Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology
The Journal of the Graduate Theological Union

Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology
Volume 3, Issue 1
ISSN 2380-7458

Editorial
Humbly Connecting Theology and Ministry

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Source: *Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 4-11.
Published By: Graduate Theological Union © 2017
Online article published on: February 28, 2018

Humbly Connecting Theology and Ministry:
A Reformed, Christian Reflection

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Berkeley Journal of Religion and Theology, Vol. 3, No. 1

A new year on Holy Hill brings with it new challenges, changes, and blessings. Of course, it is impossible to avoid mentioning the torrid political situation in the United States. The GTU comprises one of the most diverse student and faculty bodies in the United States, unfortunately a rarity in academic theology and religious studies. The neighborly presence of a variety of religious traditions is a treasured gift that few in the nation enjoy. How many Christian seminaries are situated next to, or even within walking distance to, mosques or Islamic centers, or Buddhist temples? But in these difficult times, White supremacists and Nazis were galvanized and they mobilized; and several strands of Evangelicalism either were silent or gave support to those far-right movements, although it must be emphasized that a few brave voices such as Russell Moore and Richard Mouw sounded the alarm about such a situation.[1] Far-

[1] I have personally decided to make a distinction between evangelical Christianity and Evangelicalism by capitalizing the latter to denote a right-wing religious movement that, in many aspects, has been co-opted by the nationalist and xenophobic far-right. The concept of being "evangelical" has roots deep in Christian history, and is rooted in the radical and life-affirming nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, I do not wish to abandon it to the exclusive use of Evangelicals.

right elements have converged upon the University of California and sought to use "free speech" as a platform for hate speech. Such movements not only fly in the face of what the GTU is about, they corrode the nature of love, cooperation, and harmony that form the bedrock upon which the GTU is built. No doubt, we are not alone in such an experience. Seminaries and divinity schools that embrace the diversity of humanity have felt similar worries.

Positing a "Progressive Spirituality"

In the movie, *Hero*, Jet Li plays an unnamed warrior from a small kingdom in China. He was sent to assassinate the King of Qin, who will become the Emperor Qin, the first emperor of a unified China. To do so, he needed to place himself within ten steps of the Emperor, which necessitated him to procure evidence that the Emperor's most feared enemies were silenced. One of those enemies was a master calligrapher, and according to the assassin, he commissioned him to write the character for "sword" because it supposedly betrays his swordsmanship. The assassin presents the calligraphy to the Emperor as one way to get near him.

Near the end of the movie, the Emperor muses at the calligraphy and suddenly had a Eureka moment. As he describes it, the calligraphy does not present the calligrapher's swordsmanship at all, but his "sword spirituality," comprising the three stages leading up to his highest ideals relating to the sword. At the most elementary stage, the sword and its wielder are one – the person becomes the sword, and the sword becomes the person – so that even a blade of grass becomes a dangerous weapon. At the intermediate stage, the sword becomes spiritual, residing in the heart, so that the wielder does not need the sword to kill his enemy. But the ultimate stage, the ultimate ideal of swordsmanship, is when the sword disappears. The wielder embraces everything around her so that the desire to kill

disappears, leaving only peace in its wake. In such a situation, turmoil and violence transform into harmonious peace.

I bring up this movie to suggest that what progressive movements are rather weak in is a deep spirituality that makes justice not just an issue of righteousness and propriety, but an issue of the heart. The challenges that arose this past year in the public sphere, in my estimation, has brought this matter up to mind, and they are reflected in the scholarship published in this volume. Progressive ministry and theology cannot simply focus on reordering the world in a right way, assuming that those who don't comply will simply have to "get with the program." This is akin to remaining in the first stage of "sword spirituality," where coercion and violence becomes instrumental to a righteous (or, indeed, unrighteous) end. And certainly, coercive methods of conversion and alignment with the church's mission have been practiced in the past and today, with lasting damages to the church's witness. Although some Christians, such as Pope St. John Paul II, have apologized for the Crusades, the work of reconciliation and harmony between Christian and Muslim groups is much more difficult and continues to this very day. Such a difficult *boni ardui* has a spiritual component in which mutual conversations that seek to understand different religious and theological frameworks become spaces for reconciliation and harmony. It is this spirituality that beckons those from outside the walls of the conversation to traverse its porosity and participate in it.

My reflections come from the purview of (Reformed) Christian theology, which takes seriously the presence of human sin and, as such, does not foreclose the likelihood of people for whom the ideal picture of justice is oppression, and for whom God's vision of justice constitutes infringement on their personal liberties and privileges. But this dire view of human nature must be held in tension with theological anthropologies insisting that fundamental goodness still exists in humanity. God, Creator of all good things, intends for

goodness to be a constitutive and critical element of human nature. Debates on the pervasiveness of sin aside, the lesson we need to take is the necessity of framing justice so that everybody will *want* to participate in efforts to bring societies and the world one step closer to perfect justice. That is, they participate in the work of justice, not out of coercion but desire. It is this desire that powers faculty and students of the Graduate Theological Union to do the interdisciplinary and interreligious scholarship, for at the end of the day, this is scholarship that is built upon the desire to find solutions to make the world a better place.

But at the base of that desire is a humility that recognizes that the work of justice is not an individualistic endeavor. Once upon a time, theologians and scholars occupied the privileged echelons of the theological and religious hierarchy, but only a very few institutions exist today where ivory towers are meticulously maintained. (Indeed, those ivory towers are expensive to maintain!) There is less and less space for theologians to dwell in the realm of the abstract, assuming that people will understand what is going on. Johann Baptist Metz, in his political theological writings, recognized this coming challenge as he constructed his vision of political theology as a "practical fundamental theology."[2] The humility we need is one that embraces the art of meaningful solidarity and dense networking across boundaries in order to formulate practical strategies, game-plans, and messaging efforts in suffrage for justice. Understood this way, progressive ministry and theology recognizes the unsustainability of separating theology from ministry. Pravina Rodrigues's critique of comparative theology in this issue draws attention to this separation more broadly in that theology does not take into account the complex ways in which religious identities are practiced. Those theological ivory towers, gleaming they may be,

[2] See Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Herder & Herder, 2007).

can hide foundations of colonialism, racism, and various oppressions, which may also attest to why they are crumbling fast. Ministers and spiritual leaders need to not see themselves as somehow being subservient, less "knowledgeable" than the theologians – in fact, the truth is they already are doing theology, perhaps with even more facility than the theologians themselves! While she does not bring this up, such a humility is a part of the spirituality of academic inquiry that Professor Elizabeth Liebert reflects on in her Distinguished Faculty Lecture.

It is when ministry and theology overlap significantly that new ways of doing ministry and theology can be generated, and it is upon this methodological foundation – where "religion meets the world" – that interdisciplinary, interreligious scholarship matters. This year's Surjit Singh Lecture by Jeffrey D. Long draws on his religious peregrinations to posit a Jain-inspired approach to dialoguing across different worldviews. Jennifer Fernandez's article places in conversation Max Weber, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt to trace a theological history of work, and to uncover its suppressionist forces that exalts work into potential idolatry. Jaesung Ryu draws on Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology to forward a pastoral approach to responding theologically to trauma, particularly among Korean comfort women.

I am not suggesting that theologians, here, need to be ordained. Rather, theologians in a time of change need to be part of the solutions they propose. In this way, they exercise forms of ministry that could be valuable resources for ordained ministers. Additionally, ordained ministers, many of whom are seasoned theologians, are resources for theologians and scholars as well. When the wall between theological academia and ministry break down, new ways can be proposed so that other walls of hostility, not just between world and God, but between neighbors and strangers, can be torn down as well. Humility, when done well, brings into

solidarity both rich and poor, East and West, the powerful and downtrodden, so that together the world can become more human. Indeed, more merciful.

Changes at the GTU

In Japan, skyscrapers often contain extremely complex earthquake-resistant technologies, but no amount of mathematical modeling or laboratory testing could test the effectiveness of those technologies than an actual earthquake. I surmise that this is what the GTU and many religious and theological institutions are facing, not a literal earthquake (hopefully) but an earthquake of values. And while we might seem helpless in the midst of this epistemological earthquake, we are heartened by what GTU students and faculty have been doing. Some have participated in marches and protests against hate, many in clerical robes, demonstrating that right-wing Evangelicals who have allied with hatred and evil do not have the final word. They do not speak on behalf of all Christians and of all religious communities in the United States. Others have marched alongside Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters in solidarity as Islamophobia and anti-Semitic sentiments run high throughout the country.

More importantly, through exercising "scholarship in activism," GTU members actuate what it means for the GTU to be "where religion meets the world." In the midst of the political earthquake that Trump unleashed, while evil ghosts and spirits of ages past – be it in the form of Nazism or White supremacy – have arisen from the fissures, it is in the shaking that demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of the GTU's interreligious, justice-minded approach, one that critically analyzes and resources wisdom from our ancestors past and brings it into critical conversation with present challenges. It is in the rise of injustices past that the GTU was made for such a time as this.

But, as with every earthquake, assessments are important in order to improve upon existing systems. Change always happens after such shaking, and on that note, I draw the reader's attention to two changes at the GTU that affect the BJRT. First, over the course of 2016-2017, administrators have been working on a new rebranding for the GTU. As this journal was being produced, the new rebranding was in the process of being rolled out. The previous logo, in use from 1962 to 2016, featured a flame that represented the spirit that is common across all religious traditions. It was, perhaps, a better reflection of the cooperative and aspirational ecumenical spirit of the 1960s and 1970s. Such cooperative and ecumenical spirit continues to endure at the GTU, but in light of the contexts the GTU finds itself in, the new logo symbolizes the intersections, convergences, and diversity of scholarly approaches and perspectives already represented on Holy Hill. As a publication affiliated with the GTU, the editors have seen fit to bring the BJRT in line with this rebranding. As such, the design of this year's issue has been changed and made simpler. The website has been retooled completely to reflect the rebranding. As before, copies of the BJRT are available for free in PDF on both the website and the Academia.edu page, and hard copies are available for purchase on Lulu.com.

Second, the BJRT joins the GTU community in welcoming the 7th Academic Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Uriah Y. Kim. Dean Kim is the second alumnus of the GTU to serve as Dean, having completed his dissertation in Hebrew Bible, and returns to Holy Hill from Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. One of the priorities for Dean Kim is the BJRT. For the past 3 years, the Journal has been housed under the generous administrative support of Student Affairs, specifically under the Professional Development Program. However, the wide variety of methods coming from many religious traditions is a unique aspect of the Journal that is rarely seen in religious and theological journals in existence right now.

What this means for the BJRT is that in the coming year, which will be reflected in Volume 4, the Journal will transition into Academic Affairs. Readers should know that this transition will not lead to changes in existing processes thus far. Volume 4 submissions will still be due February 1, 2018. The Instructions and Style Guide, as well as existing procedures, will not change. Any such changes will be communicated to the public through the BJRT website, our new Facebook page (link is on the website), and our Academia.edu page.

2017 is a challenging year for the world, and I am sanguine as to whether 2018 will be better. But the work of religious scholarship and praxis moves onward, especially at Holy Hill. The BJRT is honored to continue to capture at least some of what happens in the scholarship at Holy Hill, and to host conversations from across the nation and world, in its mission to be a nexus for where "religion meets the world."