How Do or Should Religious Beliefs Impact our Scholarship?

**Reflections on how religious belief can shape a vision for research and future academic career**

***(God, Mission and Salvation in my Academic Endeavor)***

***Abstract:***

*Drawing from my own experience I present a view for religious belief (Christian faith) making not only a positive impact on scholarship but also a motivation for research and future academic career. Through the examples of a few well accomplished individuals I aim to demonstrate that their Christian faith have not only made a positive impact in their scholarship but also contributed to the flourishing of humanity. However, I also do not shy away from the possibility that religious belief could be harmful for both religion and scholarship if it is used to “proof” a particular ideology while also incorporating the type of religious beliefs (within the Christian spectrum) that do not make any difference to their lives or scholarship. I conclude by suggesting that taking religious belief seriously is the way to make a positive impact on scholarship. Therefore, this paper appeals to both religious believers and none to take their beliefs seriously.*

"Religion", "religious belief(s)" or its cognates are terms which has no equivalent words in my native tongue[[1]](#footnote-1). Ritual or "*chiina*", “*zheh*” or law or 'nature of things' may be the nearest words that relates to the English word 'religion'. Even in Hindi[[2]](#footnote-2) the term "dharma" usually used as the equivalent word for religion could be translated as 'righteousness', 'faith', 'duty', 'right', 'law', etc. Same is the case with ‘secular’; the equivalent term used is "*laukika*" in Hindi, which could be translated as 'proverbial', 'temporal, terrestrial, or worldly. Fortunately or unfortunately we are yet to coin a term for "secular" (in my native tongue) which means we can only think in English when we discuss the secular-religious divide. I believe this may be the case with many other Eastern thoughts. Therefore one could argue that the secular-religious divide is a Western construct and the majority South probably do not think along this dichotomy at least until the Western 'enlightenment' came. Hence there is a difficulty to ascertain whether or not religious belief(s) shape scholarship although it is evident that in the past caste system among the Hindus in India dictated what profession one could take up (which is not the case anymore).

In my native tongue the term secular has been loosely translated as "*jiiphehzii*", which means 'worldly' or ‘which belongs to earth’. It is generally understood as the opposite of religiosity. This has badly distorted Christian theology atleast in own context. Because of the worldly connotation with secularism (and spiritual with heavenly), if one is concerned about 'worldly’ affairs like social justice, environmental care, welfare of the poor etc., he or she could be accused of being distracted with ‘secular engagements’ instead of focusing on the more ‘religious matters’. Therefore within the broad Christian spectrum also it is difficult to ascertain whether or not religious (Christian) belief(s) shape scholarship. If Christian belief is all about "believing in Jesus", "going to heaven when I die" and living a "good moral life" until Jesus comes to pick me up in a spaceship or an angel taking me to heaven when I die (as I used to believe until my adolescence), worship means singing, then I believe religious beliefs will not and does not shape scholarship or at least not what kind of scholarship (research) knowledge is important and should be pursued. It is the economy, social prestige and employment opportunity that shapes what kind of educational degree is important. In the words of Vinoth Ramachandra the new religious temples are shopping malls, cricket stadiums, industrial buildings, etc. Therefore the new gods dictate where one should live, what kind of clothes one should wear, how many children one should have, etc., and of course it demands human sacrifice (1).

Some religious believers (as in the case of young earth creationists) interpret their ‘science’ with their scripture which I belief is disrespectful both to his or her scripture, as the scripture is not given for that purpose, and also to his or her scholarship. Scholars of all faiths or non-faiths will agree that that is not a proper way to conduct academic scholarship. I do not use my religious belief that way and hence I shall exclude such methods. However my religious belief (Christian faith), through the scriptures gives the purpose and meaning of what I am doing and why I am doing a particular research. C. S. Lewis, the great Christian story teller puts it this way

*I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.*(2)

For Alister McGrath, “Christian faith … offers a ‘big picture’ account of things, which allowed (him) to make sense of what (he) observed in everyday life, and especially in scientific explanations” (3). Similarly, Denis Alexander argued that scientific advances are throwing up a host of questions that science itself was incapable to address and therefore the need to go *Beyond Science[[3]](#footnote-3)*, for which he appeals to Christian faith (4). Professor John Wyatt of University College London went beyond it and even changed his field of study from Physics at Oxford, which he loved and was doing well, to medicine at UCL not because his religious faith conflicts with his former field of study but because it convicts him to direct his scholarship to where it is needed the most. Wyatt was brought up in a strong Christian family but began to question almost everything when he left home at 18 thinking his parents had brainwashed him. His spiritual crisis while in University of Oxford made him to encounter the God ‘who was much more concerned about people than he was about neutrinos’. He recalls

*“My decision to change direction and study medicine was bound up with my growing Christian commitment. I sensed a new vocation – to use the scientific abilities I had been given for the benefit of people whom God loved*.” (5).

In this discussion I shall present a brief account of how my own initial religious belief did not had an impact on my vocation but how my whole worldview including my vision for research underwent a complete transformation when I grasped a bigger picture of Christian hope and how this has motivated (rather compelled) me to take up academic career. If I am asked what my religious belief is, my answer would be ‘loving the Triune God with all my being and loving my neighbor as myself’. I believe it is the Creator’s love that brought into existence this Universe, and that in the person of the Jesus of Nazareth, God has taken permanently the form of humanity into God’s own being. This creedal affirmation means all that I do is out of love for my God and my neighbor. This means even the subject area of my research has to be chosen in such a way that my love for my neighbor is manifested through my academic scholarship. Therefore my religious conviction wouldn’t allow me to undertake a research which could be harmful to my neighbor however legal and lucrative it might be. Rather my Christian faith convicts me to direct my deepest desire (i.e., to seek knowledge) to meet the greatest needs of God’s creation.

The Bible not only discloses the fallen human condition (which has affected the non human creation as well) and in need of redemption but also invites us to be a part of the grand story God is weaving. That all human actions, including mine, must align to this Mission of God. If Christians (or any religious believer or believer of none) believe that their belief should and will make an impact on their scholarship; knowing who is it that they worship, what is His Mission and purpose of His whole creation and what is His Salvation plan is most crucial. Unless these three (God, Mission and Salvation) are grasped properly either their religious belief will not make an impact on their scholarship or it will not make an impact in the way God wants to, or their scholarship will only serve the gods they have created in their own image.

**The God that I worship and my vision of a university**

A deep transformation occurred in my religious life during the later part of my master’s degree in IIT Delhi. It was a slow, gradual, and tedious process. It coincided with my search for meaning and purpose of education, the type of job I should hold, the type of company I should serve, the city should I live, etc. Of course, friends and books made the biggest impact [and continue to make]. Among them, *Gods That Fail* and *The Message of Mission*, both by Vinoth Ramachandra (the second co-authored with Howard Peskett) made the biggest impact and also gave me the vision to go back to the university. Vinoth not only unveiled [for me] the gods that the rich, the educated and the sophisticated worship but he also demolishes them with his robust Christian theology (1). This not only motivated me to take my academic scholarship seriously but also raises the concern that one can be highly sophisticated and accomplished in his or her academic field and yet blindly trapped in the gods created in his or her own image.

“What we think of god will determine what we think of everything else” (6) is at least true when I think about my own academic career. I believe how I conceive of who God is has shaped my academic enterprise. As I struggle to move beyond “believe in Jesus so that you will have eternal life” to who is it that I worship, it became obvious that my heart should be where the heart of Christ is. Jesus’ words “I call you friends… a friend knows what my business is...” (7) became a favourite verse instead of the stereotypical childish faith “God will grand you success if you believe in Him”.

John Polkinhorne, the Templeton Prize winner in Physics who shifted his academic scholarship to theology later on puts his experience of encountering God in this way

*“The Encounter with God, unlike our engagement with physical reality, not only illuminates the mind but calls for a radical commitment that reorients our lives on a different axis. I believe in quarks but acknowledgment of their existence does not touch or threaten me in my own being. It is very different with belief in God which has consequences for all that I do and hope for”* (8)

Vinoth Ramachandra, who has a PhD in Nuclear Physics from UCL argued against his country, Sri Lanka from developing nuclear energy because for him Christian knowing comes with responsibility[[4]](#footnote-4). Not that nuclear energy is bad in itself. Rather he knows very well the economic benefits that nuclear energy can bring. But he also knows that a government that is not transparent and whose policy is driven by greed and not by care and concern for the poor will not take the safety precautions seriously. His vision of what technology is appropriate or what knowledge should we seek is shaped by his Christian convictions. His scholarship is shaped by the belief that “*The Triune God who is at work in the mundane world of economic life is the same God who sustains the arcane world explored by nuclear physicists”*. He asks

*If education loses that vision, if Christ is no longer the integrating centre, then the sciences and the humanities fall apart. Communication across disciplines withers. As ‘information’ increases, specialists lose the sense of a bigger framework that gives meaning to the narrow subdivisions of knowledge that they carve out for themselves. Is it too radical to claim that the deterioration of universities around the world into tuition factories, churning out professionals unable to communicate with one another the fruits of their training, is due not only to the fragmenting forces of industrialization, but also to the loss of a shared vision of a creation sustained by, and responsible to, One beyond our self contained systems?*(9)

‘How can we speak coherently of a *uni*versity?’ ‘What is it that unites the different disciplines of biology and geology, astronomy and medicine, history and art?’ Ramachandra answers, “*It is Christ*”. He continues “*It is not by accident that in Western Europe the universities had their origin in the monasteries which were the centres of learning as well as prayer. Theology is the enterprise of relating all human knowledge, as well as all our everyday activities, to God’s self-disclosure in Christ* (7). This has deeply impacted my desire to devote my research to bridge the gap between policy makers and technocrats on the one hand and the poor vulnerable farmers on the other for whom the former claims to design the policies.

**The Mission of God and the purpose of scholarship**

Researchers want their scholarship to make the maximum impact and bemoan the lack of influence that research has on practice (9). If the researcher is not constraint by external factors like funding, etc., the decision will be driven by what the researcher is interested in and concerned about (Robson, 2002). Neuman suggests that ‘personal values’, besides curiosity based on something in the media, funding etc., will play a major role in selection of research areas. Robson puts it well my own feelings when she says ‘practitioners get involved in research because they often want to change something linked to their practice’ (9). My six years of working with the Government of India and deep contemplation about the ‘whole purpose of creation’, ‘what is it like to worship the God who has a Mission’ and ‘what is his grand scheme of Salvation is’, has deeply impacted my desire to direct my scholarship where it is needed the most. If the heart of Christ is with the poorest farmers in India, whose lives are affected by the problems not of their own creation; like, chemical pollutions and the human made climate change, etc., shouldn’t my academic endeavor be used to lessen the pain of my poor and vulnerable neighbors? For Mike Hulme, professor of Climate Change at University of East Anglia, climate change opens up so many questions of judgment and policy which demands strong ethical positions that cannot be discovered by science. “The real question”, he stresses, “is whether we are willing and able to live with the climate we are newly making and whether we are paying enough attention to those less able to survive and thrive under these new regimes”.

The Christian understanding of mission has its root in the God who has a mission (purpose) for his creation and hence it does not start in Mathew 28 of the New Testament. The very purpose the Bible has been given, argues the English Old Testament theologian Christopher Wight, is because God has a mission (10). God’s call of Abraham so that through him the whole creation could be blessed is a common Christian understanding. If Christians believe that they are called to bless the world, it is surely legitimate to ask which technologies must we develop? What kind of knowledge should we seek? For what kind of companies should we prod our best students to work? For whom is their education and knowledge for especially in a country like India where one third of the Globe’s poorest are concentrated? In whose name are ‘development’ directed and natural resources exploited? Should the rich and upper middle class in India continue to get free water supplies and evade taxes while ‘the poor who pays the most’ are denied the basic amenities?

I believe the question ‘what is God’s plan for me?’, a question not uncommon among Christians, is not a very helpful question when a Christian plans his or her future career. I would even argue that this question is not very Christian because Christian living is not about self-pity and self-importance. The more appropriate question to ask is “what is God’s grand purpose for His creation?”. I think once he or she is able to discern this big question the smaller question ‘what should I do?’ or ‘what God wants me to do?’ becomes easier or even almost evident. I believe my understanding of the concept of *Missio Dei* has impacted my academic endeavour very deeply. Now I begin to ask what kind of knowledge is important. Whose interest does the development of this technology or knowledge serves? Does it bring justice and peace of God or it only enriches the already rich and the powerful? Because of my strong conviction I cannot just pursue what is academically interesting or even economically viable. Rather it is the case that I should direct my whole being, not just my scholarship, towards the big purpose of God.

**The Salvation of God and environmental ethics**

One evening my Hindu friend came back home, exhausted from his work in Clean Yamuna Project as an Environmental Engineer. He said “unless we instil a sense of ethical responsibility we are literally throwing money into the drain”. He does not have any hope that his sewerage treatment plant will not work nor so many laws and regulations. Perhaps, if the religious belief that Yamuna and Ganga rivers in India are sacred had made an impact in their scholarship not only many more devoted scientists and engineers will direct their expertise into cleaning the river but refrain from illegally discharging their untreated industrial wastes into the river.

The Christian understanding of the world created by a loving God (whatever method He used is not the issue here) gives a solid foundation for environmental ethics. Rather it is the only foundation on which I can build my argument for caring for the non-human world. Arne Vesilind, professor emeritus of Civil Engineering and former director of Centre for Applied Ethics at Duke University surveyed a whole lot of ancient philosophy from Aristotle to the current day ‘expansionist theories’ and concluded that “there is no such thing as environmental ethics”(12). He therefore proposes to invoke the spirits of nature like many ancient religions including Native American animistic religions did [but not the spirits that take the human form as in the Greek, Roman or Judaic religions]. For him everything; trees, stones, streams, sky, etc., have a spirit and it moves with the trees to the furniture and house and hence the spirit has no objection when the tree is cut down for “beneficial purposes”. However, he falls short of defining whose beneficial purpose? He says “each piece of furniture, each tool has its own spirit, and as a result all of these objects deserve respect and consideration”. However this ‘spirit’ is no more real than the imaginary “memes” which Richard Dawkins invoked to explain (away) the religion in humankind (12).

The Christian doctrine of creation provides an alternative. Expositing on the Genesis story of creation, Vinoth Ramachandra writes:

“The Biblical view of creation implies that we are neither owners (to do with the earth what we please) nor mere guests (to enjoy passively but not to intervene in ‘natural processes’). Developing the earth’s potential and conserving its fruitfulness are twin aspects of responsible planetary stewardship. It is what has come to be dubbed ‘sustainable development’ in recent times; namely, creating wealth in such a way that we leave for future generations a planet that has not been robbed of its life-giving and life sustaining capacities.”

I agree with what Scott McKnight calls as the ‘salvation culture’ will not make an impact [or any difference] on the scholarship (11). By which I mean if the Christian gospel stops at “believe in Jesus so that you will go to heaven when you die” we will not only miss the bigger picture of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ but will not make any impact in the present world that God so loved (John 3:16). If the Christian Bible does not start with Genesis 3 (or end with Revelation 20) there is much to be celebrated than just celebrating over the forgiveness of sin. It begins with creation of a garden and ends with new creation; a flourishing city. This means I must celebrate it and participate in it. There is much joy in partaking in the grand mission that God is unveiling. There is great hope for Christian to celebrate. Andrew Basden calls for a three dimensional understanding of salvation. The third dimension of salvation is “God's main purpose in saving us is not just for our sakes but for the blessing of His world by people who are like Christ” (14). This, if understood in its proper perspective, will make a huge impact on scholarship. This means Christians will not just involve in academic research just to make a living, out of curiosity or to make a name for themselves but it will be out of love and concern for their neighbour. Therefore their best of capabilities will be directed towards reducing hunger, promote justice and peace, towards a cleaner environment, etc. This of course, does not mean that Christians will make the world better and better or that every single human will be reconciled to God at the end. Rather, Christians will work with the hope that ‘God will not quit unless God has had God’s full way in the world’ (15).

In conclusion, through this paper I present a positive view that religious belief, particularly Christian faith should, have, and could make a positive impact on [the purpose of] scholarship. I have also highlighted that in order to make a positive impact it is necessary to recognize which god we are talking about, what is the purpose of this universe and where the ultimate hope lies. Through the examples of a few accomplished individuals in their own fields (most of whom I had the privilege to know them personally) I demonstrated that their Christian faith have made a positive impact not only in their scholarship but also contributed positively to the flourishing of the humankind. However I also did not shy away from the possibility that religious belief if used for interpreting or “proofing” a particular ideology it could be harmful for both religion and scholarship. I also briefly incorporate the type of religious beliefs within the Christian spectrum that will not make an impact in their lives or scholarship. Therefore this paper appeals both to the religious believers or none to take their belief or unbelief seriously because ultimately beliefs make a difference.

Reference:

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14. Andrew Basden http://www.basden.demon.co.uk/xn/nv/3ds.html accessed 18 July 2013.
15. Walter Bruegmann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination: Texts Under Negotiation* (SCM, 1993), cited in Vinoth Ramachandra *The Glory of Christ* in Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra *The Message of Mission* Indian SPCK 2003 p.31

1. My native tongue Maola is spoken by about 40, 000 in the Northeast India [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hindi is commonly understood as a major Indian language but only one-third speaks Hindi [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Denis Alexander wrote the book *Beyond Science*, to argue his case when he just turned 26, which was published by Lion in 1972 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. He elaborates the responsibility of research in *Gods That Fail* 1996 p.146 published by Paternoster Press and *Subverting Global Myths* 2008 p.193 IVP Press [↑](#footnote-ref-4)