

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 42 *After 50 Years: The Living Spirit of Vatican II*

Article 19

9-1-2012

Forum: Two Voices: Grace Knows No Boundaries

Willburn T. Stancil

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Stancil, Willburn T. (2012) "Forum: Two Voices: Grace Knows No Boundaries," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 42, Article 19.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol42/iss1/19>

BEING A “JEWISH JESUIT”

By Rabbi Ruth Langer

Unlike most Jewish faculty members at Boston College who teach solely in their academic disciplines, my specific position has made dialogue with Christianity take an important role, not only in my teaching, but also in the research and service aspects of my professional life – and by this I mean not only my role as a professor, but also my role as a rabbi. As the professor of Jewish studies in the theology department at Boston College I teach an undergraduate core sequence that compares Judaism and Christianity. At my interview, the then chair kindly assured me, “We know that you do not know much about Christianity, but you are smart; you’ll learn.”

To be a rabbi is primarily to be a teacher, to be someone who engages deeply with Torah and transmits it to others. This is a central aspect of my life as a Jew. In Boston College’s Christian context, though, it has added another dimension: work on the renewal and repair of Christian-Jewish relations, both in the classroom and through our Center for Christian-Jewish Learning and the e-journal, *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*.

For Judaism the struggle itself is a form of worship

Bringing Judaism and Christianity into dialogue in the classroom and beyond requires deliberate identification of structural and cultural differences. My process of learning about Christianity and learning how to teach Judaism effectively at BC began with confronting this reality. I have co-taught

courses with a number of other faculty, and this plus interactions with my teaching assistants over the years has helped refine my understanding of Christianity and make this highlighting of difference more effective. I particularly value opportunities to teach seminarians, as they themselves will become teachers and preachers, allowing these discussions to go beyond the classroom door. Just as I struggle to understand elements of Christianity on its own terms, my Christian students enter into a struggle to understand Judaism. For Judaism, the struggle itself is a form of worship of God.

Life as a Jew at a Jesuit university has its challenges too. Many major university celebrations are in the context of a Mass, and I am an outsider. BC recently placed crucifixes in all classrooms, making it improper for me to share aspects of Jewish ritual life when I teach. In most cases, though, Boston College respects and even expects that I will be deeply Jewish. This would not be the case in a secular setting.

Rabbi Ruth Langer is professor of Jewish studies, theology department, Boston College.

TWO VOICES: GRACE KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES

By Wilburn T. Stancil

Prior to coming to Rockhurst University in 1995, I had taught theology in three different Protestant seminaries and divinity schools. As the first non-Catholic tenure-track faculty member hired in the theology and religious studies department at Rockhurst, I approached this new challenge with confidence but also concern. How would I be received? Would I be able to contribute to the mission of a Jesuit and

Catholic university? Two early experiences pointed to two divergent answers.

Shortly after my first year at Rockhurst, I was stopped in the hall by a Jesuit philosophy professor who said to me, “You realize, don’t you, that since you’re not Catholic you’re teaching without the benefit of sanctifying grace?” A bit stunned, the only response I could manage was “Father, I guess I’ll have to limp along as best I can.”

Not long after this first encounter, I was in a meeting in which a number of now familiar phrases were being discussed: “hiring for mission,” a “critical mass of Catholics,” and so forth. After listening to a number of viewpoints, the president of the university made this statement: “I would not want to adopt any policies that would suggest that the contributions of our non-Catholic faculty are less important than those of our Catholic faculty.”

Two Jesuits, two perspectives. Over time, the first experience proved to be an anomaly. Now some 17 years later, I can say that I have become a part of a community—both Jesuit and lay, Catholic and non-Catholic, that is welcoming and affirming of my gifts and contributions. Such acceptance is in continuity with the teachings of the Catholic Church. *Unitatis redintegratio*, the Vatican II document of ecumenism, states that many of the “elements and endowments” that build the life of the Church, such as the Word of God, the life of grace, and gifts of the Spirit, “can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.”

In short, the grace of God is not bound by either our particularities or our differences but transcends them, giving us more than we could hope for or even deserve. That is the grace that I hope informs my life and teaching at Rockhurst.

Wilburn T. Stancil, a former member of this seminar, is professor of theology & religious studies at Rockhurst University.