Christianity on the Road Less Traveled

Timothy Wadkins

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

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol33/iss1/22
CHRI NTANITY 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 sermonic 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-air Pentecostal church in the heart of a poor barrio in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and the worship was animat-ed with raised hands, yelling out to "Savor 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. One 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 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 marveled at how it highlight-ed, 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 CEOs of corporations. We also worshipped with other Pentecostals, Evangelicals and main-line Protestants, and visited numerous indigenous communities where ancestral village sains

Timothy Wadkins is an associate professor in the theology department at Catholic College and a member of the seminar.
and Aztec duties are absorbed into an ever widening, and only quasi-orthodox, popular Christianity.

"Learning Latin," like this visit to the Pueblo Church of God in Guanajuato, form a major part of what has become a successful summer seminar program which I direct entitled Christendom on the Road less Traveled. For one month each summer I lead a small group of students 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 South 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 "gutter" 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 retreat from the field to my regular teaching duties.

It is the first day of the full semester and I enter my classroom for RST 217: Post-Reformation Global Christian History. Chewing 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 bottom 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 DVDs, or employ PowerPoint. As I stand to deliver the
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 trans-
ported back to Mexico. I miss the rich, thickly textured,
biblical, and conflicting experiences of Christianity there.
Mexican Christianity did not readily conform to the neat-
ly 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, atti-
dudes, words, images and rituals that jostled each other
in uneasy prox-
imity, contradict-
ear our assump-
tions, 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 “mind-walk” our subject and as we did, it dis-
closed itself to us—sometimes directly through churches,
lectures, shrines and interviews, but more often in hid-
den, tacit ways through the thickly layered crusts of
material culture where the popular appetite for divinity
is everywhere buffered.

Each one of us in the seminar also brought to the
subject a series of uniquely shaped 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 dif-
fiered 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 popular culture—and all of these
conditioned our interpretations and influenced our dis-
cussions. My students were not information receptacles
who, like good pupils, competed with one another to
prove how well they had digested the course informa-
tion. 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 stu-
dents in front of me as quickly 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 “alien-
ating vapidness” crosses my mind. Parker Palmer’s notion
that traditional education is based on a medical model
seems suddenly apparent to me as well. Imagine 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 technolo-
gy, and enhanced with park like green space all to make
the patients comfortable, case information delivery, and
enhance the college experience. After four years of
useful 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
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 technographical 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 undefectable learning experience like that described so eloquently in Li-Young Lee’s poem “From Blossoms:”. “O to take what we love inside...’hold the fruit in your hands, adote it, then bite into the round substance 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

Immersion education is still on the periphery, especially in the humanities and social sciences.