

# INTEGRATING FAITH AND CONTENT IN THE HUMANITIES

A Historian's Conversational Approach

*Dennis C. Williams*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dennis C. Williams, Ph.D.

Professor of History

Director, General Education

Southern Nazarene University

Dr. Williams is currently exploring ways in which leaders in holarchical communities use collaboration to promote cultural shifts that promote adaptability and innovation.

**T**hrough conversations, humans have been exploring meaningful and pervasive questions since we began communicating. Such conversations are a profoundly gratifying and common human experience, and humanities scholars make it their profession to carry on the conversations that explore the meaning of various human expressions. As a Nazarene professor of history, I seek to create and sustain an open and inspiring space where my students and I may engage with, relate to, listen to and contribute to an exploration of how people have thought and behaved since they first began recording human beliefs and behavior. In so doing, we create anew the knowledge and wisdom contained within the conversations humans have been having since the dawn of time.

The capacity to hold and sustain meaningful conversations that explore values, to envision different futures that connect us with others, and to create a context from which we can act together to achieve great things characterizes our humanity. Venues for conversations have varied with time and culture. Despite the often mundane functionality of conversations, we imbue them with their own kind of sacredness. Notice the reverence various cultures have held for places such as the hearth, city gate, bazaar, plaza, forum, salon, cafe, pub, town hall, classroom, temple, mosque, and church. In

those venues people spread news, told stories, flirted, discussed philosophy, poured out their sorrows, dreamed dreams, and shared visions. It is through such conversations that we have created the relationships that maintain and sustain our essential humanity.

When we engage in conversations that share values; create meaning; construct an awareness of causes in which we are willing to invest our lives; and formulate plans and



communities of action that embody our shared visions, we engage in fulfilling our purpose as tenders of our social garden. As a historian living and working in a Nazarene higher educational context, I have discovered that when I stand in the place where my academic discipline and faith overlap, I can create and maintain a space that draws those with whom I relate into potentially transcendent and spiritually transformational conversations.

In that space, the conversations in which we engage are diverse and transformative. Sometimes the conversations begin as local and immediate—newsy perhaps. Along with others in the humanities, historians have long practiced turning news into deep conversations. We ask why; we plumb motivations; we look for linkages and analogies; and finally we ask, “And so now what?”

One of the meaningful conversations I enjoy hosting, because it is so engaging, is about how humans have thought about and acted toward the “other.” Whether starting with elements of nature, other people, or the divine, this conversation is as rich and rewarding as it has been compelling through

*Where my  
academic discipline  
and faith overlap, I  
can create a space  
for . . . spiritually  
transformational  
conversations.*

47

time. It is a question that underlies conversations about just war, genocide, earth keeping, social justice, the role of God in natural disasters, and many others. Such conversations take on various meanings as we consider the size and complexity of the world. Throughout history, when people's awareness expanded from local and tribal to global and perhaps to universal, they had to reformulate some of their ideas in order to sort out and explain new relational realities. Because our students are expanding the scope of their awareness, they find conversations that increase their knowledge of the world relevant. They are ready to broaden their horizons, and their engagement in such conversations has powerful transformative potential for them.

In a class concerning world civilizations, we discuss how becoming aware of a larger world stimulated some people to reconsider the ways humans should interact with one another, how they relate to the larger cosmos, and how they relate to the divine. When conversing with one another about the rise of Buddhism or Zoroastrianism; the importance of Confucianism and Taoism to Chinese identity and perspectives; the transition from Hellenic to Hellenistic culture in the wake of the Greco-Persian Wars; or the evolution of Jewish and Christian thought and practice in response to historical contextual changes, we can be engaged in a form of those original transformational conversations. When we hold informed conversations about the ways Muslims grappled with how to spread their gospel, retain fundamental theological purity, and live practically with their neighbors in Spain, India, or Kenya, we grapple along with them and explore through their experiences different ways of relating with others. When we observe how Europeans responded to the plague or interacted with Native American peoples, we explore ways that we humans have attempted to make sense of otherness. We try to listen to their conversations in order to inform our own.

By holding conversations about "others" in time, place, and culture in a Nazarene college classroom, where claims about human/divine relationships are held to be possible, we create an opportunity to explore how those experiences might be meaningful to us in our particular context. We ask to what



*By holding conversations about "others" in time, place, and culture, we create an opportunity to explore how those experiences might be meaningful to us.*

extent our nature and culture, our behavior, and the larger contexts in which we live are similar or different from theirs. We notice how awareness of the great developments, horrible tragedies, and opportunities lost makes us wiser or perhaps just different than we were before we had the conversations.

Conversations among historians generate many complex and nuanced answers to historical questions that raise many additional, potentially meaningful questions. I often tell my students to consider well the questions they ask, because the way they frame those questions has a way of determining the answers. I want my students to also be aware that while the quality of a question matters, the topic we choose to tackle does not, because all topics are portals to understanding the human condition and, thus, our own. For Nazarene colleges and universities, what matters is preparing our students, through frequent practice, to be able to participate in an open and authentic conversing community, rather than an arguing community. It is in the openly conversing community that we explore what we believe about being human, what we think about God, and why we feel those beliefs matter. By relating with others in meaningful, conversational ways; by engaging in contributing and being contributed to; by learning to listen deeply to others; by experiencing in degrees what it is like to be heard and understood, we experience what it means to be human. Thus, we create knowledge, meaning, and community. In fact, it is through these sometimes uncomfortable conversations that we create our lives and work out our salvation. ■

*What matters is preparing our students to be able to participate in an open and authentic conversing community, rather than an arguing community.*

