

‘Graduate Education in the Humanities’

A Response to
William Pannacker

Marc Baer
Professor of History
Hope College

Let me begin by thanking my colleague Bill Pannacker for raising a number of important issues. On several of these I stand in almost complete agreement. Yet his overly narrow focus on one set of factors leaves the student who is considering graduate school as merely *homo economicus* (in contrast to *homo reciprocans*). I will narrow the focus of my response to Bill’s thought-provoking essay as to how a Christian student might begin elsewhere than the job market by asking, “Is a life lived just for the marketplace worth living?” I would instead urge our audience to think counterculturally in terms of a concept I have extracted from Dorothy Sayers’s *The Mind of the Maker*: that humans were created by the Creator to create. The issues then become, “Where might I create?” and, “What might I create?” I will start by summarizing the issues Bill raises with which I agree and then move on to the potential problems I see arising from his argument.

First is the matter of accumulating debt while in a PhD program, which might compound a problem left over from a student’s undergraduate years. I agree completely that this must be a serious consideration. The advice I give students is never to enter a program wherein after subtracting expenses from what you are offered in financial aid you cannot break even. For many of our students that will mean a lifestyle for which the word Spartan comes to mind—which is a good thing for their development as human beings. I would agree with Michael Murray that if philosophy programs offer an entering graduate student a fulsome financial package but are not in the top twenty or so departments, one should think twice about accepting the offer.¹

Second is the issue of how professors counsel students. We must be honest—even brutally honest—with the mediocre student who has dreamed of herself as a professor but has rarely if ever exhibited the quality of work and self-discipline necessary to make it into, much less survive, graduate school. These are difficult conversations—which is why they have to be done. We must be attuned to the PhD fields or subfields that continue to have demand, for example the thirty-seven accredited PhD programs in information science or in my field, history, the subfields of East Asian, African, and Middle Eastern history, and ask students if they have thought about these. We must urge the very best students to gather data from multiple sources.² In another place, Pannacker offers very good advice for how to help students discern whether they might be right for graduate school and the life of the mind of the professorate: Ask them to read a scholarly monograph on a topic in their field (this works as well with an article in an academic journal) and then discuss it. He finds that most of the time such students are not actually interested in scholarship.³ That has been my experience as well.

Third, I am very proud of our own institution's Pew Society, which helps equip students in the humanities and social sciences to consider graduate school and university teaching careers and to prepare them intellectually and spiritually for both. The Pew Society's program includes panels on what graduate school is like; the culture of the academy; a mentoring program that helps students think through all the issues raised in Pannacker's essay; and a field trip to a nearby research university to talk with graduate students. This degree of intentionality should exist at any institution that generates a significant number of applicants to graduate programs. I also realize it does not, but the gap is filled to some degree by the Emerging Scholars Network (ESN), a national movement whose mission statement is "to identify, encourage, and equip the next generation of Christian scholars who seek to be a redeeming influence within higher education."⁴ The ESN comprises 3,935 members, 515 of whom are undergraduates—many of them being mentored by graduate students and faculty.

Fourth, professors do, indeed, need to be more aware of the world beyond the academy if they are to help students be wise in their thinking about their futures. My guess is that departments like mine at small liberal arts colleges are not so very unusual in being staffed by professors who have had career experiences outside academe—even if those were only for a year or so. Thus I can point our students to a colleague who practiced law, another who was a campus pastor, another who worked for a large corporation, one who was an architect, another who was a high school teacher, and one who worked for a nonprofit. If profes-

sors find themselves in departments where this is not the case, they must point students to other resources.

Fifth is the matter of internships. As chair of my department, I make this case every time I can, both to individual students within my department and to our majors and minors. Across humanities departments, we should not let a student graduate who has not done at least one internship. My own son benefitted enormously from an internship in a government agency, which pointed him away from that line of work and toward a business vocation that was a far better fit for his skills and personality.

Finally is Bill Pannapacker's statement, "I don't think it's appropriate for me to tell students what to do with their lives." I agree completely. The older I get the more convinced I am that I am not God. If we follow Gerald Sittser's argument in *The Will of God as a Way of Life*, God gives us freedom regarding what to do with our lives.⁵ At the same time, the evidence in Paul Anderson's edited volume, *Professors Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of Christian Faculty*, is that when they were undergraduates many current faculty members did get wise counsel rather than a directive from one or more professors who knew them well.⁶ Only a very foolhardy student would take advice from a single professor; likewise, only a very foolhardy student would never ask advice from a number of professors.

Now I want to identify potential problems with the implications of Pannapacker's essay. First, as a historian, I am particularly sensitive to the tyranny of the present clouding our discernment about the future. I have in mind the wisdom in an essay by C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," which includes this poignant question: "What is the use of beginning a task which we have so little chance of finishing?"⁷ I will not spoil things for the reader who has yet to encounter the essay, but just one quotation from the piece helps us contextualize our own moment of crisis: "Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun."⁸

Second, beware of jeremiads. On the first page of the essay, any reader would be depressed to discover that, in effect, the tenure track is going the way of the dinosaur, or at least the floppy disk. As a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* suggested, however, "there is no such thing as a single academic job market," and it went on to report that the American Historical Association's latest numbers reveal that 69 percent of job openings in 2010–2011 were tenured or tenure-track positions.⁹

Third, I simply do not buy the notion of an “exploitative system,” which for my taste is too Manichean. Are there individuals who exploit others in the institutions that comprise higher education? We all know of such people, and we should steer potential graduate students away from them. Do such people comprise a system? I do not think most universities are led by a President Gradgrind or Dean Bounderby or humanities departments by a Professor Bitzer.¹⁰ The sentence from *The Economist* to the effect that using PhD students to teach “cuts the number of full-time jobs” assumes a previous step that strikes me as off the mark. In fact, “using PhDs” provides graduate students an opportunity for on-the-job training and, as such, confirmation—or negation—of their sense of calling. From my perspective as a department chair at a small college, I would want to see on the CV of a recently minted PhD that she had at least served as a teaching assistant, if not taught her own course. I do not want her to make those pedagogical errors in front of our students that I learned from when I was a teaching assistant.

Adjunct is a different problem in which academic leaders are more victims than perpetrators. The real perpetrator, at least for public universities, is the state legislator who has so unthinkingly starved higher education of resources. In my own state, Michigan, the past generation has seen state support for one of the world’s greatest universities go from 75 percent of the budget to 25 percent; other public universities in Michigan have taken similar hits, while the same sad tale is true in other states.¹¹ This represents the failure of the vision reminiscent of G. K. Chesterton’s point in *Orthodoxy*: “The vision is always a fact. It is the reality that is often a fraud.”¹²

Then there is the issue of what may be thought of as “the worst of times.” Pannapacker argues that the years spent in a PhD program “are often characterized by social isolation, economic insecurity, and deepening anxiety about the value of one’s work and prospects for the future.” My guess is that the first year of law school and most of medical school and then residency are far worse. The solution to what Wilfred McClay terms “a dismal regimen that is as hostile to human nurture as it is to critical thinking” is to band together—and I would give the same advice to faculty colleagues for whom the quotation could just as easily fit.¹³ Regarding graduate school, this is why the assault on the freedom of religion and association masked as promoting self-esteem among individuals in certain identity groups by schools such as Vanderbilt University is so nefarious and as such promotes not only tyranny but also more social isolation.¹⁴ Groups of graduate students sponsored by organizations such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship or the Roman Catholic Church provide the very antidote to social isolation by fostering face-to-face community.

Finally, and most profoundly, is the issue of a calling to graduate school. As I unpacked Pannapacker's essay, my sense is that we need to have a more robust sense of what a calling is. I might suggest beginning with the proposal Os Guinness developed in *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*: There is no calling without a Caller.¹⁵ God, not the professor, calls us—first to himself, and only then to our vocation(s), which may or may not be the same as a paying job. This notion stands in stark contrast to Pannapacker's last line: "Calling should come from knowledge." When Bill chooses the verb *feel* in regard to calling, my sense is that this is something other than calling (perhaps one should think of it as *calling lite*). Calling as understood historically is fact not feeling.¹⁶ True calling, real calling, is based on wisdom more than it is based on knowledge. Surely this is what Jesus pointed us to: "Be as cunning as serpents and simple as doves."¹⁷

Bill Pannapacker's essay does not explicitly encourage Christian students to swear off graduate school. But a less-than-careful reader skimming his piece by herself might be led to such a decision, and, in the hands of others whose arguments are less nuanced than Bill's, his words could have consequences he did not intend. Chesterton, when analyzing an argument put before his audience, often considered what might happen if the argument were to be taken to its logical conclusion. So let us just imagine an academy emptied of Christian faculty because Christian undergraduates chose not to seek PhDs in the humanities. In my own field, only secular-minded historians would be on offer to undergraduates. In a generation the vision would be narrowed to one worldview where no one with the eyes of faith would help students evaluate the past, where no one would challenge them to question where human dignity comes from. In his essay, which Bill quotes, Wilfred McClay makes this very point, as does Mark Noll in his recent book, writing, "Christian scholars holding to the reality of grace are in better position[s] to understand the true sources of human flourishing."¹⁸ Our times, like all times, call for courage. On this, Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* gets the final word: "Alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator. For the only courage worth calling courage must necessarily mean that the soul passes a breaking point—and does not break."¹⁹

Notes

1. Michael Murray, "Why Get a PhD in the Humanities?" *Emerging Scholars Network*, May 2009, available at <http://www.intervarsity.org/gfm/esn/>.
2. For one tale see Brent Foster, "Why Get a PhD in the Humanities?" *Emerging Scholars Network*, May 2009, available at <http://www.intervarsity.org/gfm/esn/>.
3. Bill Pannapacker, "Why Get a PhD in the Humanities?" *Emerging Scholars Network*, May 2009, available at <http://www.intervarsity.org/gfm/esn/>.
4. Emerging Scholars Network, "Welcome to Emerging Scholars Network," *Emerging Scholars Network*, available at <http://www.intervarsity.org/gfm/esn/>.
5. Jerry Sittser, *The Will of God as a Way of Life: How to Make Every Decision with Peace and Confidence*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).
6. Paul M. Anderson, ed., *Professors Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of Christian Faculty* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).
7. C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 47.
8. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," 49.
9. Audrey Williams June, "Job Market Looks Brighter for Some Ph.D.s," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 8, 2012, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Job-Market-Looks-Brighter-for/130240/>; see also *Humanities Department Survey*, Humanities Resource Center Online (2012): 53, available at <http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/resources/survey.aspx>.
10. Cf. Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1854).
11. See "State Relations," *MSU.edu*, available at <http://msu.edu/unit/vpga/state-relations.html>; State Higher Education Executive Officers, "State Higher Education Finance: FY 2007," *Sheeo.org*, 2008, available at http://www.sheeo.org/finance/shef_fy07.pdf; and Eric Kelderman, "State Support for Colleges Falls 7.6% in 2012 Fiscal Year," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 23, 2012, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/article-content/130414/>.
12. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 82.
13. For more good advice see the blog posts by an anonymous professor: "13 Ways of Looking at Graduate School," *InterVarsity Emerging Scholars Blog*, March 29, 2012–April 12, 2012, available at <http://blog.emergingscholars.org/category/vocation-and-calling/completing-your-phd/13-ways-of-looking-at-graduate-school/>.

14. See Michael Stokes Paulson, "Vanderbilt's Right to Despise Christianity," *Public Discourse*, March 12, 2012, available at <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2012/03/4930>.
15. Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).
16. I have developed this more fully in Marc Baer, "What Is Calling?" *Emerging Scholars Network*, available at <http://www.intervarsity.org/gfm/esn/resource/what-is-calling>.
17. Matthew 10:16, blending the ISV and Douay-Rheims translations.
18. Wilfred McClay, "Books & Culture Corner: The Ph.D. Octopus, 100 Years On: How Christians Can Make a Difference in the Upside-Down World of Graduate School," *Christianity Today*, September 2003, available at www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/septemberweb-only/9-15-12.0.html; Mark A. Noll, *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 73.
19. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 256.