

The 2000 Distinguished Faculty Lecture

Entering Other Worlds: Theological Learning and Non-Christian Religions

*Dr. Judith Berling, Professor of Chinese and Comparative Religions
Graduate Theological Union*

Wednesday, November 15
7:00 P.M.

Chapel of the Great Commission
Pacific School of Religion
1798 Scenic Avenue, Berkeley



Please join us afterward for a reception and faculty publications fair at the GTU bookstore, 2465 Le Conte Avenue. The fair highlights recent publications by GTU faculty members. Refreshments will be served.



Entering Other Worlds: Theological Learning and Non-Christian Religions

Judith A. Berling
GTU Distinguished Faculty Lecture
November 15, 2000¹

As you know, I am a rare bird in the world of theological education, one of a tiny flock of specialists in non-Christian religions whose academic employment is in a theological institution. My location at "GTU central" is somehow symbolic: I am without a school, grouped with faculty representing "other religions" and ex-Deans (the truly marginal! and I represent both of those marginal categories!) I have colleagues in religious studies and in theological studies who find my presence at the GTU very strange indeed. Such skeptics continue to see the two forms of education in religion as fundamentally at odds. Other colleagues who affirm my presence at the GTU may do so for the wrong reasons: hoping that theological education will become multifaith education (not appropriate to its purposes) or that theological schools will require a religious studies component in the curriculum (not on the horizon). As of this year, I have spent more time in theological education (now in my fourteenth year) than in religious studies (thirteen years). My theological experience is greater, but just by a hair.

I am also a rare bird because from the outset I have devoted considerable energy to the field of teaching and learning in religion and theology. I've taught multiple workshops for secondary, college, and theological teachers. I've participated in a multi-year research project on religious studies and the liberal arts. I was invited to be founding co-editor of the journal Teaching Theology and Religion. I regularly teach a doctoral seminar on course design and syllabus development.

I am now embarking on a book project that builds on my dual backgrounds in comparative religions and in teaching and learning to advance the understanding and practice of theological learning of non-Christian religions. The book will have two audiences. The primary audience is faculty in theological disciplines who seek to address "other religions" as best they can within the courses and curriculum of theological education. They are on the front lines of this issue. The secondary audience is theological students, clergy, and thoughtful Christians who seek to better understand how to learn non-Christian religions.

The focus of the project is "learning non-Christian religions," an unusual turn of phrase. I deliberately avoid "learning about non-Christian religions," since such language reduces religions to mere information, failing to recognize the religious nature of religions. The project fosters learning non-Christian religions as a process which enables appropriate relationships and engagements. It is about theological learning, pursued by persons seeking to deepen and refine

¹ I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Matthew Farris, who read and critiqued several drafts of this lecture, offering insightful counsel. I also thank my partner Rhoda Bunnell, without whose support and help in innumerable ways this work would not be possible.

their own faith while also entering into knowledgeable, appropriate, and loving relationships with others in the church and the world.

Given constraints of time, I can offer this evening only a foretaste of the larger project. I will begin by briefly rehearsing the impact of religious diversity on society, churches, and pastoral activities. I will then briefly develop a framework that articulates several distinct moments (a logical sequence) in learning non-Christian religions. This articulation of the learning process will be used to evaluate the adequacy of common teaching and learning strategies. I will conclude by envisioning new directions, dreaming beyond the probable to the possible and the promising.

The Reality of Religious Diversity

Whether we celebrate or lament it, religious diversity is an increasingly insistent fact of our lives. Patterns of migration have changed the religious face of our society. A few examples will suffice to make the point. a) As of 1996, there were fifty-nine mosques in Chicago, and more Muslims than Episcopalians in North America. b) The First Parliament of World Religions in 1898 in Chicago brought representatives of the world's religions from around the globe. The Centennial of the World Parliament in 1998 could have gathered the representatives from the same array of religions from the catchment of virtually any major U.S. urban center. c) A study of extended families in the Silicon Valley during the early 1980s did not find a single family representing only one religion. A family I knew was a case in point: the wife was an active Zen Buddhist; the husband an unchurched professional theologian; the elder son a Quaker, the younger a devout Roman Catholic.

Religious diversity is evident in our communities, our schools, our hospitals, and our work places. Such diversity is not simply a census statistic, nor a listing of religious organizations in the "yellow pages." It is a fact of our everyday lives.

Religious diversity also affects the churches. Parishes include members from diverse cultural backgrounds, some of which are shaped by a non-Christian religion. Some members have lived for an extended period in another culture, and thus find their sensibilities transformed by cross-cultural experiences shaped by non-Christian religions. Some Christians have practiced Buddhist meditation, or Hindu Yoga, or Taichi. Children, brothers or sisters of church members become involved with other faiths. Then there is religious intermarriage. While some interfaith couples resolve tensions by withdrawing from active observance, friends in my parish testify that their interfaith marriages moved them to renewed commitment to their respective traditions, and a commitment for each to honor their spouse's tradition as well. These couples are negotiating religious diversity every day of their lives.

As religious diversity touches the lives of Christians in so many ways, it becomes a significant factor in ministry. How do we prepare pastors to understand and respond to the ways in which other religions are impacting the lives of Christians? How do we deal with Christians who see writings and practices of other faiths as contributing to their spiritual lives? Both pastors and lay Christians must learn how to understand, live among, and relate to persons from and shaped by other religious traditions.

Given the above realities, the "relevance" of other religions for theological education is clear. What is less clear is how we can address these issues effectively.

The Framework: Learning Non-Christian Religions

In this project I seek to unpack or nuance learning non-Christian religions in a theological setting by means of a framework that articulates several learning moments. This framework is meant to stimulate conversation, to be refined through interchange with colleagues from many disciplines. It is not a psychological model positing learning stages, nor is it an explanatory model derived from empirical evidence. The learning process is drawn from the intersection of comparative religions and theological teaching and learning. It unpacks or distinguishes what is too often glossed over. It invites careful attention to what is entailed in learning another religion, and to what such learning is intended to do for theological students. It fleshes out the comparative dimensions and the theological learning process, and articulates their complex relationships.

Background: Comparison and Teaching and Learning Theories

Comparison is a highly contended topic within religious studies. Many drawn to comparisons see it as a way to identify and celebrate the similarities among all religions. Jonathan Z. Smith has characterized such thinking as "magical," a pre-rational faith in the "power" "similarity." He comments, "The procedure is homeopathic. The theory is built on contagion. The issue of difference has been all but forgotten."² Comparison, Smith reminds us, is always about both similarity and difference.

Scholars remind us that at one level comparison is common and inevitable. To quote Jonathan Z. Smith once more:

The process of comparison is a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence. Whether revealed in the logical grouping of classes, in poetic similes, in mimesis, or other like activities — comparison, the bringing together of two or more objects for the purpose of noting either similarity or dissimilarity, is the omnipresent substructure of human thought. Without it, we could not speak, perceive, learn, or reason. (p. 77)

Comparison is part and parcel of the way that human beings assimilate new information and sort the various "things" we encounter into groups, categories, and patterns. It is important, however, to distinguish between the inevitable human tendency to assimilate something new by means of comparison from an attempt to understand another culture or religion by honing comparative learning and analysis. The first operation assimilates "the new" or "the other" into the learner's world on the learner's terms. The second seeks to understand the new and the other, and to expand the learner's horizons.

Specialists in particular traditions, especially in this era of "post-modern" critical theory, have sometimes celebrated the difference to the point of rejecting comparison altogether. Certainly the "universalizing" agendas of earlier comparative theories are in serious disfavor. This has challenged a group of scholars of religions to rethink the grounds, methods, and ends of comparison.

² Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," (orig. 1982), reprinted in A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Post-Modern Age, eds., Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 25-26.

In an excellent volume entitled A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Post-Modern Age, a group of scholars builds on the work of Jonathan Z. Smith to formulate an approach to comparative religion which is cognizant of the issues raised by post-modernism. While each contributor to the volume offers a slightly different approach, they share a general orientation:

In sum, our contributors argue that scholars can risk positing a comparative framework not to reach closure in service of a particular theory, nor to achieve [a definitive] moral judgment or to gain intellectual control over the "other," but to empower mutual dialogue and the quest for understanding. (p. 17)

This "beyond the post" approach to comparison will inform this project.

Until twenty years ago, literature on pedagogy focussed almost exclusively on what teachers did, and how they could do it better. Over the past twenty years, there has emerged a significant literature on how students learn. Perhaps the single most influential theorist has been Howard Gardner, whose 1983 Frames of Mind articulated a theory of "multiple intelligences" that significantly expanded our understandings of human intelligence and learning. New sub-fields of learning theory blossomed: experiential learning, collaborative learning, multi-cultural learning. Although scholars in these various fields expound different theories, they all stress that successful teaching focuses on the ways students learn and what they take away from the learning experience. Learning theories have also moved beyond education as the "imparting of information," what Paolo Freire called "the banking model", in which information is "deposited" in the student, available to be "withdrawn" when needed. If learning is not simply about ingesting and parroting back "information," then it is about something else -- a form of human attainment or the development of certain capacities or virtues in the learner.

The 1986 Women's Ways of Knowing studied closely women's approaches and obstacles to learning. The 1996 sequel Knowledge, Difference, and Power built upon this seminal research with even more explicit attention to issues of race and class. Phenomenological and narrative approaches to teaching and learning have addressed issues of how learners cross cultural boundaries and enter other worlds. These two approaches are discussed in relation to theological learning in Mary Elizabeth Moore's Teaching from the Heart.

The framework I am developing in this project attends carefully to the structure or process of theological students' learning of non-Christian religions, and what the students are to "take away." It separates the learning process into number of distinct moments, each of which requires a different sort of pedagogical attention.³ The "moments" constitute a learning process, a sequence of learning. The "moments" circle back on one another. I separate them only for the purpose of unpacking various aspects of learning, not to suggest a strict temporal sequence.

Distinct moments: The Learning Process

1) Encountering Difference

Learning non-Christian religions begins with engaging their difference, seeking to understand them as far as possible on their own terms, to come to

³ Jonathan Z. Smith distinguished four "moments" in the scholarly comparative enterprise (p. 239); some aspects of his articulation helps inform parts of my analysis, but the framework I develop here focuses on learning moments, not on a scholarly enterprise.

know them well and accurately. Learners engage the distinctive language, forms of life, symbols, rituals, and beliefs that constitute a non-Christian religion. This engagement must occur in sufficient depth to enable learners figuratively to enter another "world," a complex of inter-related meanings. Students might enter another world through primary texts, through film or video, through distinctive examples of religious practice and/or belief, through visiting a site, or through face to face meeting with a representative of the tradition. These and other modes of "entering another world" each have to be evaluated in terms of how well they genuinely engage the distinctiveness of the non-Christian religion, stretching the horizons of the learners. If learners are not stretched or challenged by "difference," learning does not take place.

2) Initial comparison

Coming to understand another religion well also entails a comparative moment I term "initial comparison," comparing and contrasting what the students seek to learn with what they already know. This "moment" is logically posterior to the prior moment (encounter with difference). If students rely on familiar lenses and categories too early in the learning process, they will not engage the "difference" of the non-Christian religion; they will simply peer at it through their own cultural, experiential, and religious lenses. Having been stretched by the "difference" they encounter, however, students will take the first steps to "make sense of" what they have encountered in familiar terms. This initial comparison represents the comparative dimension of "basic human functioning," which was discussed earlier. It is a natural early stage of learning, but does not fully apprehend or engage the other.

"Initial comparison" is not yet an evaluative moment. Students are not ready to make judgements about what is compatible and incompatible between traditions. This early comparison is simply an aid to "overcoming strangeness." (Smith, p. 27) One understands the new by comparing and contrasting it with what one already knows. Such initial comparing is also necessary in the study of another religion. Students need to ask: Is such-and-such aspect of the religion we are studying something like our understanding of scripture? Of ritual? Of compassion?

3) Conversational Comparison

For the sake of learning another religion, the "initial comparison" needs to be followed or accompanied by what I term "conversational comparison." The "conversation" may be literal or metaphorical. The important point is that the distinctiveness of the non-Christian religion not be lost; it must "respond" to and sometimes resist the students' initial attempts at comparative understanding. Conversational comparison maintains the tension between the non-Christian religion's account of itself and students' attempts to understand aspects of it in relation to more familiar categories and assumptions.

4) Evaluative Comparisons and Evaluative Conversations

a) responding from one's own tradition

The next learning moment is evaluative. Students are asked to call upon their capacities (based on their cultural and religious heritage) to begin to formulate judgments about what they have learned of the other tradition. In the prior moment they sought to understand the other religion in its own terms and to situate what they were learning in relationship to familiar categories. Now they let their categories talk back, as it were: they ask probing questions,

discover similarities, and draw lines of disagreement. This is evaluative comparison: ideas, symbols, and practices of two traditions are compared and contrasted; judgements are made. Evaluative comparison requires theological reflection by the students from beginning to end. Students are encouraged to engage in theological and ethical reflection, to respond out of their own faith tradition.

b) evaluative conversation

Evaluative comparison logically moves conversational comparison to the evaluative level. A representative of the other tradition, or its texts and practices, or a person who is interpreting the religion for the students, responds to students' initial evaluative judgments, correcting misunderstandings, defending against unconsidered negative judgments or cautioning against facile similarities, bringing the evaluative language and criteria of the other religion to the conversation. Students articulate the voice of their faith while learning to listen and respond to the voice of another.

c) the reflexive turn: re-evaluating one's own tradition

The conversation also gives rise to a reflexive move, a re-evaluation of one's own tradition in light of the conversation. Students may discover aspects of their own heritage they had never noticed, or think more deeply about a belief or a value in light of what they have learned from the other religion.

5) The move into practice

The next learning moment moves understandings and judgments into practice. What difference does the students' understanding of the other religion make to them, or to their relationships with others? How does it affect the way they live in the world, how they minister and express their faith, how they engage and work with others? Although this moment of learning is lifted up by the aims of theological education, it is of more general significance.

Learning another religion is engaging a human community. It is not simply amassing more information about the world; it engages other systems of meaning and creates new relationships. Learning another religion is learning how to live in a diverse world, how to engage respectfully and appropriately with other peoples and communities.

Students going into ministry will relate pastorally to Christians whose lives are impacted by other faiths, assisting them to understand and engage appropriately. Discerning the limits and possibilities of appropriate engagement requires not only learning a non-Christian religion well, but also careful theological reflection. It also entails an ongoing process of engaging the distinctiveness of other religions, performing initial comparisons, entering into conversation, making theological judgements, entering into conversation about those judgments, and refining one's relationships and behaviors on the basis of that learning.

6) Learning the process

The ongoing process just described suggests another learning moment. If the world is as religiously diverse as I have described, it is highly unlikely that we will encounter persons from only one other religion, or that we could predict in advance which other religion we should learn. Today's theological students need a facility or skill in learning other religions, leading themselves through the process described above so that they understand well, can enter into evaluative conversation, and can live, relate, and minister appropriately. That means that

teaching other religions also has to lift up the moments in this learning process, helping students to understand not only one other tradition, but also what is entailed in coming to understand any other religion. This pedagogical moment, alas, is generally neglected, and it seriously undermines the value of what is taught. Without this moment, teaching imparts information rather than nurturing a set of competencies.

Having articulated this learning process, I now discuss various pedagogical practices in light of the learning model.

Pedagogical Practices

The Survey of World Religions

Theological students convinced of the importance of religious diversity often ask for a survey of world religions. The reasons are fairly easy to understand. They understand their need as to "know something about" other religions, and the most efficient way to do so is in a single elective course which will deal with all (important) religions. They are familiar with survey courses from undergraduate education; surveys promise to provide the information in a concise and helpful framework that is relatively easy to comprehend and grasp, so as not to distract from their core theological courses. Surveys are convenient for the faculty as well, as they lessen the pressure on the core courses to address these challenging issues.

The survey course, however, does not begin to address the learning process articulated earlier. First, it does not present the non-Christian religions on their own terms; there is not time to do so in a survey. Surveys race through the diversity of religions so quickly that the instructor and/or the textbook can only select and present a few salient points, representing a prior interpretive framework. This distillation of religious difference into a comprehensive interpretive framework is more or less required of a "world survey," and it fails to do justice to each distinctive religion. As a general principle, the more "readable" a textbook on world religions, the less well the text has presented the distinctiveness of each religion. Thus what the students get is the pre-packaged comparative reflection of the author/instructor, who — almost by definition — cannot be deeply familiar with all of the religions included. The pre-packaged framework fails to confront difference or stretch students' horizons. Surveys by their very nature fail to engage the kinds of learning a theological student needs.

Coming to understand another religion on its own terms also means engaging what is vital, contended over, or struggled for in the religion. No religious tradition is static; adherents wrestle with issues which make a difference in their lives. The survey course so distills and pre-packages each religion that it is "frozen" or "essentialized" in a way that misses its internal vitality and diversity.

The "survey" course treats religions simply as information. One can certainly learn some facts about other religions, but this fails to serve theological education, which sees religion as a significant life commitment, key to individual and communal identity. Religions are living faiths. Thus coming to understand other religions in terms of their distinctive language, symbols, behavior, and self-presentation is not only the way to understand well and accurately, but also a way to honor religions as religions.

Surveys certainly do not allow sufficient exposure or time for the student's initial comparison, conversational comparison, theological reflection or

evaluative conversation; they don't require move into practice and living, nor reflection on the process of learning about other religions. Surveys taken as electives would require that a student both intuit all aspects of the learning process we have described and carry it through on their own.

This analysis suggests that if we choose to offer separate courses on non-Christian religions, we should avoid surveys, and introduce one -- at most two -- other religions, making certain that the course is designed to present religions on their own distinctive terms. The course should also ideally attend to all levels of comparison (initial, conversational, and evaluative), theological reflection, move into practice, and reflection on the process of theological learning of other religions.

First hand or immersion experiences

Many theological teachers and learners believe that other faiths require face-to-face experiential learning. This approach has much to commend it. Leaving one's familiar turf to enter another community's distinctive space creates an experience of difference. It is an inhabited context, someone else's domain. The ideas, practices, and symbols of another religion are no longer merely "information," but human experience. The structure of the experience invites students into conversation with others.

Viewed against our learning process, however, we can interrogate educational aspects of the immersion experience or site visit. If the first moment of learning is to understand the other religion as far as possible on its own terms, then we must ask both about the preparation for and structure of the immersion or field experience. How are the students prepared for what they will see or experience at the site? Can they recognize the distinctive language, symbols, and behaviors of the other religion when they encounter them, or will they simply be dazzled by "something new and different" (which they are at a loss to process or understand)? Will their horizons be stretched?

Learners need to engage in initial comparison, to situate the various ideas, symbols, behaviors they are experiencing in relationship to prior knowledge and experience. What is the mechanism by which they can make such comparisons? Is there an instructor or guide with them to stimulate such comparison? How will they enter into comparative conversations, which maintain their initial understandings in tension with the self-understandings of the non-Christian religion?

In the evaluative moment, students are to theologize and make judgements on the basis of their own tradition and also to engage in evaluative conversations with the new tradition and reflect on their own. How is this to be done? Is there someone who can facilitate and encourage the theological reflection? Is there someone who can help students think more deeply about the "response" of the new religion?

Theological learning also requires movement into practice. How is the site visit related to pastoral practice, to establishing ongoing relationships, or to effective social action? Does the structure of the visit honor the "other's" ways, or are the hosts simply being used for our purposes?

Although immersion and site visits can be excellent modes of theological learning, they require considerable preparation, careful structure, and follow-up to ensure that they are genuinely learning exercises, and not simply "exposure."

"Exposure" is not the same as learning: it often creates the possibility of learning, but it is not learning in and of itself.

Other Religions should be taught by their Adherents

Theological teachers and learners often maintain that a religion should be taught by an adherent, not by an outsider. Theological faculty who teach Christianity are, after all, supposed to be committed Christians. There is considerable merit in this position. Teaching a religion in a theological setting requires that one teach more than information: one has to convey the living vitality and issues within the life of the religious community. However, we need to consider carefully the audience and aims of teaching a religion.

It is one thing for a learned member of a tradition to teach her tradition to committed adherents who are seeking to further their spiritual lives and/or prepare for religious leadership. Teacher and students are all adherents of the same tradition, and thus share (or presume to share) certain language, symbols, texts, rituals, behaviors, and mores which comprise the religious tradition in our day.

Teaching across religious lines is another matter. Such a teacher introduces students to language, symbols, rituals, behaviors, and values quite new to them, and in some cases at odds with their basic assumptions and values. The teacher cannot assume any prior familiarity with the tradition, and is likely to encounter misinformation and stereotypes. The students will in their initial comparison of the new religion use the language, categories, and patterns of thinking from the tradition they know best, and with which the teacher may not be in the least familiar.

Let's take a concrete example – theological students wish to learn Buddhism. Buddhism is a vast and rich tradition at least as complex and diverse as Christianity, and with an even longer history. A Buddhist master who is brilliant at training Buddhist monks and nuns might well be a disaster with Christian theological students, particularly if his genius were instruction using distinctively Buddhist language and imagery. As non-Buddhists, Christian students would have no familiarity with such language and imagery.

To be effective at teaching Christian students, a Buddhist teacher would have to have a special gift and special training (in Western academic institutions) to understand how to make Buddhism accessible to Christian minds and hearts. Note that this places a double onus on the Buddhist teacher: to embody and represent the experience of Buddhism, and to know a good deal about Christian students' backgrounds and interests. There are such Buddhists, thank goodness, and we are fortunate to have several at the GTU.

Let us look more closely at what the learning process articulated above would expect of such a Buddhist teacher. First he would need sufficient familiarity with Christianity to be able to facilitate the students' initial comparison, their first attempts to locate the ideas and concepts of Buddhism in light of what they already know. He would also respond in Buddhist terms to refine or correct initial comparisons.

Then in the evaluative moment, our Buddhist teacher would have to be able both to support and respond to the students' theologizing and evaluative comparisons on the students' terms, and to respond from the Buddhist side to correct misinformation and bring Buddhist perspectives to the conversation. Either the students would have to take this course at a point in their education

when they were well grounded and confident in their own theologizing (does this moment ever really come?), or we are putting an even greater burden on our Buddhist teacher to also be a Christian teacher. We are asking him to be a comparativist.

The Buddhist teacher is also unlikely to be well prepared for guiding the student's integration of new understandings into ministry and practice. At the very least, the Buddhist would need guidance from Christian theological faculty about how to guide or oversee this aspect of learning.

In sum, while the Buddhist teacher's experience as a Buddhist is a definite asset, it is not sufficient in itself. To be effective with Christian theological students, he would either need exceptional comparative and cross-cultural gifts, or else the Christian theological faculty will have to step in to help students complete the learning process.

Courses may also be offered by Christians trained as specialists in non-Christian religions. There is skepticism in theological circles about the authenticity of the "expert's" grasp of the other traditions. They do not speak with "the voice" of the tradition. Certainly those who teach other religions need more than "book learning," since textual expertise alone would give scant access to the living tradition. Faculty who teach such courses need languages and first-hand experience of the religion, including well developed relationships with adherents of the tradition. Some faculty are encouraged to learn and teach about the "native religions" of their particular cultural heritage. Joseph Kitagawa, former Dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, became an expert on Japanese religions on the urging of his theological professors. Edmond Yee of PLTS is a Lutheran theological faculty of Chinese descent who also has a doctorate from UCB in Confucian Studies. Others are called to study other religions, to become interpreters or human bridges between their culture and other cultures, between Christianity and other faiths. Although we do not study our own ancestral heritage, those of us who live extensively in another culture, devoting ourselves to studying another religious tradition, realize that we no longer fit neatly within one culture. We become bicultural, not by blood, but by virtue of experience.

When I first began to teach, students would ask me, "Are you a Daoist? A Buddhist? A Confucian?" I certainly do not "claim" any of those traditions for my own. On the other hand, I am not unchanged. My studies and experiences in East Asia have made me more familiar with and respectful of Chinese religions, in many respects "at home" in them. I have been enriched and influenced by my experiences. Thanks to these experiences, I am able to enter into and understand the internal logic and significance of Chinese religious practice and thought. I can help others — whether Western students, or even (to my great humility) students of Chinese ancestry who have not been introduced to their native traditions — engage and learn these traditions.

Christian theological faculty who have been trained in and had extensive experience of other religions can be good resources for theological teaching of other religions so long as they are keenly attentive to all aspects of the learning process. The challenge for them is to separate clearly their roles as interpreters of the other religions on its own terms and as facilitators of Christian theological reflection on the students' terms. Such faculty can fall into the trap of seeing their own personal way of bridging between their Christian faith and the other

religion as "the" way, forgetting that the students must build their own bridges between faiths and cultures based on their own learning, experience, and theological reflection.

Theological students must learn to theologize about the other religions

Theological faculty appropriately insist that theological students must learn to theologize about other religions. The importance of this principle is captured in evaluative and practice-related moments of the learning process. Students not only reflect theologically, but also carry the implications of those reflections into ministry and into life. Given what we have said above, let me simply lift up two points.

First, students cannot move on to theologizing about other religions until they have genuinely understood the other religions. This is common sense, but it is difficult to achieve in practice. Too often material about "another religion" is added to a core course in a way that never really allows students to understand the other religion on anything like its own terms. The students move on to "theologize" without ever really grasping the difference. Somehow the distinctiveness of the other tradition needs to be engaged: a) through careful engagement with primary religious texts (Francis Clooney argues that "reading into" and "seeing through" texts is the indispensable first step of comparative theologizing, since it draws students into the "world" of the other religion). b) through visiting or inviting a representative of the other religion and giving him or her ample time to both present a distinctive view and to enter into dialogue with Christian ideas; c) through a learning project or experience which asks students to engage the other religion in some depth before moving on to comparative theology. All of these require time and careful preparation and follow-through.

Second, theological reflection needs to be structured into the learning experience in a timely way with appropriate guidance and feedback. In the case of immersion and field experiences, or when a non-Christian is teaching a course, the theologizing sometimes happens after the learning experience, in the context of other courses. Does it happen soon enough to capture what is learned first-hand? Does it happen in a way that calls upon and addresses the learning experience?

Summary of Analysis of Pedagogical Practices

Using a framework that unpacked the "moments" in learning non-Christian religions we have been able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of common teaching and learning strategies. This model can help both teachers and learners to identify aspects of learning that need more attention so that they can seek appropriate assistance.

As we closely attend to what is entailed in theological learning of non-Christian religions, we realize how demanding this learning task is. We must attend carefully to the "difference" of the non-Christian religion, asking students to enter another world and be challenged by new perspectives. We need teachers who can help students with their "initial comparisons," can facilitate several levels of comparison (ensuring that the "other" tradition has a genuine voice in conversation), and can oversee students in translating learning into relationships and ministry. We also need to structure the learning so that students learn how to learn non-Christian religions, so that they will be prepared

to learn another religion well as they meet it in the course of their lives and ministries.

It is fair to say that such exacting requirements are difficult to fill in one faculty member or in a single course, although I believe that the learning process articulated in this project can help improve courses. The learning model suggests that both teachers and learners will often need to seek additional assistance or cooperation to succeed in learning non-Christian religions. It strongly suggests that relying on adjuncts or site visits will only be effective only if the school works to integrate and round out that experience into effective theological learning of non-Christian religions.

The learning model can also be used to assess what sorts of persons we need teaching non-Christian religions in a theological environment. How many of the roles/qualities demanded in the learning process can any given individual represent? How will an institution complement the qualities of the teacher with learning experiences or courses taught by "core" theological faculty?

It can also be used to help us assess how we "learn on our feet," learn non-Christian religions by coming to know non-Christians in our lives. For many pastors and many Christians, this is the primary way in which we are asked to learn non-Christian religions. The learning model can help a pastor or thoughtful Christian evaluate what sort of mutual conversation and learning is taking place, and not taking place, and can help identify what sort of actions might enable mutual and appropriate learning in such encounters.

Conclusion

In my book I intend to end with a series of illustrations or tales which would evoke future directions and possibilities for teaching and learning non-Christian religions in theological environments. Such illustrations or tales would help us to "dream" the future.

But tonight I lecture at the GTU among many colleagues and friends, and I have always found this to be a place of dreams (perhaps some nightmares as well). So I will try in a modest way to "dream from" a plan or possibility which is on the horizon here. Faculty in the Asian Pacific Rim Working Group (which represent the member schools, GTU, the Institute of Buddhist Studies, and the Center for World Religions at the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery), are in the early stages of planning a regular course on "other religions" for the consortium. The course would be designed for M.Div. students.

In accordance with the principles I discussed above, we are resisting the notion of a survey, and envision a course which would deal, each time, with no more than two Asian religions, and which would give considerable attention to the study of religions. So much is planning: let me now begin to dream.

First, I dream of a course that does not simply introduce the principles of "religious studies," but which would be designed to highlight the various aspects of "moments" of learning non-Christian religions. Students who took such a course would understand and be adept at that skill or art, and would be ready to "learn on their feet" as the occasion arose.

Second, I dream that we could find a way to effectively build in a connection to theological reflection and learning new behaviors, relationships, and ministries. Could the course include a practical component linked to ministry, social action, or establishing relationships with an organization or

group? Could the course be somehow linked to other courses in the consortium? Could we invite faculty from practical theology fields and/or from the Center for Ethics to engage students in how the studies of these religions would impact the way they will live in the world?

Should we include a component on theological reflection? What sort of theological component would be most effective?

Could this course become an ongoing experiment in which teachers and learners worked together to find ever more effective ways to learn non-Christian religions in a theological environment?

Could the teachers and learners who participate become resources to help teachers and learners in other courses (esp. in "core" theological disciplines) learn non-Christian religions better?

Dreaming such dreams gives me hope and revitalizes my teaching. You understand perhaps better now why this "strange bird" flew over to theological education. It is my hope (and dream) that this book project will help theological teachers and learners understand and become more adept at the process of learning non-Christian religions. I want to invite colleagues in theological education and in churches into a conversation about how we can better learn non-Christian religions.