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The Challenges (and Opportunities) of “Secularization”

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The 2017-2018 academic year included several changes at the Graduate Theological Union, but perhaps none of them are as important as the retirement of our 7th president, Riess Potterveld. President Potterveld came to the GTU from the Pacific School of Religion, where he was president for three years. Prior to that, he was president of Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania for eight years. His tenure as GTU’s president was only 5 years long, and yet within those years, much has changed for the better. Financially, for instance, when he arrived in 2013, the GTU’s long-term endowment was around \$30 million. By the end of his tenure, it stands at around \$45 million.¹ Under his leadership, there was a flurry of new initiatives and activity. The doctoral program was reviewed and restructured. Several centers were established, such as the Shingal Center for Dharma Studies, and others were brought under the GTU umbrella such as the Center for Swedenborgian Studies, Doug Adams Gallery and the Center for the Arts and Religion, and the Ayala Center for Theology and Natural Sciences. This journal began under his presidency and also benefited from his support; he wrote the afterword for the

¹ Information on Long Term investments were obtained through the Association of Theological Schools’ annual data tables. See <https://www.ats.edu/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables>

Journal's special issue celebrating the work and leadership of Judith Berling and Arthur Holder (see. Vol. 2, No. 2). As he retires in June 2018, new initiatives at the GTU are still underway.

It was a far cry from 2013 when both he and I began our work at the GTU. At the doctoral orientation, where I was a bright-eyed, budding theology student, President Potterveld had just been named acting president for barely two months, making him as new to the GTU as I was. My first memory of him was his first meeting with students in the Richard Dinner Board Room. Students were concerned with the GTU's rather fragile financial situation and the lack of housing, and brought those concerns directly to him. Seminary and university presidents typically would respond rather "politically" given their positions, and may provide answers that don't answer the question. But to my surprise, President Potterveld addressed those the issues directly and candidly. He acknowledged the fragile finances and that he could not guarantee any short-term solutions. It was a level of honesty, transparency, and humility that perhaps, given the situation, many of us did not appreciate then, but looking back, is remarkable and attests to what would come later in his presidency.

Every semester since then, he would host in his office two 2-hour sessions where students can come in to ask questions about the GTU. The next fall, in 2014, when students arrived, he presented us with a list of several projects and initiatives he was pursuing that would not only improve the GTU academically, but also help financially. With each initiative, he indicated the progress. Again, he remained honest about some of the pressing problems, such as the lack of affordable housing in the Bay Area, a problem which also vexed our neighbors at the University of California. All in all, I was unbelievably impressed, and the next few years, many of the initiatives on that list were brought to completion. Hence, I greeted his announcement of his retirement with a mix of gratitude and unhappiness.

Upon hearing about his retirement, I thought at first to commission a special issue to honor his presidency. But the effort quickly derailed as I thought about who I could ask to contribute to that issue. It takes a special person with unique skill sets, pastoral sensitivities, and commitment to

interreligious and ecumenical theological education to captain a unique consortial ship such as the GTU. This neat consortium, situated on Holy Hill overlooking the University of California, is both confessional and yet interreligious, exercising a generous catholicity that stretches the definition of “ecumenical.” Consortial seminaries and institutes are free to situate their scholarship confessionally while having access to other approaches to religious and theological problems. I could only think of one other person who can appreciate this interreligious uniqueness that is the GTU. Nonetheless, I hope to pour a libation to President Potterveld in making a short reflection in this editorial on the challenges (and opportunities) of “secularization” insofar as theological education is concerned.

Theological Education When Nobody Goes to Church

Last year, after a sermon, a fellow member at church approached me to chat. He shared about how he feels religion is “no longer a thing anymore.” It seems to just create more problems than propose real solutions, and the elections of 2016 confirmed his concerns. And I suppose to some extent, he is correct. Religion as a static institution that sought to preserve the past is, indeed, “no longer a thing anymore.” With the election of Donald Trump, many are seeing how religion is a powerful motivator of injustice and fear in our country, to the point where it seems to be the cause of injustice and violence. And perhaps the experiences in our churches and other places of worship can confirm this. In contrast to the world, church was supposed to be where people somehow got along, worked things out peaceably and in charity. It was to be a community where people fought for justice and did what was right. But in reality, churches and other places of worship often reflect the conflicts that plague the world. People *don't* get along, and they *don't* (want to) work things out charitably and patiently. And people prefer that the fight for justice and righteousness happens outside the walls.

In the mid- to long-run, this has an effect on theological education. For some time, at least in Christian theological education, curricula focus on the four established sub-disciplines: biblical studies, systematic theology, practical theology, and (church) history. These remain important sub-disciplines, but as they become pastors, a lot of them suggest that

what is missing a lot of times is the practical nitty-gritty of leading a church. What are strategies that we can take to navigate intractable differences between strong personalities in church leadership? What are ways we manage church budgets that can reduce unnecessary costs while upholding important programs? The pastors coming out of many seminaries and divinity schools have become excellent academic theologians, but were not trained to be effective pastors. And as such, theological academy becomes more attractive as a calling than the important work of pastoral ministry. This is, to be sure, not a new phenomenon. Back in 1977, James Cone identified this problem in a sermon he delivered at Duke University. In it, he preached,

What is the Christian church, and how is it related to the liberation of people in the world? The answer to the question is not easy for most Christian churches because they do not know what the Christian message really is. No one can preach what they do not know. Neither can the church be the church if the people of the church do not know what the church is. To be sure, we know something about Jesus Christ, and we have heard that God sent him into the world in order that we might be saved. But the question is, who is Jesus Christ? And what exactly does salvation mean? On this question, we often leave it to theologians and preachers to tell us what we ought to believe.

But that is a mistake.

Aside from the fact that God did not entrust his kingdom to theologians but to a carpenter from Nazareth, theologians and preachers often forget the essential truth of the Christian gospel. They often let themselves get bogged down in professional and pastoral duties which often are only remotely related to the central message of the gospel. They often become busybodies, good at reading books and preaching sermons, but many times not knowing what exactly it all has to do with life, and God's will to set the captives free. If the church is to be the church, it cannot be left completely in the hands of theologians and preachers.²

It is a sobering sermon, but Cone was not arguing that theologians and religious scholarship are useless. He is, instead, pointing to the tendency for the theological and pastoral elite to make the theological academy and church administration the center of ecclesiology rather than Christ, to whom the church belongs. This is something unique to Christianity because, in Cone's biblical theology, this was attested in the witness of God in the Hebrew Bible, and the witness of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. For the church to situate its identity beyond the God of the oppressed indicates its rejection of the Scriptures that described God as such.

Cone was not inventing a new theology. It is more accurate to say that he was drawing deeply from the church's history and traditions to argue that the church has failed to be truly catholic. Its catholicity is only superficial because the church does not recognize the ways in which it has deeply participated in enriching the humanity of some and in dehumanizing of others. By its participation in dehumanization and by strategically forgetting it, the church has failed to be what God has called it to be. To use the phrase popularized by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the church has peddled "cheap grace." To make the connection between the Black experience, Christian theology, and ecclesial practice requires a wealth of theological sensitivities that good theological education provides and encourages. Good theological education – here, I draw from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – trains future leaders and ministers to be epistemological performers.³ Unfortunately, she does not clearly define what "epistemological performance" is precisely, except to describe it as a way to inhabit the double-bind between epistemology and the epistemic. As I interpret it, it is a way to live between the "is", the "should be", and the validation of them. Church as it "should be" will not be the church as it "is", and that is likely because people – theologians, pastors, congregants, hierarchs – have their methods and criteria for validating the nature of "is" and "should be." To navigate and to discern ways forward amidst the ecclesial perichoresis of

² James H. Cone, "The Church Struggling for the Liberation of the People," February 13, 1977, in *Duke University Chapel Recordings*, MP3 audio, 1:14:35, <https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/r4t727x2n>.

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 122.

these three visions in our present contexts is the challenge that ministers face. Are our theological institutions training future ministers to do this?

Theological terms and academic theology matter, to be sure, but we must remember that, in the ideological bubble of the hypothetical that is divorced from anything concrete, theology is often an internal discussion, and as such, carry the weight of privilege. The theological guild has a way of being its own class of religious existence, and within certain strands of Christianity, the *arête* of ecclesial accomplishment is not to be a congregational minister, but to be a doctor of the church, a theologian. Churches, mosques, and synagogues are local communities, and oftentimes, they have their own unique languages. But these languages are becoming irrelevant in the face of the globalizing power of the easy, the consumable, and the capitalizable. Our craft is, unfortunately, always facing the temptation offered by the devil to Jesus: “the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.” (Matt. 4:9) How do we navigate our scholarship so that it speaks concretely to the world while acknowledging the complex dynamics within which it operates? Cone’s suggestion – one that is certainly worth contemplating further – is to seek out the victims of injustice. That is to say, our epistemological performance must not be far from, if not drawn from, the voices of the marginal, from those outside the walls of the theological academy, of society and economy. The marginal may not speak in theological languages, but we cannot deny that their voices cannot be dismissed. I submit that my suggestion is influenced by Christian traditions, but if I could exercise some boldness, perhaps some of it may find application in non-Christian contexts.

Secular Opportunities for Religious Education

What all this means is that “secularization” is an opportunity for deepening our scholarship, to ensure that religion does not become an abstract repository of a bygone age. Rather, it is about religion meeting the world, which consists of an invitation to grow, thrive, and unite in solutions. If religious and theological scholarship speaks in the language of the people, and gives voice to those in the margins as much as it does to those in the center, then religious and theological education will necessarily be “secular” in that it becomes integral to what it means for the world to be

the world. Hence, our jumble of conflicting and complementary articulations and explications of the divine matter. The Tower of Babel can be a place where the divine forces division, or it can be a place where the divine provides a refuge.

This is what the BJRT aspires towards. Entering our fourth volume, we acknowledge that we are no longer “new.” Being a forum for interdisciplinary and interreligious scholarship makes this a complicated business. This year’s volume is made more complicated by the fact that we’ve had a record number of submissions, necessitating for the first time the need for a second issue. As our original staff graduate from the GTU, the leadership will naturally change as well. We also wish to extend our gratitude to two members of the staff who have been with the Journal from Volume 1, production/copy editor *Dr. Rob Peach* and theology department editor *Dr. Therese Bjørnaas*, both of whom have graduated in May. We thank them for their service to the journal, and look forward to their continuing to serve us as associate editors! We thank our staff and peer-reviewers this year, many of whom had to balance teaching and research responsibilities with peer-reviewing the many submissions we’ve received!

The GTU’s interreligious and interdisciplinary scholarship, mirrored in the BJRT, is a half-century experiment in articulating the nature of Babel. It is, of course, still a work in progress, but it must be – epistemological performance is always evolving. And yet, in President Potterveld’s humble and honest leadership through some of the most difficult times in the GTU’s history, we were privileged to witness one good example of making this performance happen. Thus, this journal and its staff salute his leadership and wish him and his family the best in his retirement.

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