

# What Is a Big Question?

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I propose that a critical way of engaging the university is to focus on its Big Questions, Big Issues, and Big Debates. I.e., how does the university define itself and its agendas?

In this way we turn outward to the broadest frame of our research, scholarship and teaching.

The premise of my proposal is that in universities there are issues, questions, debates that transcend our university “tribes,” our disciplinary languages and sites and methodologies and epistemologies of scholarship.

## 1. What Are Big Questions?

Let us consider each term in the question.

*Big questions* come to us as puzzles – vacuums in knowledge – unsolved conundrums – problems where there is no consensus.

In my field, for instance, a huge debate lasting for decades surrounds the question: what is the relationship between economic development and political change?

Will more economic development lead to more democracy? This has been a prevailing view.

But look at Singapore – massive economic development as it moved from the Third World to the First World, as its Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, once wrote. But it remained a one-party state with no true democracy.

Look at China. Massive economic growth but deepening authoritarianism. Robert Woodberry, a Christian political scientist at the Singapore National University wrote a powerful revisionist article that turned the empirically based theory of democratic development on its head. In a brilliant article in the first-rate journal, *American Political Science Review*, he showed that in former colonies more democracy was associated with a stronger presence of Protestant missionaries and Christians in those countries decades earlier.

*Big questions* are expansive.

They are big because they reach across scholarship around the world.

They are big because they are heavily debated in major academic settings – journals, books, conferences

They are big because they span disciplines. No discipline can adequately contain or explain them.

They are big because they can break out into public debate – into religions – into politics.

## 2. Benefits of Focus on Big Questions:

- They open up our *personal* scholarly horizons – they pull us away from narrow specialization – and frame and disciplinary questions more broadly.
 

Eg. I began my research career writing on the politics of lawyers, but I came to see lawyers were a subset of a much wider landscape of politics – politics of professions, of expert knowledge, of technical efforts to gain monopolies over public policy-making on issues.
- Opens up *dialog* across disciplines, faculties, etc.
 

E.g., they increase the scope of our conversations. This also means they inject some degree of humility in each discipline by demonstrating it needs the empirical and theoretical input of other disciplines to develop meaningful understandings of phenomena.

Take the topic of “*Human Flourishing.*” It ranges across many fields:

  - Positive psychology -- hope, forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, altruism and love.
  - Sociology – of inequality
  - Economics – writings of Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen
  - Helping professions -- social work, medicine
  - Developmental economics – law and development
- Transcends *disciplinary silos* –
 

E.g., Northwestern University faculty symposium on Light – brought together scholars from an extraordinary diversity of fields – from medicine and astronomy to Russian iconography, African anthropology, and New Testament scholarship.
- Open up multiple *points of entry* for theological encounters with colleagues, grad students
- Opens up a *community* of conversation among Christian scholars, i.e., a way of relating to each other
 

E.g., if we can identify big questions that cross disciplines in our Christian groups we find yet another dimension of relationships amongst us, another level of support, another glue for building community
- *Transcends narrowness* of certain national/denominational fixations on this or that topic – especially those thought to assault the faith, i.e., opens up the leadership we faculty can offer Christian movements on campuses and the church as a whole.

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