**How the Secular Presupposes the Sacred and**

**Why We Should Teach that Way**

**Stephen Wirls**

**Rhodes College**

**Prepared for “The Intersection of Religious and Secular Cores in Undergraduate Liberal Arts Education.” Rhodes College, September 25-27, 2014.**

My most extensive experience with combining the sacred and the secular has been in the Rhodes College Search program, which over three semesters begins before Plato, generally ends a little before NATO, and includes a substantial dose of the Bible. These comments arise out of those experiences.

The general theme of my talk is the same, I suspect, as many others: that the secular assumes an alternative, which is the obviously the sacred. The more specific theme is that we should teach that way because the sacred illuminates and deepens our understanding of the secular and the secular illuminates and deepens our understanding of the sacred. The focus will be on the first half of this theme. Indeed, how can one understand the secular without understanding the alternative, which arises out of a persistent and profound human experience? And how can we understand secular ideas without understanding what they were, explicitly and implicitly, responding to?

The controversial part of this argument is that this approach requires especially those of us at secular institutions, I think, to treat the sacred texts as sacred, which means taking them on their own terms. We need not teach a sacred text as if it is in fact the word of God, but we can leave the question of its origin in suspense. Whether or not the Bible or the Qur’an is the word of God, each presents the sacred, that is, at least, the anguish and joy, perplexity and complexity of the longing for and faith in a single, just, and providential God.

One alternative is to dismiss the sacred out of hand. The more serious alternative, which amounts to pretty much the same thing, is to contextualize or historicize the Bible. This approach risks turning each sacred text into something of a dead letter, or as James Kugel put it, something we “learn about” but not something we “learn from.” In the name of scholarship, this approach can sap the personal and intellectual vigor from both types of work.

The contextualizing approach offers the atheists or strong doubters among the students an easy out, but it will not challenge them either by presenting an alternative to a world of accident and indifference or by appealing to their own longing for the good, the just, or an embracing wholeness.

The believers, on the other hand, know that the historicizing is alien to the Bible as it presents itself, that is, alien to the Bible they believe in, and so they can be both good students by learning the stuff *and* good believers by otherwise ignoring it.

I think we can provide deeper personal and intellectual challenges to both groups if we present Bible as a sacred text to learn from. As an aside, taking these texts seriously, on their own terms, is a way of taking all of our students seriously, some of whom are ardent believers.

In my experience, this approach sets all mental mills in motion and provides plenty of grist for each. The atheists and doubters must confront the question of god and providence directly, and they are often astonished at the Bible’s frankness and human complexity, about which they must think carefully. They can see in all of this the difficulties of believing in God but also wonder at the fact that many do nonetheless. Some see that their competing worldviews have come too easily.

The greatest challenge, though, is to the believers, who are often amazed and dismayed that their Sunday schools and sermons barely broached the genuine horror of the flood, the disturbingly superhuman faith of Abraham, God’s rejection of the earnest Saul, his love for the grossly immoral David, the uncompromising self-abnegation of Jesus’ morality, and especially the tormenting of the good and pious Job, a book that just keeps on giving.

Why, they must ask, is submission far more evidently prominent than their preferred and inferred principle of free will? How can we account for the misery and injustice, the seeming capriciousness, of a world superintended by a just God? All this requires careful thought and serious reflection. The atheist too must reflect on the impunity and underserved misery of a world without God.

This approach, I think, allows for a genuine integration of almost all of the elements of the course that combines sacred and secular, treatises and poetry, letters and arts. I can only suggest that a full and deep appreciation of the *Inferno*, *Paradise Lost*, Caravaggio’s “Sacrifice of Isaac”, the erotic sublimity of Renaissance choral masses, or the novels of Dostoevsky requires a sympathetic appreciation of the Bible’s theological complexity and its accounts of the anguish and longing of the faithful.

But I must get to the secular readings. A just understanding of these works, I would argue, requires an understanding of the authority of the Bible, its absolute morality, its otherworldly concern for our immortal souls, and more generally its understanding of a world governed by a just and providential God. This is so because many of these secular works (for example those of Machiavelli, Bacon Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Nietzsche) seek, explicitly and implicitly, to supplant the Biblical account of the universe and its moral order.

I pick as my specific example Machiavelli’s *Prince*. This radically immoral and shockingly funny book can also be contextualized into a 15th Century dead letter, which can then be dismissed by 21st Century students, armed with a superior perspective on history and a confidence in progress, one origin of which, by the way, was Machiavelli’s argument.

On the other hand, the *Prince* can be a daunting and disturbing challenge if read in the context that Machiavelli provides, which includes Plutarch, Xenophon, Livy, and, above all, the Bible, from which sources he concludes that, regardless of historical changes, human nature has always been the same. The context, in other words, is us.

He contends with the Biblical worldview throughout the *Prince*. I do not see how can one grasp and appreciate the radicalism of his argument unless one understands the Bible as it was written, its otherworldly morality, the ubiquity of divine providence and, at least, the human appeal and seriousness of the sacred.

Strikingly, he uses the Bible’s account of human deeds and human nature to explain away the divine, as when he casually, if also blasphemously, equates Moses with Theseus, Romulus, and Cyrus, whom he also calls “prophets.”

When Machiavelli says “those who make a profession of good in all ways,” he is surely referring to martyrs, who adhere to Jesus’ absolute injunctions with regard only to the world to come as an immeasurably superior world. And yet Machiavelli argues that they “come to ruin among those who are not good,” implicitly dismissing the ruin of damnation and thereby dismissing the immortal soul itself. One can now begin to grasp the profound implications of the first significant book on politics that does not even mention, let alone focus on, the soul.

This revolution, measuring ruin in terms of worldly preservation and prosperity, is, in a way, the beginning of the modern world our students, believers and non-believers, embrace. They also accept uncritically the principal engines of this new order, modern science and technology. They ought, at least, to see clearly that these responses to worldly problems arise, in a way, out of a revolutionary dismissal of divine providence, which Machiavelli explains in chapter XXV. They should be able to fully appreciate, as Bacon and others did, the profound choices that underlie this new, modern order of things.

Machiavelli also exposes the very dark side of this new order. The absence of any ultimate consequences to immorality undergirds his astonishing revaluation of virtue, which embraces entirely self-serving acquisitiveness, murder, cruelty, and unbounded mendacity. Most students eventually revolt against this appallingly utilitarian morality, and they are nudged, thereby, back to the alternative of an absolute morality and its most compelling source in the will of God.

Now genuinely critical and self-critical thinking is possible. Believers are stuck between two incompatible worlds, both of which they wish to embrace. Many of the non-believers struggle to refute Machiavelli without edging back toward the Bible or insisting on universal moral principles, such as natural rights, that they cannot explain. This then sets them up for the rest of the course. Some could not care less, but many of the non-believers look forward with a newly intense intellectual and personal interest to the efforts of those, such as John Locke and Emanuel Kant, to discover a foundation for morality in this new, secular world, and the believers look forward anxiously toward some sort of reconciliation between the modern and the sacred.

Allow me to re-enforce my point by saying a little more about Locke. Unlike Machiavelli, Locke disguises his radicalism. It emerges only upon careful study of his manner of presentation and the gradual development of his thoughts. He regularly uses the Bible as his ostensible authority, but he also derives the same points from reasoning about the natural order. His chapter on property is a long and cautiously presented reflection on the deficiency of providence for preservation and comfort in this world. From this he derives new virtues, industry and reason, as essential to the natural order with which we are left to contend. This line of thought does not dismiss God altogether, but as his revision of the Jephtha story clear indicates, God justice and providence is note evident in this life but rather in the last judgment and the reward of heaven.

Turning these thoughts on their head, those teaching especially at religious institutions should, for the same reasons, take the secular seriously. Particularly modern political and moral thought presents direct and powerful challenges to an account of the world based on a just and providential God. Genuinely critical thinking about the most important human questions requires a direct and respectful confrontation with those arguments.