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Omega Graduate School

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1. Introduction – Describe the expectations of the graduate program and the in-person excursion component of this course. Summarize the intent of the course, how it fits into the graduate program as a whole, and the relevance of its position in the curricular sequence.
2. Personal Growth - Describe your personal growth related to the following subpoints: (a) how the exhibits at the Museum of the Bible stretched or challenged you; (b) how the museum visit enhanced your appreciation of the Bible in culture; and (c) what new spiritual insights you gained.
3. Reflective Entry - Add a reflective entry that: (a) describes the contextualization (or, adaptation and relevant application) of new learning into your professional field; (b) how might an added appreciation of art and culture manifest in your professional field; (c) how the exhibits and experience changed or enhanced your worldview in any sphere of your personal life or thinking, and (d) identify specific exhibit(s) at the Museum of the Bible which made an impression on you or caused you to reconsider history and/or society from a new perspective.
4. Future Expectations - Continue the journal by addressing questions and concerns you now have relating to the graduate program expectations.
5. Conclusion – Synthesize the three body sections of the assignment evaluating the effectiveness of the course in meeting your professional, religious, and educational goals

**Introduction**

This passage through the DPhil program at OGS has been quite a journey. It has been a wonderful experience of stretching and learning, that while enjoyable, needs to end soon. The program took an expected turn when one of the often talked about trips materialized – the Library Of Congress trip which included a trip to the Bible Museum in Washington DC. Trips to the Bible Museum are not included for many doctoral programs. However, for the OGS program, it is included. There was excitement around this trip as it was meant to deepen one’s appreciation for the Bible in the American cultural landscape.

Interdisciplinary degree programs must allow space for the study of the influence of culture on society. Cultures are woven into the lives of the people who live that culture. Sometimes people do not realize how much they are formed by their culture without conscious reflection. It is within the purview of scholar practitioners to study these intersections to understand where society is and where we are likely to go, and most importantly, how to avert the dangers that naturally come with unredeemed human endeavors.

This course is intended to expose participants to the wider influence of the Bible on the arts and culture. One can easily take for granted that the church played a pioneering role in the transformation of society by allowing for human flourishing. The development of systems and structures to manage the various needs of society were part of the mission of the church in the early days. This is evidenced by the inclusion of Bible verses in various places in the Washington DC area. Many of the early painters produced works that were based on biblical texts which speak to the Bible’s role in this area. Musical works were produced also based on biblical texts. The Bible also influenced jurisprudence as many of our early laws were based on scripture. Any comprehensive recounting of Western civilization must recognize the important role of the Bible in forming society.

It is reasonable to wonder and therefore begs the question, how did we get here where it seems that the influence of the Bible seems to be diminished. This is an important consideration for people whose research focus is at the intersection of religion (Christianity) and social sciences. Those researchers must hear from the context so that they can discern a way forward. This is valuable work.

**Personal Growth**

Each new life experience results in personal growth. It was this participant’s first visit to the Bible Museum. My first knowledge of this museum is uncertain. No personal research went into this visit. It was a wait and see. My first thoughts were about the cost of the building, who were the financiers, and the rationale behind its existence. In this participant’s context, undertakings of this nature are not expected as they are not sustainable. Sufficient to say that the building is impressive and speaks to the excellence that its creators.

Reflecting on this excursion almost eleven months later, the memory of the exhibits are not as clear to the mind. One of the highlights was the sofer or the Hebrew scribe. He was impressive. The wealth of his knowledge and skill are mind-blowing. Writing Hebrew is a most tedious skill. Yet, he did it with such ease which spoke of his experience with the subject matter. When we shared with him the names of our children which are derived from Hebrew words, he was able to give us the meanings without having to research. These names are not popular, but they were known to him.

The additional service of having the names written on strips of paper was great. That was my souvenir of having been to the Museum of the Bible. Our children have these gift to learn how to write their names in Hebrew. Biblical Hebrew is a dead language and is complex. However, the sofer brought it to life that day. It would have been nice to have a deeper dive into biblical Hebrew such as translating a text from Hebrew to English. Many faithful Bible readers and devoted Christians cannot appreciate the complexity of the task of translation. If they did, they might be less dogmatic about which version they do and do not read. The implications of the Bible not being first written in English are lost on most people.

It was interesting that there was no Greek scribe. Most Christ-followers are more familiar with the New Testament than they are with the Hebrew Bible. Having both alongside the other might have helped visitors to appreciate the complexity of having a Bible that came mainly from two different languages. The wonderful narrative of the inclusivity of the biblical text would be enhanced once people appreciated this simple fact.

Another highlight of the visit was the virtual tour of Washington to show the numerous places where Bible verses were inscribed. Kudos to the creators of experience. It was an immersive and memorable experience. Yet, it left this participant with the question, so what! If the Bible is so integral to the foundation of the America, how is it that the evidence in societal systems is seem so contrary to the values of the Bible? How does one account for the strong racist practices from the earliest times until the present day? How does one account for the economic stratifications that keeps taking from those who can least afford it? How is it that life is so dispensable? Maybe my expectations are too great or even unrealistic since biblical faith is more about personal devotion than official policy.

Maybe greater context could be added to that exhibit so that one appreciates the exhibit for what it was intended to do – show the places where Bible verses are found in the capitol. Someone could leave that experience and begin a crusade to make the Bible central to the lives of America again. Rather than accept the challenge as personal, that is, centralizing the word of God to their lived existence, that individual might externalize the thought, and look for public ways to make the *Bible central again*. The Bible is the word of God, and it does its best work when the Holy Spirit weaves it into the hearts and minds of its readers. The Shema (Deuteronomy 6: 6-9) addresses parents to center their lives around the “word”. It was not meant to be forced by public policy. When religious conviction is forced, it contravenes the divine mandate where God created humanity with freewill so that our worship of God is personal rather than cultural. No parent desires forced love from a child. Devotion and love for God and God’s word must be organic.

This participant was challenged to think how the church might do a better job of allowing the biblical narrative to speak in the culture and policies of the day. That particular attraction would not be on my list. However, one can see how it might form part of the narrative. This degree program is one input that allow the Bible to speak intellectually and profoundly to the brokenness in society. It requires that those who know that God has spoken to the realities of life, do that work of exegeting scripture to fill the current gaps. Just passing laws and using the power of an office, move into the path of the Holy Spirit to do the work in people’s hearts. The church has much work to do in living the principles of scripture and using the lived experience as a discipleship tool.

(b) As a student of scripture, it would be difficult to come away from this experience with an enhanced appreciation of the Bible. Recreations of biblical scenes are not appealing. The same may be said of the movies about the Bible. They usually seem less valuable in their portrayal. Notwithstanding, there is an appreciation for those who made the museum possible. The hope is that this museum unlocks the desire to know more for visitors. Maybe younger generations who are less familiar with the Bible may begin to ask more questions which would hopefully unlock a greater curiosity about the Word of God. Clearly, the Bible is part of American cultural narrative. An amplification of the narrative is required for greater understanding and application of the core values of the Bible.

(c) With reference to new spiritual insights, it would have to surround how we get people to understand the Bible to be a book for all times. How do we allow God to speak clearly enough in scripture that convicts all of us and change our ways. Biblical things are always sacrament in that there is more behind the veil than what is obvious. The Bible is the living word and must be allowed to live.

**Reflective Entry**

(a) In some ways the reflective entry has been made about contextualization. However, within this participants context, some of the realities are the same. When a preacher begins to quote texts, congregations can complete these verses either completely or partially. However, the knowledge of scripture does not translate in the practice of principles of scripture. The principle of familiarity breeding contempt may be at play. Notwithstanding, there must be efforts to encourage the incarnation of scripture in people’s lives. It will require greater critical reflection and the courage to reframe the narratives around scripture.

The emphasis of church has been on salvation to the exclusion of sanctification. People are committed to Christ, but they do not embrace the requirement to be better versions of themselves. The social aspects of following Christ have not been emphasized from the Bible; therefore, those social aspects seem like external requirements. It is important that when people who do not follow Christ encounter people who follow Christ that they leave with curiosity and interest. Critical reflection is needed in the wider culture to address the gaps.

(b)The church has made strides in appreciating art and culture in the ministry. However, there is more ground to cover. Those who work in Bible must show how the Bible speaks to the context and the cultural realities so that profession and practice go together. God was always concerned those who are economically disadvantaged and church must be shown that. The church has led the way of creating cultural content and informing the values of society through its members in the right places. Content creation must become important again so as to disciple people through the culture.

(c)There has beenno change in the participant’s worldview from viewing the exhibits. The need for the church to be better witnesses to the message of the Bible has been refreshed. The challenge is also personal as this participant has to recalibrate how to a better witness of scripture.

(d)The specific exhibits that made an impact were the Hebrew scribe (sofer) and the virtual Bible tour around Washington, DC. The other exhibits were interesting to see but made no lasting impression.

**Future Expectations**

This participant is happy to be at this point in the journey. It is relatively clear what needs to happen going forward. There is much work to do in the dissertation process to arrive at the final leg of the journey. The visit to the Museum of the Bible was a reminder that our research must add to the efforts to highlight the biblical narrative and how it is an agent of healing and restoration.

**Conclusion**

The influence of art and culture on society is an important study. Christian communities need to have critical conversations about what it means to represent the values of the kingdom of God in society. Skillfully working through art and culture, the work of accurately representing Christ in a post-Christian era can be effective. New teaching and learning are required as well as new postures of approach so that the church meets people in their social location. In crafting the message for the context, resonance is likely to result which might spawn curiosity for the Holy Spirit to work through.

WORKS CITED