

DISPELLING THE PH.D. MYSTIQUE

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1. Certain key terms are helpful in discussing this topic.

"Internship" may be thought of as a studied combination of productive work and educational study. It is a transitional period between pure school (study not work) and pure work without further formal schooling. Internship is a well respected component in the process whereby a person is prepared to practice as a medical doctor. In such a case it is formal period that follows schooling and precedes independent practice.

"Apprenticeship" is very similar in many ways, but today is not much used outside of the trades, and unlike internship is more likely to be a specific relationship between a certain apprentice and a certain "master" (carpenter, electrician or what not).

"Discipleship" is a concept arising in the existence of our Lord's disciples in the Gospel accounts. We also see it in the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles in the case of the men who worked closely with Paul and Barnabus. In recent times in the American church scene a great deal of talk has gone on about "discipleship" but along a somewhat different line: the emphasis has been a bit more on a body of material to be learned rather than with whom the disciple is related. For example, the Navigator "2.7" program - is it not mainly a body of material to be covered, and secondarily a sub-ordinate relationship to the particular person leading the program in a given case?

"Ph.D. Candidacy" is another relationship in this paradigm. In this case there is no ambiguity about the central and significant question of just who the "major advisor" is. It is very definitely an internship "transition" between pure schooling and independent practice. It once was a candidacy leading to a position in which the former candidate, having arrived at the point of independent operation was assumed to become the major mentor of still other candidates. This reproductive intent of doctoral work has diminished as the volume of people in such programs in the United States has increased enormously in the past few decades. Today the Ph.D. degree tends to describe something that is over with, and perhaps forgotten. It does not in most cases describe an ongoing reproductive discipleship pattern. However, it could.

2. Certain generalizations are possible.

Historically speaking, we commonly see for most professions an apprenticeship involving

- an internship combination of work and study,
- a transitional period prior to independent "profession" of competence and "practice" of that profession,
- a formal point at which this subordinate pattern terminated, either with a degree of some kind, or formal certification (e.g. CPA) of some kind, often involving a process administered if not monitored by the State.

Within each particular sphere there are well-recognized hurdles and carefully defined attainments. We see this in law, in medicine, and in ecclesiastical ministry. In the particular case of the university tradition, from which the Protestant tradition has taken so many cues, even its vestments, it is the Ph.D. and the role of the university professor which is central.

"Ph.D."s have attained sufficient respect outside of the university tradition that many professors today earn more than half of their income from consulting. Indeed, in the past 50 years we have come to the place where we see the majority of Ph.D. holders operating not within but outside of the university itself. Thus, to a certain extent, the Ph.D. has become a sort of very high level background for work outside of the university.

In so doing the degree has tended become a milestone rather than a way of life. The reproductive aspect has been considerably lessened, except for those few Ph.D.s who stay within or return to work as professors in the university itself.

When a person is "ordained" to pastoral ministry, or "passes the bar examination," or is certified as a CPA, or is given a Ph.D. degree, something has occurred which theoretically allows for a new degree of independence in practice, and (potentially) participation in the training of others who are coming along in the same sphere. You can't become a CPA without working for three years under some other CPA, for instance.

3. Certain applications are possible.

Life today is more complex than the long-traditional professions imply. The one degree which has gained a certain generalized value is the Ph.D. That is, you don't see people with any other professional hurdle behind them with as wide an acceptance outside of their narrow professional field. "He has a Ph.D." does not usually mean that a person is specifically competent in some narrow field, but that the person has proven himself to be a fairly competent person. (We quite rightly downplay the significance of this degree, but that fact, in certain arenas in American life - which tears down all privileged status - will not make this whole thing "go away" for our national leaders overseas, for the government officials who are constantly demanding more and more in this area, or for the bulk of our constituencies, many of whom secretly wonder just what those missionaries do know.

One resulting or parallel phenomenon is the creation of a whole swath of other "doctorates." Lawyers are now getting to be Doctors of Jurisprudence, ministers are getting to be Doctors of Ministry, etc. These are the so-called "professional" degrees, and are not considered to be "research" degrees. But it is plain that leaders in many spheres are more and more aspiring to be some kind of "doctor" - and this is in great part simply because the followers are more and more expecting people of learning and leadership capacity to be doctors. Thomas Wang, the new Executive Director of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, whose office is now no longer in Hong Kong but in Charlotte, N.C., tells me that although he does not have an "earned" doctorate nor even an "honorary" doctorate, people are more and more often introducing him as "Doctor Thomas Wang" and his name is printed that way quite commonly in church bulletins and conference brochures simply because people would be embarrassed for him if he did not have such a degree.

Often the holders of "honorary" doctorates have more definitely "earned" that degree than those who went through the more formal "earning" process. Yet the process is respected, a mystique has grown up around it, and its significance is perhaps to be taken seriously, at least as seriously as Roman citizenship was to the Apostle Paul.

4. A suggestion for consideration.

Anyone who is working contentedly within a specific, highly structured profession certainly should be content with the attainments appropriate to that tradition. Anyone who is to be involved on a broader level of ministry - such as "Missions" may or may not need or even desire a specific credential in some very specific arena of responsibility.

However, for a missionary what is the best kind of arrival point, the best pattern of on-going education to follow, which will be recognized both in and outside of the missionary profession? The emergence of the Doctor of Missiology degree is one answer to this, just as the Doctor of Ministry degree is one answer for the stateside minister. But is possible that the missionary and the national church leader will benefit more from the Ph.D. tradition, which has commonly had a broader base and a research emphasis which is to some extent ubiquitous (I attained a full professorship in a field different from that of my Ph.D.).

The principal problem is not the concept but the delivery system. The settled university tradition is geographically ensconced at some distance from most mission fields, and it has not been notably willing to unbend sufficiently to allow for its monitoring and evaluation functions to be extended to the scene of action - in the case of missions.

The thought is that this could be done, however. Of all degrees in their traditional way of working, the Ph.D. seems to be the most exportable. When you think of all the different elements in a B.A. program you realize that to transport a college across the world would take a whole lot more than to monitor a rigorous Ph.D. doctoral committee at a distance.

By now the world of missions has acquired by dint of a great deal of distortion and loss, a great number of Ph.D.s right within the blood stream of the mission industry itself. Furthermore, on the field there are others with Ph.D.s in great numbers today in most mission fields.

Classically this is all it takes. The presence of imposing university architecture is not the salient element in the conduct of a quality doctoral program. Rather, it is the committee, the availability of research materials in the situation, and the presence of quality advisors that counts.

It would not seem necessary for any great number of mission field Ph.D.s to result from the existing mechanisms within the societies of the sending churches, if only the powerful and well-prepared mission agency structures will take this additional function in stride.

However, from our point of view whatever value there may or may not be in the process of getting a degree, or of "wearing" such a degree. We deem it highly significant that holding such a degree by long-standing tradition qualifies one for ongoing discipleship

which can be of profound significance, if we wish to reestablish this aspect of the process. And, if degrees of this kind are in the last analysis as unavoidably of value as Paul's Roman citizenship, then the discipleship pattern for their attainment is both Biblical and wholesome, and now even legally and officially feasible.

To renew and develop this pattern, the mission industry now has at least one university corporation for its use which is entirely sympathetic and devoted to its cause. What this university shall become in itself and in the nature of its pilot influence is up to the Mission industry itself to determine. The collaboration of the industry at this point is both necessary and, if forthcoming, entirely sufficient to achieve a great deal in a timely way.