

Mission in the Secular American Academy

Colleagues,

Last week we heard a pastor, Mark Greenethaner, reflect on his work in Australian Lutheran schools that embrace the mission of Christ as a defining characteristic of their identity. This week's offering is a counterpoint of sorts to Mark's observations. The author, our own Carol Braun, is a lay polymath whose vocation as teacher unfolds in a secular academy in New York City. You'll get the details directly from her. More to the point, you'll hear her thinking out loud about her calling as a double-agent missionary (my term, not hers) who serves two distinct missions, one secular, the other anchored in Christ. I, for one, am especially struck by her description of the values that shape and drive her students. Give some thought as you read to how these values manifest the law of God in its operative and ultimately deadly glory and, in doing that, necessitate the breathtaking gift and promise of Christ. This being noted, thanks be to God for Carol and every other Christ-truster—our churches are filled with them—who salt the earth day after day with their love for the driven children of God that Jesus died for.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

I teach physics, math, and English at a private high school with no religious affiliation. I therefore spend more time every day talking with teenagers than with anyone else. Many of them are the children of immigrants, and their cultural backgrounds are

diverse. They come from a variety of faith traditions, and many of them have no religion at all. The fact is, I don't know what percentage of them are religious, because we rarely talk about our own religious beliefs. In part, that's because we're busy discussing other things—how to find the range of a projectile, or solve a quadratic equation, or make sense of Shakespeare. But of course there's more to it than that. Even in our downtime, during free periods or after school, I hesitate to bring up my own religious beliefs and practices, or to ask my students about their spiritual lives. Having taught here for four years, I can count on one hand—practically on one finger—the number times I've had a frank discussion with my students or even my colleagues about the non-secular aspects of my life.

So, do I consider myself to be a missionary to the secular American academy? Not really. Certainly not in any kind of overt or straightforward way. In short, that's not my job. The academy has its own mission of pursuing secular truth through the teaching and learning of the arts, sciences, and humanities. My job here is to support that secular mission. In a sense, though, I suppose that anyone who spends Sunday morning in a pew, and who spends private moments in prayer, and who reads the Bible at home, is a kind of missionary—or emissary, or person who's sent—into the secular weekday world. As I interact with my students, I sometimes find myself wondering how they might respond to the Gospel if they heard it. How would it sound to them, if they haven't heard it already? Is it something they're yearning to hear, even if they don't realize it? Or would it strike them as superfluous, irrelevant, absurd?

To put the question another way: Who are the young people who are being formed today by the multicultural, secular academic institutions like the one I now call home? What motivates them? What's important to them? What do they want? And how do those motives and values, needs and desires, intersect with the things

God wants for them? Even if no one is confessing the Gospel of Christ within the walls of the academy, it's still likely that, where confession does happen, it sometimes falls on ears that have been shaped by this kind of secular institution. How might the Church's message sound to those ears?

I often have rather explicit discussions with students about what they want—if not out of life, then at least out of the next few steps in their education. One recent conversation comes to mind: A ninth-grader was working on his application to a rigorous extracurricular science program at a prestigious New York university. He asked for my feedback on his application essay, in which he sought to explain why he was interested in the program. In the essay he listed his many accomplishments and awards in math and science, and his longtime dream of becoming a doctor. He gave explicit credit to his parents for supporting him in his career goal, explaining how they provided him with books and supplies to advance his scientific interests. Finally, at the end of the essay, he said that he hoped the challenges of the university's program would add to his record of outstanding academic achievements. As we reached the end of the essay, I asked him to dig deeper: “*Why* do you want to add to your list of academic achievements?” He answered quickly and candidly: he sought further achievements because they gave him a sense of accomplishment, and because (in his words) they brought honor to his family. He added, rather urgently, “*I need to get in.*”

This drive toward success, tied closely to a sense of responsibility to one's parents, is very common among the students I teach. In most cases, I get the impression that the students come from homes that are loving rather than draconian, and that with their parents' high expectations comes an equal measure of caring support. The students themselves are driven both by their parents' expectations and, even at a young age, by their own conviction that they need to work hard to reach or

surpass their parents' own levels of achievement. College (especially getting into a "good college") is a major stepping stone toward that goal. In my first year of teaching, when I asked my class why they'd decided to take physics, over half of them said "Because it looks good on a college application." The next year I decided not to ask.

Of course, in the process of striving for achievement and honor, most of my students discover that they have a genuine passion for some of the things they're asked to do. They develop a taste not just for the general glow of success but also for the pure joy of doing something that they love and excel at—be it in the classroom or art studio, on stage or on the basketball court. In the context of the secular academy, this kind of natural passion is cherished as a precious resource: it drives young people to pour their efforts into the pursuit of truth and excellence—not for the building up for their own glory but, it seems, from some kind of higher motive. Such a person, within the academy, can be trusted as the truest and best member of the community: someone who is unlikely to commit academic sins like plagiarism or cheating or poor sportsmanship, and who serves as a natural role model to others. Confidence has its place in academic circles, but among university professors and high school teachers alike I have often observed an institutional reverence for humility, especially when coupled with outstanding achievement.

In this context, I often think about the Christian notion of devoting one's life work to the greater glory of God—the idea of putting your life in God's hands and asking him to make you an instrument for the accomplishment of his will on earth. In response to the question "why do you want to do what you're doing," the Christian has answers quite different from those given by her secular counterparts.

A closely related question that's also on the minds of

thoughtful high school students is, "What responsibility do I have to others?" The secular American academy generally honors those who serve the poor and unfortunate. This is reflected, for example, in my school's policies of rewarding and requiring community service. I've heard students complain about peers who (rumor has it) use community service as yet another way to pad their college resumes. I've also heard a surprising number of them say that, while they initially balked at being "forced" to serve others, they came to derive a real sense of fulfillment and purpose from the experience. This leaves open the question, however, of why they do what they do. I've gotten into some rather heady discussions with eleventh- and twelfth-graders about altruism and whether they can be truly altruistic if they're motivated by their own desire to give their lives purpose and meaning. In general, those discussions end with the conclusion that yes, altruism is possible. But at such moments, especially, I've found myself strongly tempted to reveal how my understanding of service is colored by my Christian worldview, which casts all humans as beloved children of God, and which casts charitable love for others as a fitting and God-willed response to the love he gives to us. Again, on this point, I sense that the Christian has answers which the secular seeker might find intriguingly different.

This brings me to the question of what it is that God wills for these young people shaped by the secular academy, regardless of whether or not they think they have any use for him. I don't know how to answer the question of how the Church might frame its confession of the Gospel so as to ring true in the ears of these young people. I don't even know if that's a useful question to be asking. But I do know, from the Gospel itself, what it is that God wants for them: simply put, he wants them for himself. He loves them and yearns (1 Timothy 2:3-4) for all of them to be saved and come into knowledge of the truth

personified in his son Jesus. And in this sense at least, I do see myself as a missionary to the secular American academy, because I believe that God has sent me here to see all his children as he himself sees them-as his beloved sons and daughters, each one precious to him. The thought that some of God's love for them can be channeled through my own love for them is the best motivation I have for doing the job that I do.