be a particularly accessible concept for our contemporaries both inside and outside of religious faith communities .

Taylor's (2004) concept of the social imagination helps us with this, the social imaginary is a concept tied to the question of how Western modernity understands itself. Taylor writes that 'the differences amongst today's multiple modernities need to be understood in terms of the divergent social imaginations involved' (p. 1-2). Taylor is not using the word 'imagination' here to refer to fiction, fantasy or to the inner world; as in 'she has an active imagination' (Smith,

2017). Taylor is using it to refer to the way people understand the world they live in, how they fit into that world alongside of others and what assumptions inform their expectations about what is normal. Many such assumptions are formed at a pre-cognitive level and thus Taylor explains that this is something deeper than an intellectual schema or worldview. 'I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations' (p.23).

J.K.A. Smith (2009) has argued that worldview approaches stem from reductionist accounts of the human person that rely too heavily on cognition and propositional accounts of knowledge. His argument, grounded in Aristotelean and Augustinian tradition, is that before humans are knowers, they are lovers and that much of what we know and understand is shaped by this pursuit, or our telos. Implicit in this argument is the sense that the concept of 'worldview' itself belongs to the modernist era in which it became influential and is limited by the scientific rationalism that dominated the imagination of modernism. Christian faith and Christian texts reach much further back, with their roots in ancient practices of worship and storytelling upon which contemporary schemas of doctrinal commitment rest. 'I suggest' writes Smith, 'that instead of thinking about worldview as distinctly Christian "knowledge," we should talk about a Christian "social imaginary" that constitutes a distinctly Christian understanding of the world that is implicit in the practices of Christian worship (p68)'.

This Christian understanding of the world may be equally unfamiliar, strange or indefensible to the contemporary social imagination but the idea of a Christian "social imaginary" shares a conceptual logic which worldview does not. Smith has been accused of unfairly dismissing the role of cognition although he does clearly state in *Desiring the Kingdom* that this is not his goal, preferring instead to correct an overemphasis on cognition as opposed to embodied practice within the reformed tradition. Smith has also been criticised for adopting a relativist epistemological position regarded by some authors, including Davis & Franks (2013) as incompatible with reformed or conservative evangelical theology. Smith is well able to defend himself and a discussion of these theological and philosophical debates are beyond the scope of this chapter but the debates themselves resonate deeply with the practical questions associated with practicing Christian education in secular time. Taylor's (2004) concept of the social imaginary offers us tools for the analysis of our religious and educational institutional practice that may bridge into contemporary understandings of the self and society more effectively than worldview.

Taylor is careful to make the distinction between social imaginary and social theory and his three reasons for doing so help to illustrate why the concept of a 'social imaginary' might be more useful to us than worldview in this cultural moment. First, he explains that the way ordinary people imagine their social experience is often not expressed in theoretical terms 'but is carried in images, stories and legends' (p.23). Second, theory, for which we might substitute 'worldview', is often possessed by a small minority whereas the social imaginary is typically shared by large groups of people and third, the social imaginary makes possible a widely shared

set of common practices and sense of legitimacy. Analysing the social imaginary rather than worldview shifts the focus onto practice. In institutions of education there is a particular space for analyses and conversations about practice called pedagogy; pedagogy is the focus of the next section of the chapter.

Pedagogy rather than curriculum

Living in the present tense, says Pearl Jam, requires ‘forgiving yourself’; the only reference point is the individual self (Vedder & Mccready, 1996). Secular time ushered in a new understanding of the self and its relationship to reality. Kant (1784) described this process of enlightenment as a process of maturing, or coming of age. He regarded the inability to use reason and understanding without guidance from another as a sign of immaturity, the implication being that freedom lies in the cultivation of reason, the intellect and self-determination. One of the consequences of this for the practice of education has been the emphasis on mastering content, method and technique in the pursuit of individual rational autonomy.

If knowledge resides in observable facts and first principles, and if its purpose is the actualization of the autonomous self then it makes sense to focus primarily on transmitting curriculum content because it ensures everyone has access to truth. The concept of worldview is very helpful here for highlighting the self-referential loop that this creates in the present tense. Measuring or observing facts, establishing first principles and designing curriculum are not value free enterprises. Some way has to be found in secular time for adjudicating between competing claims about truth. Worldview highlights that there are competing claims, but the concept of the social imaginary moves the analysis on even further because it helps to highlight the extent to which our assumptions about knowledge and the self, our worldviews (Christian or otherwise) are themselves influenced and shaped by a secular social imagination.

The language of ‘Christian’ or ‘bible-based’ curriculum is a powerful example of this. Emphasizing Christian worldview courses, biblical integration and unique Christian curriculum suggests that if knowledge is only taught from a Christian perspective then Christian faith will be securely transmitted. Smith (2009) Smith and Smith (2011) have written extensively on this topic in the context of Christian higher education in North America. They argue that Christian learning should be conceptualized in relation to belonging to a community of practice not the intellectual assent to a set of a propositions. Smith (2009) has proffered a radical counter-cultural vision of the Christian university as a place for lovers, a new monasticism for the formation of desires. Whether or not one accepts this as a legitimate vision the point is that the conversation about what a Christian university is for in secular time requires an articulation of telos and it requires that attention be paid to practices of formation. Even as we recognize that educational policy norms and accreditation processes push us repeatedly towards curriculum content, pedagogy remains the far more powerful conceptual space in which to have this conversation.

Prior to the enlightenment, or in ‘higher time’, education was primarily conceived of as a religious activity and experienced within the context of the religious community life. Shortt and

Smith (2004) remind us that during the thirteenth century boys attending university in Paris lived in hospices called pedagogies. The praxis of religious faith, relationship with God, with each other and with the created order legitimately framed the shape of enquiry. Without wanting to resurrect the middle ages, re-emphasizing the profile of pedagogy forces us to articulate what it is that we believe about the learner. As Rowan Williams (2018) so beautifully puts it, teaching begins with the question: “can truth find a home here, and be alive”².

This essentially poses an anthropological question which can be worked out faithfully and theologically within different traditions as Higton (2012) does in his magnificent overview *A Theology of Higher Education*. Higton (2012) writes that ‘the university is going to remain an ambiguous and ambivalent institution’ (p.256). His thesis is that university can make a difference, even in secular time when it’s up against multiple discourses the most dominant of which are deadening and destructive. How does a university do this? Higton’s answer is pedagogy, ‘by exercises of virtue, by experiments in sociality, and by carefully placed questioning about the good of what we do’ (p. 256). What is particularly noteworthy about Higton’s argument is that he is writing in the context of the United Kingdom where almost all universities are public and secular. In writing a theology for university education in this setting he is more closely representing what it might take for Christian faculty to be faithfully engaged in the secular social imagination. This leads us helpfully in to the next section of this chapter which discusses the distinction between distinctively Christian and uniquely Christian.

Distinctively rather than uniquely Christian

Christianity has a particular vision of what it means to be a person, an anthropology which shapes the Christian response to human existence. Rowan Williams explains that this vision contains within it a set of assumptions: that human beings are summoned to respond to God’s initiative and that they are summoned to shape a life that communicates God to others and something about humanity to God (Williams, 2018). For Williams these commitments are non-negotiable to the life of faith. Others might summarise them as the call to repentance, image bearing and stewardship (Carson, 2008). Writing specifically about the place of theology in the university, Williams’s thesis is that a Christian anthropology ought to reinforce in society a deep suspicion of things that make us less human. Practices that re-make higher education in the image of the political, the bureaucratic and the convenient are the de-humanising consequences of secular time. Williams (2018) points out that not everybody in our society has an anthropological vision but that a society which believes it can do without even the memory of these commitments will be impoverished.

The question that often gets asked is whether this Christian anthropological vision is unique and whether it is authoritative? It should be noted that part of Williams’s project is to reclaim the

² There is no page number to reference here as this was a verbal response to a Q&A following a lecture. Bibliographic details for the transcript of the lecture can be found in the reference section of this chapter.

'humanism' from 'secular humanism' and to legitimate the religious critical perspective in public intellectual debate. This is a significant discussion in its own right, outside of the bounds of this chapter, but not outside the bounds of faculty, denominational and institutional discussions in Christian higher education. For the purposes of this chapter what's of interest is the language of uniqueness, as opposed to distinctiveness. In other words, what happens to the conversation about Christian education once it has been framed in these terms. Research with Christian teachers in both the K-12 and higher education settings carried out by Cooling *et al* (2016) sheds some really interesting light upon this.

In a study of high school teachers in English Church Schools Cooling *et al* (2016) found that many Christian teachers struggled to explain the relationship between their Christian faith and teaching and learning. A common thread seemed to be the sense that in order to describe something as 'Christian' teachers thought they had to be teaching exclusively Christian curriculum content or to be doing something that non-Christian teachers might not do. As part of the research Revell (2016) also interviewed university professors who were training teachers. The interviews with university professors revealed significant amounts of suspicion around the prospect of offering a Christian vision as part of the task of education. What is interesting is that Revell did not find that this suspicion arose because universities were perceived to be secular public spaces where the discussion of religion was to be excluded. Revell found that the root of the suspicion arose from the notion of professionalism. The dominant view shared by teachers and professors in the research, whether they identified as Christians or not, was that to be a professional meant treating personal beliefs as irrelevant so that classrooms or lecture halls could be experienced as inclusive spaces.

Cooling's research introduced the participants to an approach to teaching called *What If Learning*³ which attends to imagination and pedagogy in order to reframe teaching and learning through a distinctive Christian anthropology. It was a deliberate attempt to start the conversation in a place which more obviously connects to the assumptions actively shaping education in secular time. Smith (2017) and Cooling (2016) have adopted the language of 'distinctively Christian' to help articulate where the lines and boundaries could be for a community of Christian educators. Smith writes that the task of Christian teaching is to 'find ways of teaching that are genuinely consistent with our Christian faith and genuinely educationally helpful to students' (Smith and Cooling, 2017). This may well lead to the affirmation of practices from sources other than those of Christian institutions, doctrine and tradition, just as it might lead to the opposition of practices from any sources that undermine or oppose faithfulness to Christian calling.

The origin of the phrase 'distinctively Christian' as Cooling and Smith use it came out of a policy shift in the Church of England. Cooling (2016) writes about this at length elsewhere but the

³ <http://www.whatiflearning.co.uk/>

presence of church schools and universities with an Anglican foundation in the UK public education system is a legacy of a particular historic and cultural relationship between the church and the state in the C19th that has since been refashioned (Chadwick, 1997). The Church of England needed to discern the nature of its presence and its investment in publicly funded education for the contemporary cultural context or ‘present tense’. The discernment process that the Church of England went through affirmed the centrality of education in the church’s mission to the nation (Archbishops’ Council, 2001). This affirmation was a radical step since the culturally normative thing to do in secular time would have been to back away quietly, not ratchet up the religious purpose of education.

The language of ‘distinctively Christian’ enabled Church of England schools and universities to articulate a particular vision of what it means to be human. It explained what a church school was for, by affirming ‘that church schools participate in the mission of the church by promoting the formation of their students as image-bearers of God’ (Cooling *et al*, 2016, p.21). It set expectations that this distinctive vision should permeate teaching and learning, it was not to be just the preserve of the chaplain or the bible teacher. As Williams (2018) proposes, this kind of vision releases schools and universities to do the task of education, to address the quality of teaching and learning, to tackle inequality of educational outcomes, to reframe practices of diversity and inclusion all within the context of a learning community that is guided by a clearly articulated religious purpose. In this way we might say that the language of ‘distinctively Christian’ is better able to bend, inspire and illuminate the possibility that the road ahead does not have to be travelled alone with the self. In the final section of the chapter we will take a closer look at the road ahead by summarizing how imagination, pedagogy and distinctively Christian touch on some of the questions we may have about Christian higher education.

Living The Present Tense – as to the Lord

C.S. Lewis illustrates how a Christian “social imaginary” makes it possible to live fully in the present tense. *‘It is only our daily bread that we are encouraged to ask for. The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or grace received.’* (Lewis, 1965, p.52) This quotation comes from a sermon Lewis preached to university students during the second world war. With the future hanging in the balance, with friends and contemporaries dying on the battle field attending university must have felt pretty futile. Lewis tackled the question of the purpose of learning during wartime. He argued that wartime only served to highlight questions that Christians should be asking in peace-time: how to go about the business of ordinary life, how to be faithful in parts of life, such as education, that did not feel explicitly religious. Lewis answered the question by describing the posture of living ‘moment to moment as to the Lord’, exemplified by the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray⁴. If we return to the set of eight questions posed in the first section of this chapter it is possible to see how the three conceptual distinctions proposed might assist in ordering practices of learning to receive grace in secular

⁴ Matthew 6: 19-13

time. In other words, the present tense is no barrier to what Lewis (1965) describes as God's infinite and inexorable claim.

For ease of reference and because the questions are inter-related we can group them into four pairs. Please note that the purpose is not to definitively answer the questions but to explore how the conversation might open up if we frame it with imagination, pedagogy and distinctively Christian.

First, what is distinctively 'Christian' about Christian education? Is it something to do with the content, or with the quality of the learning community, or with the institutional mission, or with the pedagogical process itself—or all of these? The concept of a social imaginary could change our response to this question. It certainly lends itself to the affirmation that yes, 'all of these' (content, learning community, institutional mission and pedagogical process) have something to do with the way we imagine education. The concept of a distinctively Christian imagination would also suggest that there are particular practices that a Christian social imaginary might emphasise about the nature of community and mission. Discussing what those practices are necessitates a conversation about pedagogy. Perhaps pedagogy doesn't really belong at the end of the list in the question, you could have a very fruitful conversation about what pedagogic processes form distinctively Christian content, learning, community and mission.

Notice how our three conceptual distinctions have begun to re-balance the emphasis in these questions compared to worldview, curriculum and uniquely Christian which typically force us into a far narrower conversation around content and structure. This is important for the second pair of questions which ask what are the biblical and theological convictions that underpin our educational theories? Is there room in our institutions for diversities of theological conviction, as well as diversities of educational theory and practice? Structure is important, many of us assume that it is derived directly from biblical and theological convictions, but convictions are shaped by our contemporary social imagination in more ways than we are often aware of. Biblical and theological convictions don't just show up in curriculum content, they shape practice and are shaped by our institutional practices. If we lack the conceptual space to acknowledge this, it becomes difficult to fully examine structures and content or to explore what the relationship could be between biblical and theological convictions and practice. If that conversation hasn't taken place, then it is less likely that Christian higher education will be able to live fully in the present tense.

Implicit in the previous pair of questions and in the third is the concept of 'uniquely Christian', tethered to a sense of higher time in which the social order was religious and uniform. We've attended already in this chapter to some of the reasons why imagination is a helpful concept for dealing with the reality of multiple Christian worldviews in secular time. This is not to suggest that the following questions are illegitimate but to suggest that there might be a different reason to ask if there is one Christian worldview, or many? Is there one type of education which is distinctively 'Christian', or are there many 'Christian educations'? Grappling with this, especially by attending to pedagogy and asking what the practices of different types of Christian education are and how they relate to the present tense is a very different conversation than seeking to determine which worldview and type of education is uniquely Christian.

Picking up on this thread the concept of distinctively Christian is particularly useful for considering the final pair of questions: Can some types of Christian education be found in secular institutions as well? And what is the relation between theories of Christian education and their practical implementation in our own educational institutions which are highly regulated and therefore 'secular' in many of their processes and requirements? These two questions very effectively sum up the dilemma in which Christian higher education finds itself, although as Taylor (2004) Higton (2012) and Williams (2018) have pointed out all universities are facing an assault to their purpose and legitimacy. The concept of 'distinctively Christian' gives us a way to affirm educational practices that are consistent with Christian faith, that humanise and cause us to flourish, wherever these occur. Hauerwas (2007) writes that secular universities are no more 'secular through and through' than universities that claim to be Christian 'are Christian through and through' (p.8). To affirm 'distinctively Christian' practices of teaching and learning is to hold out an alternate imagination to secular regulation. Working in partnership to do this might be one of the few buffers we have to counter the sense of futility engendered by secular regulation.

In this chapter I have attempted to take seriously the times in which we find ourselves. People of faith, their institutions and communities are called to live fully in the times and places where they live, indeed are shaped by them. I have assumed that a Christian imagination affords a particular shape to the ways in which we decide to live in those times. Finally, I have argued that the concept of a Christian social imaginary with its attendant pedagogic practices and distinctive anthropology might be a more powerful framework within which to discuss the response of Christian higher education to secular time.

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Biography

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