

# THE SOCIAL SCIENTIST AT NAZARENE INSTITUTIONS

Teacher, Practitioner, and Scholar

*Lena Hegi Welch*

The previous essay examined the nature of transformational student learning. In contrast, this essay examines the roles of faculty members at Nazarene institutions. Although faculty members at Nazarene institutions share a common body of academic knowledge with our counterparts at non-Nazarene institutions, our teaching, practices, and research are uniquely influenced by the tenets of the Church of the Nazarene. These values affect everything from how we approach our academic disciplines (our *starting point*), to the *processes* we use to implement our disciplines (how we apply our academic knowledge in the classroom and in practice outside the classroom), to the *desired outcomes* of our disciplines.<sup>24</sup>

## A STARTING POINT

As social scientists teaching at Nazarene institutions, we approach our disciplines from a different *starting point* than our colleagues at non-Nazarene institutions. We do not study human beings impassively;<sup>25</sup> our faith tradition tells us that all people are valued by God, having been created in His image.<sup>26</sup> We are called to see people as God sees them: deeply flawed from falling out of relationship with Him, but ultimately worthy of redemption and desperately in need of restoration through Jesus Christ. As Parker Palmer suggests, our starting point is rooted in “knowledge that originates not in curiosity or control but in compassion, or love—a source celebrated not in

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our intellectual tradition but in our spiritual heritage.”<sup>27</sup> We believe human suffering originates from broken relationship with God. Flawed society, dysfunctional family relationships, unjust government, financial inequity, and political power struggles exist as a result of humanity’s separation from God.<sup>28</sup>



Closely related to the concept of human worth is the concept of human freedom. The Church of the Nazarene maintains that God, having created human beings in His image and likeness, gives each person the freedom to choose his or her relationship to Him (God) and others.<sup>29</sup> As social scientists, we recognize that our disciplines enrich a person’s understanding of his or her choices. Our disciplines help us to understand better the context out of which such choices are made; the patterns of relationships that influence thought and behavior; and the interaction of physical and social environments. Our disciplines assist human beings in identifying truths about themselves and others.

#### THE PROCESSES: APPLYING OUR DISCIPLINES

The tenets of the Nazarene denomination also influence the *processes* of our disciplines, or how we actually teach, practice, and do research in our fields. We believe that God’s love is transformational: He changes lives.<sup>30</sup> We are called to partner with God in His work with compassion and a desire for social justice.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, we do not work alone or rely on our own efforts, but with God’s help and in cooperation with other Christians, we are called to use our knowledge of culture, communication, environment, family structures, the human mind, human behavior, distribution of wealth, and political power to change the lives of others. As teachers at Nazarene institutions, we must challenge students to join us in partnership with God, to be compassionate, to seek

social justice, and to demonstrate their faith so that others are drawn to Jesus Christ. Our partnership with God gives us a hopeful, optimistic confidence that “human nature, and ultimately society can be radically and permanently changed by the grace of God.”<sup>32</sup> As social scientists and agents of God, we are challenged to apply the knowledge we gain to change dysfunctional family dynamics; to establish more equitable systems of producing and distributing wealth; to use media as means of informing and shaping culture in redemptive ways; to create criminal justice systems that truly rehabilitate; and to improve natural and human-made environments to make them more sustainable.



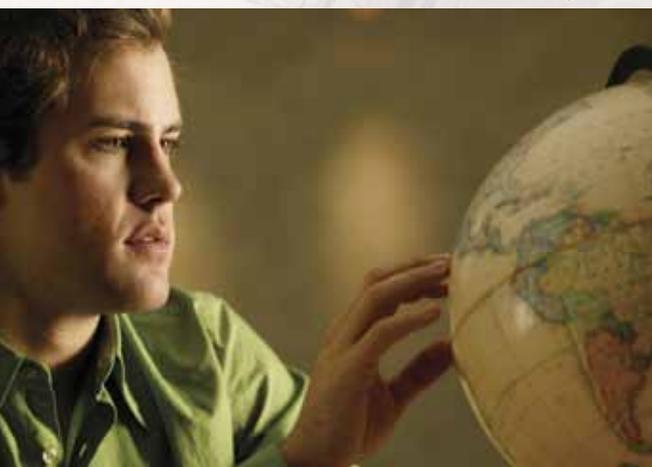
Social scientists at Nazarene institutions should be humble in understanding, knowing that our perspective of any situation is limited by our finite humanity; only God is omniscient. As Eileen Hulme and Paul Kaak describe Christian faculty members, “[O]ur place in the kingdom of God is always as a child of God firmly rooted in a sense of awe and humility.”<sup>33</sup> Yet, we are also called to excellence of soul, body, mind, and strength.<sup>34</sup> We must remain knowledgeable in our disciplines and demonstrate quality in teaching and scholarship so that our work is respected by others in our disciplines who may not understand or share our beliefs. We are also asked to practice “toleration to others who disagree with us on matters not essential to salvation.”<sup>35</sup> Social scientists at Nazarene institutions should be particularly open-minded in accepting people, in looking beyond another person’s belief system to discern value and truth in their lives.

As instructors at Nazarene institutions, we are challenged to mindfully integrate faith in our teaching. Harold Heie suggests instructors pose integrative questions that encourage students to consider the relationship between faith and learning. He offers the following sample questions for disciplines in the social sciences:

- Political Science: What is the role of forgiveness in international relations?

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- Economics: What is the relationship between the quest for profitability and the Christian call for compassion and justice?
- Sociology: To what extent are social problems caused by inadequacies in societal structures or by individual or group irresponsibility?
- Criminal Justice: To what extent should the penal system be retributive or restorative, or both?
- Communications: What is the potential for finding common ground through dialogue when the conversationalists are embedded in different traditions?<sup>36</sup>



Wrestling with these kinds of questions pushes students to find their “coherence in Christ,”<sup>37</sup> recognizing their role as agents of God and embracing the inherent connections between academic study and spiritual growth.

#### DESIRED OUTCOMES

Finally, the tenets of the Church of the Nazarene influence the *desired outcomes* of a social scientist. As Palmer notes, “The goal of a knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds.”<sup>38</sup> Nazarene theology includes the fact that the optimism of grace allows human beings to participate with God in the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Through the person of Jesus Christ, God seeks for individuals to be reconciled to Him and to each other. The restoration of relationship to God and others becomes the ultimate means of finding individual wholeness, promoting societal justice, reuniting families, breaking the cycle of poverty, promoting effective political change, and creating mediated communication that positively influences culture.

Few of us would disagree that the world is becoming increasingly complex and interconnected.<sup>39</sup> The need for social scientists who believe—and implement—the teachings of Jesus as expressed by the Church of the Nazarene has

never been greater. These core values do, indeed, influence our initial point of view, how we apply the knowledge in our disciplines, and our desired outcomes as social scientists. ■

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>24</sup> For this essay, the social sciences are primarily identified as anthropology, communication, criminal justice, economics, geography, linguistics, political science, psychology, and sociology.
- <sup>25</sup> For a more complete examination of the distinction between objectivism and gospel epistemology, see Parker J. Palmer's essay, "Toward a Spirituality of Higher Education" in *Faithful Learning and the Christian Scholarly Vocation*, ed. Douglas V. Henry and Bob R. Agee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003).
- <sup>26</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *We Are a Missional People*, 2010, par. 9. <http://www.nazarene.org/ministries/administration/centennial/core/missional/display.aspx>.
- <sup>27</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1993), 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *Manual 2005-2009* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2005).
- <sup>29</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *We Are a Holiness People*, 2010. <http://www.nazarene.org/ministries/administration/centennial/core/holiness/display.aspx>.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *We Are a Missional People*.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, par. 23.
- <sup>33</sup> Eileen Hulme and Paul Kaak, "Choosing to Engage the Culture," *The Soul of a Christian University: A Field Guide for Educators*, ed. Stephen T. Beers (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008), 192.
- <sup>34</sup> Philippians 4:8-9; Church of the Nazarene, *We Are a Missional People*.
- <sup>35</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *We Are a Christian People*, 2010, par.4. <http://www.nazarene.org/ministries/administration/centennial/core/christian/display.aspx>.
- <sup>36</sup> Heie, Harold, Examples of Integrative Questions by Discipline, Jan. 22, 2004, par. 1. <http://www.cccu.org/professionaldevelopment/resourcelibrary/examplesofintegrativequestionsbydiscipline>.
- <sup>37</sup> M. E. Marty, "The Church and Christian Higher Education in the New Millennium," *Faithful Learning and the Christian Scholarly Vocation*, ed. Douglas V. Henry and Bob. R Agee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 60.
- <sup>38</sup> Palmer, 8.
- <sup>39</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *We Are a Missional People*.

## RECOMMENDED READING

Henry, Douglas V., and Bob R. Agee, eds. *Faithful Learning and the Christian Scholarly Vocation*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003.

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The tenets of the Church of the Nazarene influence the desired outcomes of a social scientist.