

LOVE OF LEARNING AS WISDOM

Every member of the Society has heard this phrase at least once, at initiation. It's our motto, a generous translation of the Greek whence derives "Phi Kappa Phi": Φιλοσοφία κρατεῖτω φωτῶν. If your memory's *really* sharp (or if you've attended multiple initiations), you know that the Society translates *Philosophía* as "the love of learning," *Krateítō* as "to rule," and *Phōtôn* as "humanity." "Thus," reads the script, "in saying the Phi Kappa Phi motto, you are calling on yourself and others to have your lives ruled by the love of learning." Seems straightforward, unless ...

Years ago, a student invited to membership contacted me with a specific concern: a committed Christian, she was troubled that the Society's motto contradicted a deeply held belief that her life was ruled not by a love of learning but by adherence to her faith. Never having questioned the motto, I was not prepared for the conversation. At the end of an awkward discussion about language and values, I encouraged her to act upon her conscience.

She is surely not reading this essay.

When I share this story, the typical response is, "What an odd reason to decline the honor." Perhaps. But just as I suspect many ΦΚΦ members identify as persons of faith, I further suspect that few members have considered the motto's matter and meaning so intentionally.

My own reflection on the motto led me to appreciate the substantive nature of the broader questions raised. Is my life "ruled"? If so, by what? I began to wonder about the purported incompatibility of positions raised: Can one's life be ruled by both a love of learning as well as something more? Certainly. Yet all too often, Western society erects a wall between mind and spirit such that folks feel compelled either to make a choice between the two or to live in discomfort straddling both.

Speaking as a linguist, and with all due respect to the Society, I wonder if the challenge is one of translation. Rendering *philosophía* as "love of learning" strays from the

Greek word's linguistic roots, which indicate a more apt translation as "love of wisdom," thereby recasting the motto as "Let the love of wisdom rule humanity." Whereas the pursuit of wisdom presupposes a commitment to learning — as well as reflection and adaptive judgment — any perceived incompatibility between mind and spirit dissolves. Indeed, living out my own commitment to a "love of learning" is directly shaped by a deeply held spiritual belief in doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with the Divine — a position I have worked out since the time of the original conversation. (Wisdom delayed is still wisdom, yes?)

As Socrates teaches, "true wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us." Perhaps it is this realization that we profess at each ΦΚΦ initiation, a realization that fuels our love of learning in service to the pursuit of wisdom.

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