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CHRISTIANITY ON THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Lamentations from a Classroom

By Timothy Wadkins

My eight students stiffened like fence posts in a snow storm. Most of them were Roman Catholic and this was as far from a traditional Mass as you could get. The pulsating music and seismic bursts of spontaneous tongues speaking began to vibrate the tin canopy of the church and they looked around for me, desperately hoping I might signal a quick exit. We were seated on the front row as invited guests in an open-aired Pentecostal church in the heart of a poor barrio in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and the worship was animated with raised hands, wailing out to *Senor Jesus*, and shaking under the influence of the Spirit. Before long the music melted away our tension and we were immersed in the ecstasy. We shared neither the culture nor the belief structures of this “Jesus only” Pentecostal congregation and, for the moment, it did not seem to matter. We had entered the mystical realms of this holy frenzy and were caught up in singing God’s praises and bathing in the emotional release.

In the weeks before this visit our group studied together the history and character of Pentecostalism. We pondered carefully what Harvey Cox refers to as the “primal piety” of this movement. We read extensively about the explosive growth of Pentecostalism worldwide, especially in the Latin South. Before this service an anthropologist came to our guesthouse and briefed us on Pentecostals in Mexico, this particular church, and its powerful pastor. But until this experience, Pentecostalism was either a subject of ridicule, based on a caricature of US television evangelists, or just abstract course information about people and piety at a distance. The fact that we were touched by such unpretentious, spontaneous worship filled us with new respect and intense curiosity for this movement.

The next day we began to “figure out” Pentecostalism—its complexities, its impact on Latin American culture, its strangeness to North American Catholic students. The discussions were wide ranging and intense. Our different ways of perceiving came out loud and clear. We made connections between Pentecostalism and the political, economic, and social forces at work in Mexico. Some argued that what we had encountered was only a reflex response to the alienation caused by poverty. Others were very impressed with such simple and emotional faith and indicated how it highlighted, in a negative way, the formal absence of religious affections in their own religious tradition. But it was clear that this had been more than a typical academic experience—we had not just accumulated “objective” information about religion at a distance. In some important ways we had “entered” the subject we were studying.

As the month-long seminar continued, many other opportunities helped us piece together the complex puzzle of modern Christianity in Mexico. We visited sweat shops and shanty towns. We interviewed conservative Catholic bishops and liberation theologians. We spoke to numerous groups of nuns and priests and broke bread with members of Christian base communities. We toured factories, spoke to high ranking politicians and CEO’s of corporations. We also worshipped with other Pentecostals, Evangelicals and main-line Protestants, and visited numerous indigenous communities where ancestral village saints

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and Aztec deities are absorbed into an ever widening, and only quasi-orthodox popular Christianity.

"Learning Units," like this visit to the Pentecostal Church of God in Cuernavaca, form a major part of what has become a successful summer seminar program which I direct entitled Christianity on the Road Less Traveled. For one month each summer I lead a small group of student scholars from Canisius College to a selected third world country where we conduct field research and analyze the history and current expressions of Christianity in that country. Thus far, I have developed these courses in the Philippines, Mexico, El Salvador and Southern India.

Initially, this program was not grounded in any particular pedagogical theory. It was rather the direct result of my own transformative encounters with Christian communities in the developing world. I wanted to expand the cultural and religious horizons of my students and introduce them to the Christian tradition as it is lived out in what Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., famously referred to as the "gritty" places of the world. Nevertheless, in the process of organizing and implementing these courses, my understanding of the processes associated with knowing, learning, and therefore teaching were substantially challenged. In what follows in this essay I will explain this epistemological journey indirectly, by reflecting on the discomfort I experience when I return from the field to my regular teaching duties.

It is the first day of the fall semester and I enter my classroom for RST 217: Post Reformation Global Christian History. Choosing texts and preparing lectures for this course has presented numerous challenges. How can a global survey course hope to do justice to different groups in different places at different times across the globe? Is there a common narrative to this unwieldy amalgam of cultures and traditions which are united only by their attachment to the gospel of Christ?

At the moment, however, I am preoccupied with something else. I walk to the teaching station at the bot-

tom of an air-conditioned, fluorescent-lit, theater-like classroom where I look up to row upon row of cushioned chairs that lean back and spin. This teaching station, formerly just a wooden lectern located in front of a blackboard, is decked out with a computer and fancy technology from which I can control the lights, bring down the big screen, use the world-wide web, show DVD's, or employ PowerPoint. As I stand to deliver the

I led a small group of students to the third world.



Spring Hill College.

first lecture of the course I am struck by a feeling that something is fundamentally wrong with this environment.

In a sudden flight of nostalgic fantasy, I am transported back to Mexico. I miss the rich, thickly textured, messy, and conflicting experiences of Christianity there. Mexican Christianity did not readily conform to the neatly ordered images presented in the textbooks. As reality always does, it presented itself in the raw, through a complex mosaic of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, attitudes, words, images and rituals that jostled each other

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limp, looks, daring me to try
to educate them.*

in uneasy proximity, contradicted our assumptions, and made it difficult to see patterns and form opinions.

This was not, as John Dewey once described traditional education, "learning as a spectator sport." We were forced to "indwell" our subject and as we did, it disclosed itself to us—sometimes directly through churches, lectures, shrines and interviews, but more often in hidden, tacit ways through the thickly nuanced layers of material culture where the popular appetite for divinity is everywhere embodied.

Each one of us in the seminar also brought to the subject a series of uniquely shaded cognitive windows through which we took in and interpreted what it revealed. We were fundamentally different – in gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic class and education. We manifested widely different processing styles. We differed in our religious orientations. We brought widely divergent personal histories – with former teachers and classes, with literature, with family memories, movies, music, and other forms of pop-culture—and all of these

conditioned our interpretations and influenced our discussions. My students were not information receptacles who, like good capitalists, competed with one another to prove how well they had digested the course information. Instead they were empowered, fellow thinkers, engaged with me in the act of translation, trying to make sense of the new horizons we had journeyed into.

Briefly, I emerge from this fantasy and confront the reality of where I am. I want to get these classroom students in front of me as excited about learning global Christianity as the eight that were with me during the summer. Instead, I am greeted with a sea of bored, limp looks, daring me to try to educate them. Paulo Freire's comment that traditional lecture-based teaching is "alienating verbosity" crosses my mind. Parker Palmer's notion that traditional education is based on a medical model seems suddenly apparent to me as well. Imagining that our students are "informationally" infirm when they walk into our sterile and isolated classrooms, we see ourselves as the physician-experts who drip healing data into their brains. Colleges and universities are designed to enable this process with modern efficiency. They are decked out with architecturally sophisticated classroom space, equipped with latest communications delivery technology, and enhanced with park like green space all to make the patients comfortable, ease information delivery, and enhance the college experience. After four years of testable knowledge-infusion our students are certified as healed and we let them graduate and re-enter the world.

I brood over the suspicion that this educational enterprise might be the dark side of the revolution created by the printing press and the rise of technology. As the late Walter Ong, S.J., often argued, as important as print was in its influence on literacy and education, it also helped to prioritize word based descriptions of the



Exercising mind
and body at
Le Moyne College.

world. It allowed readers or hearers of the word the "indoor" pleasures of encountering the world passively and mentally, at a distance from the physical, external environment. As I stand to give the first lecture of the semester, I find myself in a techno-graphical funk.

How can I give my students a taste of lived religion in the third world through the medium of a text or lecture as they sit passively in this classroom? How could I offer them, instead, a direct and delectable learning experience like that described so eloquently in Li-Young Lees' poem "From Blossoms": "O to take what we love inside... hold the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into the round jubilation of peach." There is something bland and tasteless about mere propositional truths, delivered from a podium as bloodless facts to be memorized for midterms and known forever.

I am aware that this brooding fantasy is hyperbolic. There are different kinds of knowledge and several ways to teach and learn. Personally, I love the power of words and believe that professors must be more than just learning facilitators. My favorite professors were those whose lecture style and rhetorical flair seemed to embody the very essence of the ideas they were presenting. I also know that, at least in Jesuit colleges and universities, traditional, lecture-based education is increasingly being infused by various kinds of active and experiential orientations. Service learning offices on most campuses add an immersive component to some courses. Campus ministry programs take students to Appalachia and to numerous laboratories of poverty in Central America and the Caribbean. Business schools offer internships, medical schools are increasingly taking students into the third world, and science has brought nature into the classroom through laboratory experiences. Although most semester abroad programs still feature sanitized experiences in elite Western locations, a few have emerged, like the *Casa de Solidaridad* in El Salvador, that get students into difficult places across the globe.

But immersive education is still on the periphery, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Much of it takes place outside the regular curriculum, and it is usually dependent on student abilities to pay extra for it. There is an overriding emphasis on aesthetically enhanced classroom space, where, together with sophisticated technological systems, traditional "knowledge delivery" is still taken for granted. In contrast, there is very little priority and not much funding given to courses that feature immersive learning in places where students will encounter difficult global realities.

Once again I come back to the task at hand and face the reality of this course. I have chosen the best texts on global Christianity. I will structure my lectures to "cover" the content. I will try to live up to typical evaluation



Christ teaching statue at Scranton University.

comments: "he is knowledgeable and funny and makes boring material interesting." My students will get through the exams and even the essays with varying degrees of success. Course goals and student learning will be assessed, quantified, and dutifully submitted to the Dean's office. By most standards of reckoning, the course will be another success.

Nevertheless, I feel trapped in a context that creates a vast canyon between the expert teacher and student learner. I am troubled by the fact that the information my students take in will be flattened out into abstract propositions and framed according to my interpretation. I am uncomfortable in a physical environment designed to emphasize that knowledge can be objectified in isolation from direct experience. I am worried that I am helping to train a generation of knowledgeable global bystanders who are sophisticated enough to watch the Lehrer News Hour about the world but nevertheless go on about their lives at a distance, unaffected by it. I am concerned that I might be part of an enterprise that educates "people for others," whom, ironically, they have never met. ■

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