Response to Stephen Davis

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We are all in Stephen Davis’s debt for his interesting and sprightly paper. In conceiving of the desired outcomes of liberal learning his eight characteristics and skills are—it seems to me—the right ones to argue. And, his main theses—that the modern academy has mislaid its principles of coherence, and that church-related colleges are in a good position to speak to that—seems to be the right diagnosis and the right remedy. So, even though I have flown two-thirds of a continent to be here, it feels like I haven’t left home. At Calvin College we are accustomed to hearing philosophers argue for the need for foundational worldview coherence in our educational mission. If Mr. Davis were the preacher, either in his current Los Angeles or in his fabled Paris, many of us could volunteer to be in his choir. Indeed, if some of us at Calvin College were Pentecostals, though we are not, one might hear a response to his paper, “can someone say Amen?”

The burden of my brief comments, however, will not be to say “Amen” to what he has written. My concerns arise not because I disagree with him as to final, ideological result, but because, in a strategic sense, I believe we are a long way from the sociological reality in which a consensus about worldview can emerge.

Mr. Davis points to the loss of consensus because of, among other things, the advent of “race, class and gender” as lenses through which reality is seen. In truth, an epistemological cluster bomb has exploded over our heads, permanently altering the landscape of academic life. We now appreciate, as we did not when I was a graduate student, that knowledge is both socially constructed and socially located. While the repercussions of these insights are said to be new, those of us who accept them insist that human understanding of reality was always filtered through such standpoint lenses; the only new thing is that now we all understand it to be true. In this vital matter we echo Alasdair MacIntyre in asking, “whose virtue, whose justice, whose knowledge, whose worldview?” The students that Mr. Davis refers to in his paper seem to be lacking some essential points of their being; their race, their sex and their class. They seem to be universal people from no particular location; their voices from everywhere and nowhere. I don’t think we can speak of them, or their institutions, without reference to their particularity and locality.

In this regard, a book that has had a great impact in historical circles is Telling the Truth About History (New York: Norton, 1994) by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob. The fact that the first two named have been or are presidents of the American Historical Association indicates the high profile character of their work. But, these woman colleagues came to professional prominence as outsiders; being woman made a difference. As they say, “for outsiders, skepticism and relativism offer modes of inquiry essential to redressing the wrongs of exclusion.” [2] Prior historical work had often excluded women, minorities and working-class people from the historical narratives and from the history profession as well. For Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, it is important to
acknowledge the larger historical nexus. There was, from the 1950s onward, a substantial democratization both of the academy and of how it functioned: the opening up of higher education to nearly all who wanted it; the rise of skepticism and relativism as modes of inquiry; the dethroning both of science as the model for historical method and of the nation as its subject. These trends were, according to our colleagues, inter-related in that they promoted democratic change in both the structure of the academy and in the epistemological assumptions on which it operated. As Appleby, Hunt and Jacob write, “We routinely, even angrily, ask: Whose history? Whose science? Whose interests are being served by those ideas and those stories? The challenge is out to all claims to universality....” [3] In a recent anthology on Christian historiography both the present writer, and one of our hosts at this conference, Professor Shirley Mullen of Westmont College, used this quotation by way of defending a Christian perspective on history [Ronald A. Wells, ed., History and the Christian Historian (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998)]. Because of the brevity of this response, I cannot discuss the sense in which, in the above noted book, I move very much in the direction for which Mr. Davis argues. While one acknowledges that the reality is socially constructed, that does not mean that it cannot be known and that we cannot agree on some of its contours. Indeed, in this regard I agree with Appleby, Hunt and Jacob in insisting that the past is both partial and knowable.

If there is, then, one main criticism I have of Stephen Davis’s paper is that he seems to assume a universal experience of knowledge for both students and faculty in liberal arts colleges. It appears to me that that assumption is very difficult to defend in our time—the time after the modern—when the epistemological cluster bomb has exploded. In our discussion to follow this session, I don’t want to get bogged down in the mire of the meanings of “post-modernism” nor evangelical yearnings about “what ever happened to truth;” nor do I wish to defend the corrosive work of those who have pushed deconstruction to the end in which we all “bowl alone.” I am merely observing that we have a long way to go before we can outrun the logic of the questions about the sociology of knowledge that started with Karl Mannheim, and is most accessibly known in our time in the seminal essay by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann [The Social Construction of Reality (New York: Penguin, 1966)]. An articulation of the sociology of knowledge in this connection does not commit one to radical deconstruction, but to a caution about the assertion of “world view.”

In conclusion, I am not insulting Stephen Davis by saying he wants a simple return to a golden age of race, class and gender privilege. Not at all. I am merely saying that before we can restore what he calls “a unifying worldview,” we need to work through many important matters. I join him in looking to the day in which a unifying worldview can help to re-direct our common effort in the liberal arts. But that day is a long time from now.