

# The Fresno Pacific Idea: A Centered Vision

MICHAEL KUNZ

I recall the year the fence was built around the main campus of Fresno Pacific. Our environment in southeast Fresno had changed since the college was established here. Initially, open fields gave way to new suburban homes, but as Fresno expanded northward in ensuing decades, older neighborhoods of south Fresno were mostly abandoned by middle class families. The racial and economic demographics surrounding Fresno Pacific changed in ways that appeared threatening to many.

While acknowledging the need for a sense of safety and security, I want instead to focus on the limitations of fences. External, physical entities can serve as metaphors of internal, spiritual perspectives. A Christian university can be viewed as a fixed bulwark of traditional stability in a shifting, unsettling, and threatening world. Creeds, doctrinal statements, catechisms, and confessions can confer a sense of common identity within a community and set boundaries for its members. They can also be used like fences to exclude those with beliefs and practices that differ from the group norm. The role of the Fresno Pacific Idea stands in contrast to this approach. The Fresno Pacific Idea proclaims itself to be a “center.” It exemplifies the contrast of bounded sets and centered sets.<sup>1</sup>

Group membership can be defined by physical location. Eligibility to vote in a Fresno city mayoral election is determined by residency within precise city limits. Neighbors on opposite sides of a street that serves as such a boundary find themselves either in or out of the community based on their resident location.

Rather than defining identity based upon fixed station, it can also be understood in terms of movement toward or away from a center. The physical act of pilgrimage involves a journey toward a destination. Medieval pilgrims *en route* to Jerusalem or Rome were pilgrims whether they were just beginning their journey or within sight of the city gates. The language that pervades the FPU Idea conveys this sense of dynamic movement toward a common future. It incorporates a vision of a reality not yet fully realized, but toward which we travel together. Much like Jesus’ parables of the Kingdom, this centered-set understanding of membership invites us to join an adventure more than assent to a doctrine.

In 1987, I was nearing the completion of my doctoral studies in ecology at the University of California at Davis. To what future was I being called? My Christian faith had been shaped by a Lutheran upbringing that underscored grace, an undergraduate InterVarsity experience that emphasized Bible study, discipleship and mission, and Peace Corps service that deepened my commitment to justice, simplicity and global perspectives. My goal was instruction at a Christian college consistent with such a faith.

Unfortunately, the great majority of religiously affiliated colleges were not attractive or acceptable. Many institutions sponsored by religious denominations scarcely seemed Christian in any sense of mission or practice; most religiously conservative institutions and I would find each other mutually incompatible. Disciplines within the natural sciences are inextricably linked to many understandings considered heretical by most fundamentalist-influenced doctrinal statements. What I understood to be the values of Jesus and God's kingdom were also at odds with mainstream American Evangelical cultural worldviews that seemed to dominate most Christian colleges. Though raised in the San Joaquin Valley, I was unfamiliar with Fresno Pacific. I had come to know and admire Mennonite Central Committee volunteers while serving in Peace Corps, so I was excited to learn that Fresno Pacific was affiliated with a Mennonite denomination.

When I applied for a faculty position at Fresno Pacific in 1987, the application included a theological orientation statement that was quasi-fundamentalist in nature. I responded that I could accept certain statements only with the recognition that I define terms differently than how they were understood by others. The boundaries of acceptable theological orthodoxy were apparently diffuse enough for my admittance, or else evaluated by others skeptical of such fences. I also encountered the Idea statement. It was only the hope of a community shaped by such a center that gave me the desire to join.

The Fresno Pacific Idea has justified, encouraged and influenced many of my priorities and understandings over the past three decades. The Environmental Program I direct was collaboratively developed by FPU faculty with a mission centered in the Idea's visionary call to "engage members of its community in a collaborative search for knowledge and experience which lead toward a perceptive and creative relationship with God, humanity and the natural world." Such perspectives give direction and inspiration for action. The sections of the

current version of the Idea encapsulate what could be understood as a trinity of emphases. Like that theological center, the Idea proclaims its three parts to be complementary and inseparable aspects that “form an organic whole.” Each section has been a catalyst for reflection, discussion, and practice.

### **A Christian University**

I teach science. The grand story of the universe – its distant origin, the long emergence of billions of galaxies with billions of stars, the slow formation of our planet, and life’s progressive development – is a common story that has been discerned from nature over the past four centuries. It is accepted in its broad outlines by scientists around the world from all cultures. It is a story that unites fields of science including physics, astronomy, geology, chemistry and biology.

Many historical Christian responses to such scientific advances have not been helpful. Static fences of doctrine have wrestled with each new scientific discovery and considered many to be threats. Dismissal, warfare, or separation into cloistered enclaves are frequent alternative reactions. Forced integration (such as insisting that the successive days of creation in Genesis 1 are scientifically accurate analogies to the accepted scientific cosmology) results in convolutions that are contrived and damaging to the intent of scripture.<sup>2</sup> The Catholic contemplative master Thomas Merton noted the anxiety the modern world engenders. He reflected “One of the moral diseases we communicate to one another in society comes from huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to questions we are afraid to ask.”<sup>3</sup>

The response of many in science has been to view religion as a superstition intrinsically opposed to science. Yet, on their own, scientific precepts have difficulty orienting human values. Steven Weinberg is a renowned recipient of the Nobel prize in physics for his contribution to our understanding of the fundamental physical nature and early origin of the universe. Weinberg famously noted, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.”<sup>4</sup> Modern science by its methodology excludes teleology or purpose, but a practice that takes the limitations of its discipline as the boundaries of reality will be circumscribed and stunted. Such a recognition undergirded Einstein’s quote: “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”<sup>5</sup>

The Fresno Pacific Idea confidently asserts: “There is no contradiction then between the truth of revelation, of scholarly investigation and of action.” From a bounded-set perspective, how faith and academics can be reconciled seems inconceivable, but the Idea’s centered vision of a Christian university offers a hopeful alternative. It begins description of our Christian university as one “centered upon Christ...” My time at Fresno Pacific has encouraged me to understand faith to be centered upon the transformative process of following Jesus. A centered approach to Christian faith views scripture not as a flat field of propositional truths that must be pieced together like a 1000-piece puzzle, but rather stories with an arc of meaning. Jesus, whom we recognize as the Christ, is at its center. Every worldview or paradigm, whether cultural, scientific or theological, confronts inconsistencies and anomalies. These may be internal inconsistencies, or conflicts with external realities. How they are dealt with is critical. When conflicts and contradictions arise, this center adjudicates.<sup>6</sup>

The desire to highlight the interaction between faith and science has been the impetus for the development of my course History and Philosophy of Science. Worldviews that have dominated western thought have pervaded both scientific and religious understandings. Ancient and medieval views of nature as a static, created hierarchy with humanity as the center of the cosmic salvation drama were replaced by a worldview that perceived nature as a clock-like machine obeying laws decreed from a divine, deistic clock-maker.<sup>7</sup> Many of the categories that dominate popular religious and scientific worldviews are still limited by those Enlightenment categories, which is a source of much of the perceived conflict between science and religion.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the past century has presented a different view of natural history that is dynamic and evolving, where relationships are fundamental in defining reality.

Discerning a way forward in such a present world is not easy; formulaic solutions do no one favors. If there is hope (as I believe there is), I expect it will be found in places like Fresno Pacific with a center on Christ, revealed in scripture as both the incarnate and particular revelation of God’s plan of creation who makes visible the arc of both human and cosmic history. The grand vision of cosmic history laid out in the first chapter of Colossians asserts that Christ is the beginning, sustaining presence, and future end of all creation. Creation itself is on a journey of reconciliation and redemption. The pattern of life, death

and resurrection revealed in Jesus points to God's methods and purpose. We and all creation are participants in this journey.<sup>9</sup>

A perspective that views a Christian university as the locus for dialog frees both faith and disciplinary understandings. We anticipate scientific discoveries with eagerness, trusting that the scientific story of creation is ultimately a sacred story. The intellectual and spiritual journey into future decades of scientific discovery is one of excitement and revelation that never diminishes our vision of God; it only heightens it. Ours is a universe where we see and understand dimly, as Paul professes. Scripture becomes not a modernist view of rigid abstract ideas to which assent is given, but a lived story into which we enter; patterning our lives upon it, it becomes our story, centered on Christ.

### **A Community of Learners**

The Idea insists that education cannot happen well in isolation. The Fresno Pacific Idea emphasis on community stands in sharp contrast to the individualistic understandings of faith that emerged from Enlightenment thought. Just as the material world can be modeled as a system of individual atoms moving and reacting through space, forming or breaking bonds with others but remaining essentially inert, so we may also model human society where faith and education are primarily personal decisions that ensure future salvation of individual souls. Opposed to this individualistic approach to faith and learning is the Idea's understanding that "holds to the believers' church expression of community as a body that transcends individualism and those cultural, national and ethnic boundaries which separate and alienate."

The boundaries of Fresno Pacific community inclusion have shifted since the founding of Pacific Bible Institute, often determined by categories of identity. Should faculty include other Protestant faith traditions? Are Catholic faculty to be included? What of those who are divorced and remarried? Is admission of non-Christian students permissible? At the time of each of these decisions, the community wrestled with legitimate concerns regarding the distinctive nature of the community, should the boundaries of inclusion shift.

The Idea sees that threat as an opportunity, recognizing "that inclusiveness enriches community, Fresno Pacific University welcomes those of different cultural, national, ethnic and religious backgrounds to participate in its educational experience." Though the arc of community inclusion can also be unset-

ting, the centered-set concept does not ignore the crucial importance of a cohesive community identity. Others are invited “to enter into dialogue and faithful practice with those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite and believers’ church tradition in following Christ and in sharing the university’s mission.” We gain new and often overlooked insights into our own faith journey from those starting from other beginnings but centered on the same destination.

My field of ecology provides a parallel perspective. Ecological health comes from an expansive community of shared interaction. The narrow definition of community given in the Idea statement has served as a source of bemusement to someone trained in community ecology. The ecological definition of community is the sum-total of interacting species in a location, of which humanity is but a single member. 20<sup>th</sup> century conservationist Aldo Leopold sought to understand the root causes of environmental damage. He wrote of the consequences that inevitably ensue when we fail to recognize the significance to the community of those species and entities considered outside the bounds of inclusion. Leopold wrote: “In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating. Why? Because it is implicit in such a role that the conqueror knows, *ex cathedra*, just what makes the community clock tick, and just what and who is valuable, and what and who is worthless, in community life. It always turns out that he knows neither, and this is why his conquests eventually defeat themselves.... The common person is certain he knows which species are necessary; the scientist knows he does not.”<sup>10</sup>

For Leopold, progress comes from expanding the circle of ethical consideration with respect to both human and non-human groups. Analogies and applications to our human FPU community may be seen in Leopold’s writing. Who is necessary to the community? Are there groups committed to Christian discipleship who remain excluded from the Fresno Pacific community? If so, their absence compromises our faithful journey forward toward Christ’s reconciling center.

### **Prophetic**

It is not surprising that an Idea centered on prophetic witness would be controversial. Its removal from the 1982 revision of the Idea and its reinstatement in the current version illustrates a tension as old as the nation of Israel. The priestly tradition often blessed and sanctioned established political, economic

and religious powers; the prophetic voice critiqued and challenged those same powers, which often sought to silence it.

Prophetic visions are replete with imagery of negative consequences for following the wrong path, and positive imagery of God's intended destination for creation. The Idea proclaims that movement toward such a visionary center involves implementing "institutional and societal values which contribute to developing a vision for wholeness, justice and reconciliation." These terms are synonymous with the biblical concept of shalom, which serves as the organizing thematic center for the Environmental Program. Choices we make as individuals and societies have mazes of complexity with innumerable costs and benefits to human and natural systems. Such a prophetic and visionary center gives clarity of direction to environmental issues.

This section of the Idea begins with the statement: "Fresno Pacific University believes that to be prophetic is to serve the church and society by engaging in dialogue with and critique of contemporary culture and practice." Of all the aspects of the Idea, I consider this one to be inadequate. Dialog and critique are necessary, but insufficient, responses.

In the prologue to Merton's book *No Man Is an Island* quoted above, he also wrote: "the first responsibility of a [person] of faith is to make... faith really part of [one's] own life, not by rationalizing it but by living it." As the poet Maria Rilke observed, we must learn to "live the questions"<sup>11</sup> rather than simply codifying the answers. Anabaptist theology and practice have emphasized a lived, embodied, alternative community as the primary means of being prophetic. Our collective institutional community life ought to demonstrate these Kingdom values.<sup>12</sup>

One issue in our university history illustrates the tensions associated with such an embodied prophetic witness. For decades, Fresno Pacific teaching faculty were unranked, and administrators and teachers were together considered faculty. A compressed pay scale minimized the extremes between new faculty and top administrators. The justification for this alternative institutional structure was rooted in an Anabaptist understanding of the teachings of Jesus and the nature of Christian community. There were persuasive arguments for why Fresno Pacific should pattern itself after other universities, but changes came at the expense of being prophetic in this aspect of community life. An alternative

perspective trusts that life in an embodied prophetic community is ultimately richer and more fulfilling.

## Conclusion

The Idea conceived by Pacific College faculty in the 1960s and its subsequent revisions were undertaken by people I admire and respect. The document has been for me a source of inspiration and confirmation. I came in 1987 with different ecclesiastical, cultural, and academic backgrounds, so my own understanding and application of the Idea will be peculiar to me. But they have also been profoundly shaped by dialog and insight from this unique community. I may have taken its perspectives in seemingly unorthodox directions, but this was also true of those young Anabaptist-Mennonite framers of the original Idea, whose own intellectual and spiritual forays ventured beyond those of their mentors. As is true of all journeys into uncharted territory, the Fresno Pacific Idea beckons us into risky country.

Significant documents may develop lives of their own beyond those of their composers or their original intent. Its current ultimate sentence states that this Idea “gives the university reason for existence, courage for growth, and stimulus for adventure.” This is to be expected from a center that allures us to explore the future together. If this spirit enlivens Fresno Pacific, then it is appropriate to recall the character of God’s Spirit. It blows where it will and refuses to be boxed by walls and fences.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Dalton Reimer describes the Idea using “centered” language. Reimer, Dalton. 1995. “The Origins of the Fresno Pacific College Idea.” In *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education: The Story of the Fresno Pacific College Idea*, by Paul, ed. Toews, 24-39. Fresno, California: The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies.
- <sup>2</sup> Ian Barbour discusses these models of interaction of science and religion. Barbour, Ian G. 1997. *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. Revised. New York: HarperCollins.
- <sup>3</sup> Merton, Thomas. 1955. *No Man Is an Island*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- <sup>4</sup> Weinberg, Stephen. 1993. *The First Three Minutes*. Updated. New York: BasicBooks.
- <sup>5</sup> Einstein, Albert. 1940. “Religion and Science.” *The Conference on Science, Philosophy and Religion*. Religious Naturalism. <https://religiousnaturalism.org/science-and-religion-2/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Imre Lakatos understood scientific paradigms as comprised of a non-falsifiable central hard core protected by auxiliary belt of modifiable hypotheses. Lakatos, Imre. 1970. “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programs.” In *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, by Imre Lakatos and Alan, eds. Musgrave. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Others have applied this concept to religious understandings.

- <sup>7</sup> Ian Barbour. *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*.
- <sup>8</sup> Delbert Wiens discusses how American Evangelical and Fundamentalist movements have unconsciously adopted abstract Enlightenment modernist understandings of scripture and faith. He contrasts these with communities of faith such as those embodied by rural Anabaptist-Mennonites that turned to scripture with an expectation of patterning concrete choices for community life on the stories of scripture. Wiens, Delbert. 1995. "The "Christian College" As Heresy." In *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education: The Story of the Fresno Pacific Idea*, by Paul, ed. Toews. Fresno: The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies.
- <sup>9</sup> Paleontologist and Roman Catholic priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was one of the first to develop a synthetic integration of contemporary cosmology and Christology, such as in: Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. 1959. *The Phenomenon of Man*. New York: Harper & Row.
- <sup>10</sup> Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>11</sup> Rilke, Rainer Maria. 1934. *Letters to a Young Poet, Translation by M.D. Herter Norton*. New York: W. D. Norton & Company.
- <sup>12</sup> Dalton Reimer emphasizes this in his discussion of the prophetic nature of the Fresno Pacific Idea: Reimer, Dalton. 1995. "'Fresno Pacific College is a Prophetic College'." In *Mennonite Idealism and Higher Education: The Story of the Fresno Pacific Idea*, by Paul, ed. Toews. Fresno, California: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies.

