I have always been struck that at least three great statements of Christian orthodoxy suddenly appeared precisely when the secularization of culture gathered force in the early twentieth century. This was the moment when modernism, with both its promise and its horror, was in full bloom. There was a need, in the minds of Christian intellectuals, in the face of dramatic shifts in culture, for clarifying engagement of the essentials of the Christian tradition. First, early in the century, G. K. Chesterton presented his marvelous Orthodoxy in 1908. C. S. Lewis followed mid-century with his influential Mere Christianity, first broadcast on British radio during World War II from 1942 through 1944. A bit later, Dorothy Sayers issued her emphatic statement Creed or Chaos in 1949. These three books fit squarely within a distinct pattern for thoughtful Christians: When things begin to unravel in the surrounding culture, Christians feel compelled to get the essentials right for a new
moment in time. The two books under review seem driven by this same motivation.

What intrigues me most about the three British apologists, in addition to their bracing statements of what matters in Christian thinking, is the need they felt to make such statements at that particular time. The historical moment, of course, was defined by the relentless pressure of modernism against all traditional thought, including sometimes fierce antagonism against Christianity. We recognize these dramatic changes in literary works like T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” or in the philosophical writings of Nietzsche. What happened in the early twentieth century was a huge cultural shift, what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls a “titanic change in our western civilization,” where “the presumption of unbelief has become dominant.” What came out of this shift was our “secular age,” as Taylor tells the story, a story that had been unfolding since at least the seventeenth century. To be Christian within this cultural context requires of us the ability to speak into that presumption of unbelief in compelling ways.

But here is the important point for our purposes in relation to David Dockery’s extraordinary mission and the two books under review: In order to speak into the culture of unbelief, we must discover again what it is we believe. We must equip ourselves to make the case, winsomely and effectively, for our time. To do this we must tap into the long and rich stream of Christian thinking throughout history. We must be translators of that intellectual tradition into a language for our day. We must do, as the great Lesslie Newbigin has said, “what the Church Fathers and Augustine had to do in the age when classical culture had lost its nerve and was disintegrating. We have to offer a new starting point for thought.”

It is against this backdrop that I come to praise the work of David Dockery and Timothy George in their overview called The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking. They have Newbigin’s notion exactly right. And then, David Dockery, as the President of Union University, along with his faculty and various administrators, in this fascinating collection of essays Faith and Learning: A Handbook for Christian Higher Education seeks to illustrate exactly this effort
of finding a Christian voice at the very heart of the university of our day.

The partnership behind *The Great Tradition of Christian Thinking* between David Dockery and Timothy George goes back some twenty years. We find in these two fine scholars and leaders a persistent mission to focus on the life of the mind within the Christian community and especially within the Christian academy. They have been consistent, over so many years, as articulate champions of thinking Christianly about our world. For their work, and the model of their lives, I am immensely grateful.

It seems to me there are two important intellectual drivers behind these efforts. First, the writers know their cultural moment. They know that we live in the “secular age,” a post-Christian moment in time, a postmodern moment where all stories, and in particular the Christian story, are called into question. But they also know that Christians find themselves so often ill-equipped to “make the case,” as 1st Peter says, “for the hope we find within.” They want to meet “the challenge to prepare a generation of Christians to think Christianly, to engage the academy and the culture, and to serve church and society.” But, and here is the heart of the matter for this work by Dockery and George, they “believe that both the breadth and the depth of the Christian intellectual tradition need to be reclaimed, revitalized, renewed, and revived for us to carry forward this work” (12).

And so Dockery and George outline, with winsome passion, that great Christian intellectual tradition. We take a marvelous tour of the major thinkers through the centuries, this “chain of memory,” from the early apostolic encounter of the Graeco-Roman world, through the School of Alexandria, Athanasius, through Augustine and Aquinas, the Reformers, and to our own age. I concur with these devoted scholars; this is a tour badly needed in the Christian community of our day. I have come to believe, even in my own current reading and study, that there is a great hunger to engage more deeply with this rich tradition of Christian thinking. The need is huge, the hunger is evident, and the work of Dockery and George help us take a vital step forward to lay new foundations for our own time.
Finally, as I took another tour through the twenty-some essays in *Faith and Learning: A Handbook for Christian Higher Education*, written almost wholly by Union University faculty, I find myself impressed again by the persistent effort, not only to acknowledge the Christian intellectual tradition, but to offer fresh perspective out of respective disciplines within the academy. We hear, competently and clearly, from biblical studies, philosophy, history, political philosophy, the arts, music, media, the sciences, business, student life, and others. We find in these essays committed scholars and teachers carrying on their craft, their vocations as Christian intellectuals, fully attuned to their time. We find here a deep care that the Christian university steps up to the challenge of engaging the academy and the culture with the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I end with an appropriate statement from one of the great Christian apologists of our own time, the prolific and respected British theologian N. T. Wright. At the end of his marvelous book *The Challenge of Jesus*, Wright summarizes the kind of vision talked about in these books: “Our task,” says Wright, “as image-bearing, God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians, following Christ and shaping our world, is to announce redemption to the world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to the world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust to the world that knows only exploitation, fear, and suspicion” (184).

For me this is the critical note that must be sounded. We must, as Dockery and George and these writers all understand, pursue our learning in the Christian academy with the end goal of announcing redemption and healing and love and trust to a world that has lost its way. We find a new starting point for thought, for our time, because we seek to engage our chaotic culture with the splendor of the gospel. Wright must have the Christian academy in mind as he goes on to say that “the gospel of Jesus points us and indeed urges us to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology and even, heaven help us, biblical studies, a worldview that will mount the historically rooted Christian
challenge to both modernity and postmodernity, leading the way into the post-postmodern world with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom” (196).

This is our charge as Christian intellectuals and Christian universities. This is the charge heard clearly and communicated forcefully by David Dockery, Timothy George, and the faculty at Union University. I commend these volumes, with enthusiasm, as central to the direction we must pursue in the Christian academy for our time, central as well to the broader Christian community as we seek to make our world a better place for all of God’s children.

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