



ATFE

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ATFE

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Report of Proceedings

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ATFE Chair's Steering Committee Address

By Dudley Rose

January 22, 2005

Let me begin by saying what an enormous privilege it has been to serve this Association. I have attended ATFE Biennials since Denver in 1991, and for a few years even before that I met with the Boston area theological field educators. I can say without hesitation that it is among theological field educators that I have found my most gracious, helpful and treasured colleagues. So six years ago when I was asked to serve this Association, I was as humbled as I was surprised. I was a little fearful, too. But I needn't have been. As I look over the last six years and visualize the colleagues I have had, both on the Steering Committee and not, and as I look over what the Association has done and been, I know that almost all of it was done by you. So my debt of gratitude is not only for the privilege you have given me to serve, but also for the many ways in which you have carried so much of the load. On both counts, thank you from the bottom of my heart. It has been great fun, and great work, and I will miss it.

As some of you know, I have the rare privilege of now offering a second Biennial address from the chair. Due to Sue Zabel's unforeseen illness, I was chair at the Biennial Consultation two ears ago in Chicago. At this current Biennial, then, I don't have newness on the job as an excuse for any lack of wisdom to impart. On the other hand, I am now, two years later, more aware of just how little actual wisdom I may actually have. I am just wise enough to begin to suspect that one address from the chair is probably the right number.

Nonetheless, with your permission, I would like to offer a few parting thoughts this evening.

First, let me just reflect on what has happened here in Toronto. I have heard from many of you how much you have enjoyed this Consultation. The insights, coming as they did, from theological field educators, from those within our field, seemed to move us more quickly into deep and nuanced conversations. There was never any question about whether our speakers "got it". In the smaller presentations, workshops and seminars, we were treated to exciting current work and research that theological field educators are doing. Many of you have told me that you leave Toronto renewed, informed, inspired and with many new resources. So, thank you to Lorraine St. Marie, Cam Harder, Joan Wyatt, Bob O'Gorman, Emily Click and to all of those of you who offered afternoon sessions. ATFE members are doing exciting and very good work. As Bob O'Gorman said in speaking of Emily Click's work, and his comments apply to all we have seen, we stand at another defining moment in theological field education.

In addition, as is true and right for theological field educators, we were asked to engage context kinesthetically, spiritually and experientially as well as intellectually. The unsettling, but also kind and gracious, experience of Turtle Island and the Aboriginal people will long affect me; both because of its painful exposure of difficult truths, but also because of the generosity with which our hosts laid them bare. I am grateful for all that has taken place over these last days, and to all of you who have made it possible.

Second, and I have thrown most of this portion of my address away because what I wrote to say has been already said and said far better than I would say it, but second, I would like to sketch out a few thoughts, a few trajectories, a few observations about the ideas of theological reflection, context, the "other," and our field of inquiry, and then what I think they say about our relationship with other fields of inquiry and with our colleagues in those fields. What I have to say will rely on much of what has been offered at this Consultation, but I hope it offers

something new, as well. This plan is large, and the time, you will glad to know, is short, so my remarks will be by necessity suggestive and incomplete.

Several of our speakers have emphasized attention to context, both its location and its otherness. It is an important emphasis, for as some of you have pointed out, theological reflection that looks only at the person, ministry, world and conclusions of the student, misses the transformation that the content of the context is prepared to teach. But turning our attention to the other is not simply a matter of the direction in which we look.

Cam Harder told us that participatory research, which is based on Frere's work, is research that begins with the people being studied being given the opportunity to describe and interpret themselves. This seemingly simple and innocent idea is, of course, fraught with complexity and subversiveness. It is subversive because the researcher loses control of the narrative; the narrative belongs to the subjects. It is complex because hearing another describe his or her story requires the researcher to learn the language and world of the story teller. It is not a simple matter to learn these languages or worlds, but it is a very easy matter to convince ourselves that one has when one hasn't. We may too easily assume that the language, the world or context of the other is identical to ours. Joan Wyatt told us that she requires her students to enter contexts so dramatically different from their own precisely so the students can more readily and immediately be aware of the differences.

As most of us recognize, building the skills to read the contexts of others is arduous business. Unnoticed and unexcavated presuppositions threaten to derail us at every turn. We instinctively attempt to bury difference in the warm embrace of familiarity. Resisting judgment is often not our strong suit.

We have heard over these days many good reasons to make the effort, especially in theological reflection. Allowing others to speak for themselves is a matter of justice and respect. It allows a more authentic and genuine ministry. And it makes any critical correlation more sound and meaningful. I will come back to another observation about relationship with context in a moment, but first I want to note some similarities between our work and the work of those scholars in other fields.

Increasingly other fields have also come to understand the importance of reading the context more carefully. They have come to demand of themselves and their students that they enter the world of those they study with respect. Rather than overlay interpretations, norms and presuppositions they are asked to face the attendant unfamiliarity, the attendant otherness of who and what they study. This requires developing subtle language skills, historical and cultural knowledge, and openness to the unexpected. Like Donald Schön's reflective practitioner, scholars are more and more aware that the context itself contains much of the information necessary to understand it, so the process must be dynamic, integrative and open-ended. Further, they have come to understand context to be found in multiple dimensions, chronologies and forms. For example, the Biblical scholar may understand context to mean the time, place and culture in which the texts were written, or to mean the language in which it is written, or to mean the interpretive milieu and theological location of the reader.

But let me give you an example from yet another field. Francis Clooney a comparative theologian at Boston College studies Christianity and Hinduism comparatively.

In order to do his work with integrity Clooney must learn Hinduism on its own terms. He must learn the languages. Even the grammar is instructive, because thought constructs are quite different in Sanskrit from those carried in English. He needs to learn the various worlds of and behind the text. He must come to grips with the fact that there is no Hinduism, but multiple

Hinduisms, just as there are multiple Christianities. He must work through a variety of unfamiliarities. Only when Clooney has done the best he can to hear the Hindu text on its own terms is he ready to compare it (or correlate it) with a Christian text. He may then select a Vedic text that deals with the idea of body and place it in conversation with Paul's passage in 1 Corinthians 12:12 and following. Incidentally, he must follow a similar process with the text of Corinthians. There are many levels of context he must engage.

So, what's the point? What does he gain in this study and comparison? First, as a scholar, he has pursued a subject of interest to him, and he has tried to learn about it as authentically and honestly as he can. He has tried to let the context speak for itself as much as possible. Second, Clooney would locate himself as a Christian theologian, and in the comparison with the Hindu text, he may see something that sheds new light on how he reads Paul. But third, it is possible that he finds something in the Hindu text which more significantly challenges his Christian theology. In listening honestly and carefully to the other on the other's own terms, he has been willing risk to some degree his own religious and personal convictions.

I draw two conclusions that have relevance for theological field educators from this rather provocative vignette. First, when we engage the other on the others own terms, we must be prepared for conversion from some deeply held convictions. When the minister engages a dispute in the church, the minister is not simply guiding or managing conflict resolution. The minister, if open to the possibility, may be converted by the disputants. Schön would say that the solution had to be found in the materials of the problem itself. Heifetz would say it was leadership. Either way, I believe our models for ministry education and formation should aim to teach students to attend to others at these deep levels. They should never be satisfied with reflection that ends at simply excavating and explicating the students' theology, or sees ministry events, or contact with others, as merely opportunities to learn more about themselves. True engagement with context always contains the possibility of significant, even disruptive change. The context and its content are inextricably braided together.

Second, there are many other scholars like Francis Clooney, and in fields other than comparative theology, who see disciplined and careful attention to the other to be fundamental to their work. And many of them are our colleagues. Biblical scholars, religious studies professors, historians, ethicists, theologians and others are more and more realizing that the first requirement of their teaching is to introduce students to the defamiliarity that proper study of the other requires. Many of them have worked out sophisticated theories and methodologies and approaches for disciplined engagement with and attention to others. Many have understood the subversive impact and theorized it. Many have used the work of thinkers I have heard referred to here this week -- Ricouer, Levenas, Tracy – to develop their insights.

My second conclusion, then, is that whether we see our programs to be weighted heavily toward any one of the models that Emily has given us – mentoring, practica or integration – we have many intellectual concerns and understandings in common with others of our faculty colleagues. While theological field educators should never be satisfied with only an intellectual agenda, I believe we ought not to eschew one either. We can both claim our distinctiveness as a field, including our particular commitment to experience, and converse cheek to jowl with faculty in other fields. When we do, we can learn from each other, and, along the way perhaps, do much to mend the marginalization many field educators feel.

Let me conclude by again saying thank you. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve you. God be with you the rest of your time in Toronto, in your travels back home, and in your work. God bless you.