Theology and Education: Insights from Research on Undergraduate Introductory Religion Courses

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In 2004, sixty-six college professors of religion and theology who were identified by their respective department chairs as "highly effective" became part of a research project conducted by Barbara E. Walvoord, University of Notre Dame professor of English. All aspects of the introductory courses were carefully documented, students and faculty alike ranked and reported their goals for the courses and participated in extensive course evaluations. The project was supported by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Religion and Theology. The insights gained from my participation in and reflections on the study and from facilitating subsequent workshops have led me to view the teaching of introductory courses in theology and religion with renewed sensitivity to the complexity and diversity of the fields and to ponder more deeply the relationship of theology, religious studies, religious education and education.

The research for this paper is drawn from the summary of the findings of the study, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses,* (Walvoord, 2008) and the experiences of the author in facilitating workshops on the study with theology and religious studies faculties at various institutions of higher learning. The UCLA HERI Study of Spirituality in Higher Education (2004) provides further data. Additionally, the Teagle Foundation, a philanthropic organization, posts a blog entitled, The Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates (www.teaglefoundation.org).

As noted on the blog by Cecil Chazelle of the College of Jew Jersey, the rising interest of undergraduate students in matters of religion begs the question of what sorts of pedagogies best engage these students and at the same time fulfill the academic mission of liberal arts education programs. These are not easy questions and they are being addressed and answered in diverse ways.

Theology and education are forming new and closer relationships. The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, endowed with monies from the Eli Lilly Foundation, is now in its second decade of promoting the building of new inroads between the two and has forwarded the process of linking theological and educational scholarship.

For a religious educator/pastoral theologian like me, these conversations offer an exciting excursion into the observation of the developing relationship between theology and education. One only need to visit the website of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion or read the journal *Teaching Theology and Religion* to get a glimpse of the richness and scope of the growing scholarship in this area. Interestingly, there seem to be many parallel conversations going on within the different disciplines about teaching and learning. It seems that some cross-fertilization might be helpful or perhaps disciplinary fragmentation has all but rendered us blind and deaf to the stirrings outside our individual areas of study.

The areas I address in this paper are: 1) the continuing debate about the relationship of theology and religious studies; 2) the current growth in interest of teachers of theology and religion in aspects of teaching and learning; and 3) the challenges of

helping students to think clearly and critically about their own perspectives in confronting the questions of religion in their lives. I will conclude with some attention to the significant contribution religious education might bring to the conversation both as a practical theological endeavor and as a long time associate of the fields of education and the social sciences.

The Relationship between Theology and Religious Studies

Participants in the Walvoord study taught in a variety of institutional settings: public, private non-sectarian and religiously affiliated, large and small colleges and universities, in departments of theology and religious studies. Walvoord notes that many of these participants were educated in both disciplinary frames (theology and religious studies) and that "they often integrated and combined aspects that scholars would classify within different disciplinary frames" (2008a, 5). Some of the professors employed this integrative approach in order to: 1) avoid making students who were not members of a faith tradition ("outsiders") feel excluded and 2) to allow students who were part of a certain faith tradition ("insiders") to approach it critically in order to make their own informed decisions (5).

Katherine Tanner points to the difference in methodological approaches of the two disciplinary frameworks as a primary source of the past tendency to make religious studies and theology two completely separate academic areas. However, she notes, and the Walvoord study points out, the lines of separation between the two, when viewed topically rather than methodologically, often become blurred (Tanner in Cady and Brown

2002, 200). While this is true, it became evident to me as I facilitated workshops on the Walvoord study with university and college religious studies and theology faculties that some tension between the two disciplines remains, especially among those who have been in the profession for some time. The problem is seemingly exacerbated by the challenge to sectarian institutional identity in the face of the fading presence of members of the founding orders and denominations on campus. Furthermore, the advent of an increasingly religiously diverse student population and the need for secular state-run universities to honor the legislated separation of church and state issues contribute to the complexity of the issue.

The participating faculty of the study whose case studies are included in the Walvoord text deal with the tension and the integration of the two disciplines in various ways, often depending on the type of institution in which they are teaching, but there are some exceptions to the rule. One professor, at a religiously affiliated university, states quite clearly in her syllabus that the course will not be confessional but will pay attention to all kinds of experiences. She writes,

> While this course may indeed enhance and develop your own faith life, it is not materially about your faith life; it is materially concerned with critical reflection upon the meaning of human existence and God's existence. Wherever you as an individual person find yourself with regard to these questions of meaning will in no way effect the grade you earn in this course. The grade you earn corresponds to how well you engage these questions at the university level. (Walvoord 2008a, 52)

Again indicative of the blurred lines, another professor in a public university hopes that her students will learn how to "clarify ongoingly [their] own ultimate values and

convictions" (Walvoord 2008a, 52). In seeking to allow the inclusion of all student perspectives within the context of a given course, Walvoord found that

> A "theological" frame had to accommodate the fact that not all students were "insiders" to a faith tradition. A "religious studies" frame had to accommodate the fact that many students did not want merely a dispassionate analysis of religious beliefs and practices. (5)

Teaching and Learning in the College Introductory Theology/Religion Course

As educational theory turns from an emphasis on what the *teacher does* (methodologies) to *how students best learn* (pedagogies and epistemologies), both disciplines, theology and religious studies, stand to gain from the ensuing insights. The liaisons between theology, religious studies and education have grown stronger and continue to increase in impact on the way these disciplines are taught. There are many reasons for this and it may be helpful to include here at least some of the more obvious.

Firstly, as a result of scientific and educational research, there is simply more knowledge about how people learn. We know that students learn in a variety of ways and that active and engaged learning promotes deepened understanding. The study found that most of the participating faculty cared about student learning and made intentional efforts to help students be successful in their courses. "Above all, the faculty were characterized by attention to student needs and the desire to engage students beyond mere factual information" (Walvoord 1002, 5). Pedagogical practices are important to the extent that they enhance student learning. Advancements in the science of the human brain and in educational research on individualized learning processes will increasingly be made available and interpreted for adaptation in the various academic disciplines.

Secondly, being able to bring to the job interview the ability to design and teach a college level course gives a candidate a competitive edge in the hiring process. Consequently, more and more schools (Catholic University of America included) are offering courses in teaching and learning to theology and religious studies graduate students, as well as opportunities to assist in and teach undergraduate courses. A strong mentor program offers graduate students a chance to be introduced and socialized into the profession of teaching in higher education by members of their teaching faculty.

Thirdly, teaching evaluations are increasingly a greater part of the overall tenure and promotion process in higher education. While scholarship and service remain important for promotion, colleges and universities are more aware of the connection between student recruitment and retention to quality classroom teaching. Additionally, theology and religious studies departments in institutions of higher learning undergoing the accreditation process are increasingly being required to exhibit mission statements, assessment procedures and collective syllabi that use educational jargon such as "student learning outcomes," "classroom assessment techniques," "structural and process options for instructional settings" and "evidence of student learning." Professors of theology and religious studies are simply required by their positions to become knowledgeable about teaching and learning.

Finally, and what comes through so clearly in the study, effective teachers are highly motivated to elicit student learning and are those most willing to experiment and take risks to find experiences and assignments that will help students achieve the learning goals of the course. Walvoord includes a particular case study of one professor's efforts

to engage her students because, "it demonstrates the constant cycle of experimenting with a strategy, observing carefully how well it works and why, then trying something else, over and over again" (178). More teachers are simply increasingly concerned with understanding how students learn and becoming better teachers in order to help them do so.

Spirituality and Religious Development in the Classroom: Divergence in Teacher and Learner Goals

Both the HERI report (UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, "The Spiritual Life of College Students," 2004) and the Walvood study (2004) indicate that students enter college with a high level of expectation concerning spiritual and religious development. The HERI study revealed that many college students

> are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and are exploring the meaning and purpose of life. They also display high levels of religious commitment and involvement. As they begin their college experience, freshmen have high expectations for the role their institutions will play in their emotional and spiritual development. They place great value on their college enhancing their self-understanding, helping then develop personal values, and encouraging their expression of spirituality. (UCLA HERI Spiritual Life of College Students 2004, 3)

In a follow up study entitled "Spirituality and the Professoriate," research indicated that faculty have mixed opinions about the role colleges should play in the spiritual development of students. The follow up survey also indicated that sixty-two per cent of the third year college students reported that "their professors never encouraged discussion of spiritual and religious matters, and never provided opportunities for

discussing the meaning or purpose of life" (UCLA HERI Spirituality and the Professoriate, 9).

The Walvoord study which carefully documents accounts of student goals versus faculty originated outcomes for student learning corroborated the HERI results. Identifying what she called the "great divide," Walvoord noticed that faculty members were more likely to rate as essential or important the goal of developing critical thinking (86% of faculty compared to 64% of the students) while students ranked the development of their own beliefs and spiritual practices high and faculty did not (65% of students compared to 33% of faculty) (18). Varying usages and definitions of the terms *spirituality* and *critical thinking* aside, both studies affirm the need for classroom teachers to recognize that the learning goals they set for their courses may not be in line with those of the students. The questions then become how (or if) these divergent goals are to openly considered and 2) if there might be ways to align them.

The responses to that question drew great energy from the participating faculty in the meetings following the research collection and from faculty participating in the national workshops held in various venues the past two years. While some workshop attendees were entirely comfortable in including such objectives on their syllabi and felt a responsibility to provide opportunities for spiritual and religious growth in their classes, others were adamant that, while this growth may spontaneously occur, it is not within the role of an academic course to elicit such responses. In workshops that I facilitated, the faculty resistance to identifying students' personal learning goals was attributed to several different perspectives including: 1) the desire to maintain academic integrity in

the eyes of administrators and colleagues from other academic departments on campus; 2) not wanting to allow the course substance to be student-driven; and 3) discomfort in opening the course up to something as subjective as spiritual and religious growth.

Among the study and workshop participants, there emerged the idea that critical thinking skills and the development of a certain level of cognitive growth are essential and that students may indeed experience growth in religious and spiritual sensibilities as a result of being better equipped to think more critically about such matters. Most teachers hoped that ideas encountered in their classes might have a transformative effect on the lives of their students, though few would explicitly include such a goal on their syllabus. Many Walvoord study faculty participants tried to provide space in their classes for such growth by including assignments such as reflective writing, journaling and spiritual autobiographies. Walvoord found that many

> faculty members create an environment in which many students experience transforming growth and change. Among all 533 classes I studied, about two-thirds of the students reported progress on "analyzing and critically evaluating ideas." About three-fourths of the students reported progress in developing their own values. (2008b, 22)

Attention to service learning, examining diverse religious worldviews, respecting the personhood of students, and avoidance of indoctrination are all cited as methods of integrating spirituality into academic college curricula (UCLA HERI Integrating Spirituality into the Campus Curriculum and Co-Curriculum 2006, 17).

The place of faith, both of the student and the professor in the classroom, is currently a hotbed of debate, demanding careful reflection by every teacher of religion. There is a strong possibility that this topic is so personal and unique to each instructor

that no consensus will be reached. However, students often come to a course with the idea (or fear) that the course will bring pressure to accept certain beliefs or propositions. Walvoord observed among the faculty of her study a considerable amount of care not to do so and the application of "appropriate boundaries between inviting students to consider new ideas and pressuring them to accept certain positions" (2008b, 22). They sought to "create voices within the formal class structure to bring the students' own religious beliefs and experiences into relationship with the course material and critical thinking" (2008c, 4).

Religious Education, Theology and Education

In 1903, William Rainey Harper in his address to the first gathering of the REA entitled "The Scope and Purpose of the New Organization," inserted as number six of twenty purposes, the idea that the new Association would include a department of Universities and Colleges (*Proceeding* 1903, 234). By 1904 the department was a reality and talks were given that reflected issues of the day. A still very timely speech given by the president of Kentucky University, Burris A. Jenkins, expressed a present day worry about the soul of the college student who is in transition from home to the broader arena of university life and study. A professor should be chosen for his moral and spiritual fortitude "in preference to a better scholar lacking these" (1904, 153). Harper again addressed the REA in 1905 with a lecture, "What Can Universities and Colleges Do for the Religious Life of Their Students" (1905, 110)? He felt that along with intellectual

growth in the college years, there should also be a corresponding level of religious growth:

> The university in its laboratory of practical religion should engage the development of the altruistic spirit, for this is an essential part of the religious spirit. The life of the student, as also of the instructor, is confessedly a selfish life. The best corrective is to do something for others. The opportunity presents itself in settlement work and in a thousand other ways. (1905, 113)

The Religious Education Association has recently made a step forward with the addition of a task force on Religious Education in Undergraduate Education. The 2009 REA conference theme is one that seeks new ways of understanding the link between religious education and theology. The task at hand, finding ways to pedagogically integrate the topical material of introductory religion and theology classes with the life and life-questions of the undergraduates is one that is not at all foreign to the religious educator in public, ecclesial and/or academic arenas. This essay concludes with a brief look at three dimensions of religious education that have the capacity to engage today's college student more deeply in their study of theology.

Religious education connects life and religion. Religious education, unlike theological studies, has never been disconnected from the living out of life. Theology in its original state was about just such a connection. Edward Farley explains the difference in theology as wisdom/knowledge and theology as a distinct academic discipline. He expounds on the question of exactly what kind of knowledge *theologia* signified in early Christianity: "If there is a dominant position it is that theology is a *practical*, not theoretical, habit having the primary characteristic of wisdom" (1994, 35). Theology in its earliest form, according to Farley, had to do with salvation, the life of the student, and

training in the Christian way of life (36). Theology as an academic discipline needs religious education to make these connections to a paideia for a way of life.

Religious education has always been in dialogue with the social sciences and therefore understands the holistic nature of the human person and the role of higher education in transforming both the individual and society. James Michael Lee wrote,

> There can be little doubt that the most foundational issue in all of religious education is the relation of this field to theology on the one hand and to the social sciences on the other hand. This foundational issue is absolutely pivotal because the whole way in which religion teaching is both conceptualized and enacted depends on whether religious instruction is a branch of theology or a branch of social science. (In Miller 1995, 1)

While higher education as an academic area looks holistically at the development of the college student, religious education adds the understanding from social sciences of the growth of faith and the moral life over the life-cycle and seeks to make the role of the faith community explicit in religious education, formation and catechesis, thereby helping the student to both understand the theological tradition of his or her religion and to reflect on the meaning of that theology for life. Psychology, sociology and anthropology, as well as education and theology, inform religious education in significant ways.

Religious education, as a form of practical theology, operates at the intersection of education and theology. This conference reflects the long history of the Association's grappling with the nature of its relationship to theology. It is commonly agreed that religious education is not simply the conveyor of theology and that most teachers of religious education, religion and/or theology personally espouse a particular theology. Beyond that, theology has been assigned varying levels of importance in religious education, depending on which theorist you are reading. Norma Thompson's *Religious*

Education and Theology (1982), Randolph Crump Miller's *Theologies of Education* (1995) and John Elias' *Studies in Theology and Education* (1986) all address various perspectives on the dynamics of the relationship between religious education and theology.

It is interesting to note in conclusion that religious education is increasingly considered a field of practical theology. Both Maureen O'Brien and Anne Streaty Wimberly make such a reference in their postings on the 2009 REA conference blog, identifying common methodologies of teaching with narrative and theological reflection. They acknowledge the significance of theological assumptions in the work of religious education and remind us, as did Jack Seymour in 2004 (283), that we need to get a bit nervier about theology's place in what we do.

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