

ALVIM, HENRIQUE G., Ph.D., December 2014

Cultural Foundations
of Education

LIVING CHRISTIANLY AMONG STRANGERS: THE EDUCATIONAL, CIVIC,
AND THEOLOGICAL PRACTICE OF “BEING THE CHURCH” IN THE POST-
SECULAR AMERICAN ACADEMY (312 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Natasha Levinson, Ph.D.

As religion regains prominence in American public life, it becomes increasingly important for institutions of higher learning to recognize the challenges and possibilities in making room for people of faith within the academy. As universities continue to diversify their educational spaces, the recruitment, retention, and success of students who hold an exclusivist view of Christianity points to practical and critical implications that will be addressed in this dissertation; implications that take into account religious perspectives that inform the lives and the learning experiences of many students of faith.

This humanities oriented dissertation aims at exploring possible answers to questions that guide the overall inquiry into what a life formed and informed by exclusive Christian convictions has to offer to a shared, pluralistic space where people of the most various secular and religious commitments intersect to live and learn together. The overarching question that guides this project is: How ought Christian students – especially those that hold a particularist worldview informed by their faith – live, express their religious commitments, and practice their social agency “as the church” in public institutions of higher education in America?

While this dissertation will address the challenges and possibilities in making room for exclusivist believers in the American academy, it will also press public universities to reevaluate the meaning they attribute to diversity and inclusion with a

view to creating spaces that are more hospitable to religious viewpoints. That said, believers will also be encouraged to reflect on the virtues of civility, respect, and hospitality, so that they may become co-workers of a peaceful learning environment where mutual understanding of others might contribute to the formation, transformation, and flourishing of all members of the academy.

The dissertation outlines certain ways of living Christianly that while maintaining the legitimacy of exclusiveness of one's religious convictions still lends itself to deeper learning about, with, and from others. With that, it presses exclusivist Christians to answer other important questions, one of which is: How are they to practice, in the post-secular academy, a presence that is neither disinterested nor domineering? Possible answers to this and other questions will lead to an important assertion: that civic and educational pluralism, when intelligibly informed and augmented by a religious worldview, edifies our public life, particularly as people of varying moral and ethical commitments decide to enlarge the conversational space where education takes place. To that end, the idea of respectful dialogue will be discussed as a way by which all members of the academy may become teachers and learners of values that ultimately inform life in a democratic society.