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Cover: Junius R. Sloan, American (1827-1900)
The Knitting Lesson (1866), oil on canvas, 18 11/16" x 15 11/16.” Bequest of Percy H. Sloan. This small painting is typical of many American works of the period, depicting ordinary life in rural settings. Most of Sloan's output is housed in the collection of the VU Museum of Art, which originated with the bequest of the artist's son, Percy Sloan.
Lessons

This issue of *The Cresset*, published with the sponsorship of the Lilly Endowment, Inc., for the local program of Lilly Fellows in Humanities and the Arts, again arises from the Fall Conference, held last October here at Valparaiso. The topic, “Spirituality and Higher Education,” received attention in three major presentations, which are reproduced here. But because it is our sense that many of our readers are engaged in their own versions of a widespread national process of thought about the meaning of education today, this issue hopes to accomplish more than simply to reproduce these speeches, excellent as they were. Rather, we wanted to gather material that will establish a context for readers to reflect personally on the questions—the very profound questions—those presentations addressed.

To that end, we have included not only the book reviews which contribute to the discussion of meaning in education, but we have trusted in the Lilly Program’s expressed conviction that the arts enable us to discover truths in ways that are inaccessible, or perhaps not readily expressible in the more usual methods of academic discourse. In his essay on Denise Levertov’s spiritual development as a poet, Jim Champion not only explores the subject, but demonstrates what the faithful heart, in concert with the trained eye, can do in understanding and writing about poetry. Robert Siegel has contributed two poems that not only mean something, but describe how meaning can be tracked and even captured.

My own contemplation has been moved ahead by a consideration of two paintings, one of which is reproduced on our cover. American Junius R. Sloan painted “The Knitting Lesson,” in 1866; it is one of the items in a large collection of his works in the VU Museum of Art. Sloan, who worked a good part of his life in Illinois, painted a number of genre scenes, though he may well have preferred his nature paintings, deriving as they did from the higher-toned Hudson River school.

I have often looked at this painting with affection, but never more than I did this spring when I saw it in my mind’s eye while actually looking at a reproduction of Rembrandt’s “The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Tulp.” Painted in 1632 for the Surgeons’ Guild, this picture now hangs in the Museum of the Hague, and appears in nearly every book about Rembrandt’s work. A rather grim exercise in civic memorializing, it celebrates the accomplishments of the chief city anatomist of Amsterdam, roughly the equivalent of the L.A. County Coroner and the Head of Surgery at UCLA Medical Center. It shows a cadaver stretched out on a table—glowing somewhat decadently—while the doctor, having apparently just opened up the arm, pulls back its outer layers to display the muscle and bone structures to the group of eager guild members and science-lovers around the table.

I must have been captured by the fact that both works use the word “Lesson” in their titles. A year of participation in the Lilly Fellows Colloquium, with its explicit study of the nature of teaching and its relation to spirituality, surely made me more sensitive to any depiction of lessons. Both paintings were familiar to me, but as I suddenly saw them together, their meanings for me began to shift. I began to see in them how two versions of the meaning of teaching might conflict.

It might be mentioned first that neither lesson concerns abstractions or ideas. Both are practical demonstrations rather than philosophical reflective discourses. Both pictures include the same three things: a student (or group of students), a teacher, and an object of learning.

The contrasts could hardly be more impressive. The doctor stands slightly apart from the watchers, in a vaulted hall of formal proportions. The grandmother sits in a rocker in a somewhat untidy room with the little girl at her elbow. The doctor holds an instrument, and with it touches the cadaver, gesturing with his left hand. The grandmother holds her snuff pouch, but the girl holds the knitted object, her hands grasping the needles. Of the doctor’s hearers, three look out of the painting at the viewer, two look at the doctor, and two look down at the opened arm. Both grandmother and girl look at the knitted object.

Perhaps it does not need to be mentioned that one is a great painting and the other is not. Or that in one picture, all the characters are male, and in the other, female. One lesson concerns science and medicine, the other a domestic skill. In the Sloan painting, clear emphasis is put
on the transmission of something from one generation to the next, whereas the Rembrandt shows a group of fairly similar colleagues, one of whom, judging by his distinct dress, and his physical position over against the object, knows more than the others.

I do not mean to suggest that we would all agree about the meanings I have begun to read in these pictures. But it seems to me that our discourses about teaching, or at least our structures for teaching in the university, reflect the values represented in the Rembrandt. The teacher—removed, cool and dignified—dignifies learning. The subject being taught is important. How do we read this? In part because all the people involved are male and white and prosperous. But to get stuck here would be to miss a much more important point.

I am strongly aware that, in the Rembrandt, the object is dead. If I forget what I have been taught to see, (that is, anatomy is an important thing to learn, therefore the tabu against mutilating the dead has to be set aside) it is an altogether odd image—all these interested, well-dressed men gathered around the very dead, very undressed man. And one of the most amazing things about the painting I learned only recently by reading footnotes: not only are the names of the guild members known, so is the name of the corpse, an executed criminal named Andriaen Adriaensz, known as het kint, or, as the footnote informs me, "the child."

But of course we are not, as viewers, meant to focus on this dead body. We have learned to see here the advancement of learning, the rise of humanism, the forward thrust of analytic knowledge, the classical trajectory of scientific investigation. But for me its title reverberates and reconnects with the scene in the kitchen: The Lesson. I suspect that most of us mark the comparison with some unease. Something resists seeing in Sloan’s painting a possible model for university teaching and learning. And the extent of that resistance, I suppose, defines a denial that learning and teaching could be—must be—human activity carried on in love, for humane purposes having more to do with our ability to survive together than with our expertise at analyzing the “dead child” of what we call culture and knowledge.

The two paintings were part of what I was thinking about when, in the Lilly Fellows Colloquium this year, we saw a film by Francois Truffaut called The Wild Child. Based on a case documented by a French intellectual reformer named Itard, the film imaginatively recreates a sequence of events when a wild boy was found in the forests near Aveyron, in France, in 1799. Though conventional treatment at the time would have condemned the boy to live as a freak show, Itard’s Enlightenment principles made him ask to have the boy committed to his care. At his country estate, Itard attempted to teach Victor the rudiments of civilization—dress, manners, and language.

Truffaut, who cast himself as the philosopher-pedagogue, gives us scene after scene during which Victor and Itard struggle to communicate. Because Victor cannot speak in words, and seems unresponsive to words of any kind, the process of learning language is agonizing. Itard is patient but dogged. He cares about the process, and records each small step. (The film is based on Itard’s journals.) These frustrating bouts of benevolent, but unsuccessful education are interrupted by sequences in which Itard’s housekeeper, Madame Guerin, shelters the boy from the relentless educational process, and teaches him things he needs to know—how to hold a spoon, how to ask for milk—by responding to his need rather than to the philosophe’s program.

The discussion of this film by a collection of academics proved awkward. We were unhappy with the artificiality of Itard’s undertaking, yet it is an article of faith with us that Victor was “better off” learning to be civilized. He needed educating. Certainly we all responded to the catalogue of methods used by Itard, and analyzed so scrupulously by him in his journals and his reports to the proper authorities in Paris. Yet, in what way was Victor better off? How can discipline function to bring about improvement through the infliction of pain? What sort of pain is permissible, and for what reasons? How much “learning” is merely the successful imitation of something the teacher has decided is important, and how much is genuinely necessary? What attitude of the heart must make the relationship of teacher to learner?

We had no consensus. But we did generate some brief written comments on these subjects, and I have used some of them throughout this issue. My thanks to the members of the Colloquium who contributed, as well as those writers whose longer works make this issue so stimulating, informative and beautiful. This is a remarkable collection. May it engage your mind and spirit in these summer months.

Peace,

GME
What is the relationship between the life of the intellect and the life of the spirit? This is a complex and painful question. In this paper I would like to approach the problem, not by jumping into the middle to answer the whole of it, but by pondering with you only one part of it having to do with what it means for a Christian to think rationally. As members of our own culture, all of us have been reared to believe at some level that even for the Christian, intellect and spirit are and need to be kept separate. A good deal of my education, even my Christian education, over the years, and yours too, I suspect, was based in the conviction that our human minds are only really trustworthy, that is, "objective," when we are able to discard from our thought processes our own particular, individual perceptions of the world, our own particular experiences, our own particular points of view, and our own values. In short, in order to meet the criteria of acceptable thought we have not only tried to make a division between intellect and the spiritual. We have actually tried to throw out of our definition of what it means to think a good deal of what we know and who we are as human beings and as Christians. In order to help us think about this, I would like to tell a story. It is my story, but I tell it because I suspect large parts of it are your story as well.

One Friday morning in the winter of 1950 when I was in the fourth grade in P.S. 41, I went with the other forty members of my class to a movie in the school auditorium. Apart from the quizzes we inevitably had afterwards, which I would nearly always fail from daydreaming through them, I liked the school movies. Being about the progress of Mankind in industry, one way or another, they were all the same. Moving pistons, spinning vats of dough, crashing looms, and clacking printing presses whirred against a background of speeding music and virile voices. Sunk down in my seat with my feet up and my arms around my knees, I felt the presence of a huge man, dressed in a blue over-all with red stitching on the pockets, striding across the mechanized farms of the Great Plains of America into distant hills. The movies made me proud to be a human being.

This Friday started out like all the other Fridays. The movie was on the mining, processing and use of coal. Because it talked about fossils, however, I didn’t daydream as much as usual. Coal was made from the compressed bodies of dinosaurs and giant ferns long dead, from slithering and flying creatures no longer found on earth. I loved the idea of fossils. The film had begun wonderfully. By the time we were taken a mile below the earth’s crust and into the blackness to witness the enormous underground drill, however, my stomach was going around with it. All of a sudden it was obvious: if coal were only made from long gone plants and animals, the amount of coal on earth had to be limited. If no more coal could ever be made, then the time would come when human beings would run out of coal. There would be no more pulsing machines, no more electricity, no more big vats of dough. Houses would have no heat; people would have no food. Maybe mothers and fathers would leave their children.

Normally, I was too shy and sullen ever to ask a question to class, but today when the lights came on, I truly

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leaned into the Question and Answer Time. I straightened out of my slouch and raised my hand. Miss Jason called on me: "You there, in the fifth row."

I stood up. "What will happen when the coal runs out?" I asked.

Miss Jason was disconcerted. She looked at me fiercely, the inside corners of her eye-brows touching. "What do you mean?" she answered. "The world will never run out of coal."

"But Miss Jason," I persisted, as I saw the five boroughs of New York City, my home, spread out before me, dark and empty. "That can't be true if all the dinosaurs are already dead. Sooner or later, we'll have to use up the coal!"

"Sit down right now and be quiet," she ordered. "Believe me; be reasonable. I am telling you, we will never run out of coal."

I slid back down on my backbone, humiliated and angry, confused and guilty. I had gotten in trouble in school again. I couldn't be reasonable. I couldn't figure out how not to believe what seemed so obvious.

This happened to me all the time. Once, at recess, for example, I came out late to find the girls from my class by the high wire fence at the back of the playground, behind the slides. They were in little clumps, whispering and looking over their shoulders.

"What's going on?" I whispered, too.

"Did you notice Carolyn isn't in school today?" Rosanna, who was precocious, answered. "When Carolyn came home yesterday her mother was lying in the hall and there was blood everywhere and she wouldn't wake up. I know this is true because Carolyn told me she had to clean up all the blood!" The other girls nodded.

"Yes, an ambulance came and they took her to the hospital!" another girl whose name I forget added. Everyone looked solemn, with the self-importance of knowing something only the adults were supposed to know, and a bit frightened as well.

"Where did the blood come from?" I had to ask.

They looked at each other. "We can't figure it out," said Miriam, but "but when Carolyn asked her father he got mad and told her to mind her own business. I asked my mother, and all she will say is that I'll know when I'm older."

Before we had a chance at further speculation, Miss Jason stomped up to us in her lace-up school-teacher shoes. She clapped her hands. "All right, girls," she said, "I'm not going to tell you any more to stop talking about Carolyn's mother. Now get out there and play!"

I never did learn what had happened to Carolyn's mother. I assume now that she had a miscarriage, and I suppose she must have lived. I began, however, to have suspicions about the durability of my own mother. After a few sleepless nights, I finally asked Mama as cautiously as I could, without mentioning Carolyn's mother, "What will happen to Freddie and me if you die?"

"Oh," she replied, "I won't die till you are an old woman."

"But what if you get sick?" I wanted to know. "What if you have a car crash?"

"I already told you. I'm not going to get sick, and I'm not going to get in a wreck!" she said, firmly.

"But how can you know?" I cried, by this time, really anguished.

To which she irritably replied, I suspect, with the answer mothers through the ages have given to the questions mothers cannot face from their children. "I just know. That's how! Now, go out and play and get some fresh air." I slunk out in a rage of frustration and anxiety.

As I grew, an increasing number of my struggles of this sort were connected with being a female child. Every night after supper, for example, I would help with the dishes while my brother Fred would build things with his erector set. I thought this was terribly unfair. "Why do I have to do the dishes, while Freddie gets to play?" I would ask. "Because you are a girl and he is a boy," my mother would answer (I would not have dared complain in front of my father). Everyone seemed to take it for granted that male privilege corresponded to a reasonable law of nature based in female inferiority: my father, probably like every other father in the apartment complex, nightly brought home jokes about pushy and emotional broads at work who couldn't think. The boys in our neighborhood spoke of girls in just the same way: "girls are disgusting; girls are cry-babies; girls are dumb."

This was the story of the intellectual life of my childhood. Before I could catch myself I was always making observations or asking questions that didn't fit with what the adults were telling me about the way things were, and I didn't know how to make sense of the differences between the simple answers they gave me and the messy or ambiguous possibilities I saw under my nose. I was certainly smart enough to know that it was unlikely that I would be right about something and the entire adult world wrong, but what was I supposed to do with my own knowledge and experience? I thought I must be crazy. I was afraid of my thought processes, because they got me in trouble and drove people away.

This was also the story of the "spiritual" life of my childhood. From the summer revival sermons at my grandmother's Pond Fork Baptist Church and my weekly attendance at Calvinistic Sunday Schools I worked out early that
there was something about God that made any sort of speculation about God risky. There, I had learned that God said he loved me. But how could I believe God loved me? I was always in trouble with adults for my questions, and God the creator was the power and might behind adult authority. God wanted me to believe what I was told. Indeed, God was so serious about this that God sent Jesus, God’s own child, to die on a cross to make me believe. If I believed as God commanded, I would go to heaven. If I sinned by not believing, I would go to hell. I was terrified of Jesus, frightened witless by a God I couldn’t believe in and who asked me not to be who I was, not to know what I knew and who gave me no way to obey.

As I grew into adolescence, these problems did not go away. Indeed, anxiety and guilt about my inability to put aside my own perceptions in order to “believe,” to see things “rationally” only grew worse. Help seemed to me to be at hand when I fell in love at fourteen with a beautiful blond boy named Herbert. (In those days, love was the answer to a girl’s every problem.) Like me, Herbert was in the band and the orchestra—he played French horn, I played flute—and like me, he read books nobody else read and asked questions nobody else asked. He was funny, and smart, and full of energy. I could hardly take my eyes off him.

The most wonderful thing about him, however, was his family and the way they liked me and welcomed me into it. Both of Herbert’s parents had grown up in old New England Unitarian families. His father was an academic scientist, a biochemist who moved purposefully, correcting his sons in the same calm, unanguished voice in which he discussed biochemistry. His mother was an intelligent, decisive, and absolutely no-nonsense woman. She knew everything there was to know about art, music, literature, old movies, psychology, math, and history. She was also able to make anything, including her husbands’ perfectly tailored sport-coats, the sleek, modern salmon colored sofas upon which they sat in their elegant gray living room, and the intricate silver knives and forks with which they ate.

Unable as I felt myself to be to escape from the ambiguity of the pain, isolation and guilt of my own intellectual, emotional, and religious childhood struggles, what Herbert’s family had to offer seemed wonderful. Above all, they believed in Reason. This was not reason as it had been defined in my childhood, that is, as what the grown-ups told you anybody with any sense who wanted to be good believed on faith. Rather, “reason” meant logic. It was literally, no-nonsense. Reason was for the purpose of solving problems and knowing things. Only what could be worked out by the universal laws of logical reason could be true, and thus real. The laws of modern physics and chemistry were true. Mathematics was true. Human progress was true. Reason was, above all, clean.

The enemy of reason in that household was “traditional” religion. Traditional religion was illogical, authoritarian and impeding of progress, and thus, by definition, not true. This sounded good to me. If I could believe it, in the name of truth and science I could escape the murky and guilt-inducing claims of my childhood God which were so mixed in for me with all the other things I had strained against my own judgment to believe when I was small. In exchange for isolation in the chaos of my tortured, guilty inability to identify the real I would receive a well-structured and shining world of rationality. I would no longer have to live in guilt and pain. I could become an independent thinker.

During the next three years of high school I loved the Taylors more passionately than reason would allow, and I tried my best to embrace the rational as they did. I was not more than half successful, of course. Faith, even Enlightenment faith, is never simply the result of the exercise of logic. The deep beliefs we are called to in childhood are not abandoned all at once, even if we never did fully accept them in the first place. At the same time, observation and reflection on what I could see for myself continued to make me unable to believe that life was so transparently, cleanly simple as objective reason made it out to be. Nevertheless, by the time Herbert and I broke up when I was seventeen, even with my doubts, I was more convinced than not. I had an extravagant longing to be trained in the ways and wonders of Western Civilization.

College and later, seminary, were happy to do the job. The world of the university was populated by a whole society of people prepared to induct me more fully into the ethos of “the life of the mind” and teach me its nuances. As it had been for Herbert’s family, the foundation of that ethos was a commitment to reason, that is, to a model of learning and knowing based in the logical methodology of the hard sciences. This was not new.

Now, I was taught explicitly for the first time that the opposite and enemy of reason was emotion. Where reason was objective, and universally verifiable, emotion was dangerously subjective, belonging to the misleading realm of personal, particular experience. Only by stripping away emotional responses to particular people or problems was it possible to arrive at the truth. That my own emotions and experience so often stood in opposition to the conclusions of reason did not mean that those conclusions should be re-examined. It meant that my emotions and experience were to be discounted.

At the same time, I learned a new way to think about the moral life. According to Kant, as we learned in Philosophy 101, a person of principle never lied, even in
order to save the life of an innocent person, for to make an
exception in one case meant to open the flood-gates of
social distrust and chaos. To be moral meant to lay aside
the distorting private pulls of pity, preference and the
particular for the sake of the rational and austere sternness of
universal law. Ethics was about justice, and justice, like the
rationality of which it was an expression, was blind.

Soon, in the ethos of the seminary, I would learn
how God fit into all this, that is cleanly, unambiguously,
and at a civilized distance. There, it would be suggested to
me that God, as the source of the structures of reality, was
Universal Reason. God was “the ground of our being” who
“accepted us in spite of our unacceptability.” But God was
not interested in the sins or sufferings of individuals.
God’s concern was with the human race, and that concern
was for social justice. God did not break the laws of nature
for the sake of the inner or outer pain of individuals.
Intercessory prayer might do good for the person praying,
but it did not move God at all. Intercessory prayer was
superstitious, anthropomorphic, subjective, and even selfish.
God does not miraculously heal people from cancer,
or help children find lost dogs.

As for Jesus, he was a far cry from Pond Fork Baptist
church’s “personal Lord and savior” who died to make me
believe as I was told. He was Lord, yes, in so far as he
showed forth the Kingdom and gave us a perfect example
of how to live into it by sharing with us in all significant
human experience. But Jesus was only a man. The virgin
birth, the miracle stories, the resurrection—all this was
merely the mythological language of the early church,
from which we needed to extract the universal truth.

I embraced this university ethos with eagerness. It
was so optimistic, and it offered such freedom. It valued
asking questions and challenging received truths about the
world. Its refusal to take the emotional and the personal
seriously promised protection against my fears and anxieties.
It was so clean, its answers so unambiguous, so natural.
Fear of death? Death is the natural end of life. Guilt
over sex? Sex is as natural as eating or mowing the lawn.
My murky childhood God who demanded belief was to be
replaced with an impartial, rational God who asked only
for justice. Some good came out of all this, not the least of
which was the mobilization of my whole class of seminarians
in support of the Civil Rights Movement in many cases
against the opposition of their own churches!

On the other hand, even during high school I think I
realized that this model of reality was actually no more
objective than the one I had grown up with. There was so
much still that I could not make myself believe. It was full
of questions I must not ask if I did not want to be labeled
irrational, immature, or even immoral. It took the most
fundamental, complex and subtle human realities and
declared them insignificant. How could I accept death as
the natural end of life in the case of a starving child, or a
mother dying of breast cancer, frantic for her small children?
Even under the best of circumstances, I was unable not to
know that the reality of death was not clean, universal,
simple.

One of the most paralyzingly painful things about this ethos was the way all the claims of objective rationality
entwined with explicit and implicit judgments about
what it meant to be female. I began to learn this at the end
of the first day of my freshman History of Civilization. The
affable and witty instructor had finished explaining that the
course was to be structured around a study of the economic
forces which had created the rise and fall of the world’s
great empires. The insect sounds of early fall came peacefully
through the open windows of the sunny room. Now,
he stood relaxed, waiting for questions, his pipe in his
mouth. A show-off student asked a question about Marx;
another asked about factors contributing to Napoleon’s
down-fall. In spite of suffering from elementary school
fears of speaking in class, I raised my hand. My stomach
hurt. The instructor nodded in my direction.

I tried to articulate my question. “What I would like
to learn about is what everyday life was like for ordinary
people in each period. What did they think about? Will we
be studying that, too?”

The instructor, who was by this time sitting on top of
his desk, took his pipe out of his mouth, removed his left
ankle from his right knee, looked at me and laughed.

“Just like a woman!” he said. “No wonder women
can’t think! Women are never interested in the Big
Picture; they are so subjective. All they are interested in is
feelings! If you want to learn about feelings, go read a
women’s magazine!”

The class laughed. “Next?” he asked, putting his pipe
back in his mouth.

What became increasingly clear in college and seminary was that the whole scheme of rationality depended upon a hierarchical division of the human race into the
“thinkers,” and the “feelers.” Men were the thinkers, the
powerful ones, the objective carriers of the higher powers
who thought about the big issues. Women were the feelers,
the carriers of emotion, the enemy of rationality, the ones
who lived in the realm of everyday, particular experience.
What happened in my first history course was repeated in
nearly every class in college I ever took. To the questions I
increasingly tried not to ask, I received a variant on the
same answer: “What kind of a question is that? Women
are so subjective!”

Women were not taken seriously because they couldn’t
think. As for women who wanted to think, who could not
help thinking, these women were contemptible. Women were not supposed to want to think. It was the age of the popularization of Freud. Women who thought were told both in university classes and in popular women’s magazines that it was the indisputable scientific conclusion of modern psychology that women who thought were unnatural. Smart women made bad mothers. Smart women, like women who were good at sports, threatened, even hurt men.

All this raises two questions. What could I do once I had begun to suspect that as a woman I would never be more than tolerated in the university and seminary world of rational thought? And even more fundamentally, why in the world had I gone to seminary at all?

From childhood, I had read stories to comfort myself over the messiness of the world. Stories from the Old Testament had given me models of resourceful, independent children God approved of, like Joseph in Egypt, or Ruth. Perhaps recalling my childhood pleasure in the stories from the Old Testament, I wanted to write a graduate dissertation on the use of Old Testament imagery in the English metaphysical poets. In preparation for this work, I decided one morning to use the summer of 1963 before I began graduate work to learn some Hebrew at the seminary on campus. With a little effort that same morning I talked one of the Professors into monitoring me, and that afternoon I bought a copy of Learning Hebrew By the Inductive Method and a Hebrew Bible.

The next morning I studied the first pages of the grammar, and I opened my new Bible. And then, stumbling in Hebrew through the opening line of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” I had an Epiphany. Why this was so, I do not know, but I still recall the way the shape of the letters and the look of the light falling on the creamy paper were mixed up with what I can only call a sense of cosmic goodness and joy in all created things I had never encountered before. It was as though the page itself was alive and the jots and tittles on the letters little flames. For the first time I could recall, life itself seemed all of a piece and trustworthy, and there was a place for me in it. In that instant I knew that God delighted in creation, in light, in water and mountains, in fruit-bearing trees and grasses, in water creatures, and slithery things, in wild animals and tame, in men and most important for me, in women like me.

I decided at that very moment to leave off graduate work in English and to study Hebrew. Within the next few weeks, I applied to seminary for this purpose, and I was given a scholarship. I began second year Hebrew that fall. I loved Hebrew. The next two years I took as many Old Testament and Hebrew courses as I could for the purpose of a graduate degree in Hebrew.

At the same time, the relationship between my study of Hebrew and my understanding and experience of God was far from straightforward. Of course, I was not able to stop believing in God as I had known God up till then because what we know of God is always wrapped up in who we are, in our ways of feeling, thinking and perceiving, as we have been shaped by our personal experience, and by our larger culture. In fact, it was as though I now knew and believed simultaneously in three mutually contradictory gods.

There was the Christian God I knew from the Calvinistic Sunday Schools and Baptist revivals of my childhood who continued to grip my guilty imagination with threats of love, images of judgment, and demands of belief.

Then, there was the liberal God of the world of the university and the seminary, the civilized, distant God of Universal Reason, to whom any attempt to pray in personal terms or for personal reasons was an act of intellectual dishonesty. God in this guise was the very embodiment of all the supposedly male virtues academics including myself admired: rationality, unemotionality, justice, and impartiality. Unfortunately, however, he was at the same time the supreme rejection of “female” emotionality, particularity, partiality, spirituality. (“A fine paper,” my seminary teachers would say, "you think like a man.") Belief in this God necessarily entailed the repudiation of myself as female.

Finally, there was the almost secret, private God whom I did not yet know but whom I had first encountered on that summer day in the first pages of my Hebrew bible. How was I to live with all this theological mutual contradicitoriness? I handled the tension in the way I had been trained in the university: I declared to myself that I was not and would never be a Christian. I simply would choose, rationally, to avoid Christianity. I would not take courses in church history, or New Testament, or theology. Women couldn’t think, anyway. I would not grieve for any God I could not please and I could not have. I would spend my life studying Semitic languages, and for two years this is what I did.

Then, I went off to Oxford in England to do graduate work in Semitic studies. I thought I had entirely made my escape. Oxford, with its women’s colleges, took it for granted that women could be scholars. The Oxford program in Hebrew suited me perfectly. We wrote Hebrew compositions, both prose and poetry; we studied Semitic philology; we read Hebrew texts; we read few secondary sources and we did not ask questions about what the texts we studied meant. (“Could we take just a few minutes to talk about the meaning of the Book of Job?” I asked the last week of a three term course on the Hebrew text of Job. Embarrassed, the students looked at the table top and shuf-
fled their feet. The small Scottish professor drew back. “My dear madam, that is something to ask your tutor in the privacy of your tutorial!” Leaving the pain of the present far behind me, I retreated into the romantic dust of the ancient world.

The first warning that things were not ultimately going to work as I imagined came at the end of my first term. I was sitting tensely in my tutor’s office waiting for what came next in his evaluation of my first term’s work. He was a small, neat elderly English Baptist, and he was sitting in meditative silence.

“Well, my dear,” he said at last, steepling his tidy fingers, and looking at me with his bright eyes, “If you are going to take your examinations in two years, you will need to start your second Semitic language now. Syriac will be just the thing.”

“Syriac?” I said, stupidly.

“Yes,” he replied. “You will enjoy it. A wonderful language, and all the surviving texts are from the early church!”

I gave him twenty reasons, none of them the real ones, why Syriac with its Christian texts was impossible. In the end, I lost.

I lost badly. Two years later, I found that I was actually going to have to do a dissertation in the area of patristic theology. The beginning of the search for a topic was truly awful. I spent one anxious week after another in the Bodleian library reading in Greek and Syriac texts which soon all ran together in my mind into one. Even apart from the gloom with which these Christian works filled me, I could not get the hang of any of it. They proved the truth of Christianity by pointing to Jesus’ miracles; at the same time, they declared that the image of God in human beings resided in human rationality. In their talk about God the Logos, they seemed to combine in a particularly incomprehensible manner the painfully oppressive language, imagery and demands of both of the Christian gods I had tried to escape.

The beginning of my way out of this morass came about six months into my general reading for a dissertation topic. I had learned that the christological controversies of the fifth century were regarded as central to patristic thought, and that many of these texts were in Syriac. I had begun, therefore, to focus my attention on the writings of the monophysites, one of the major parties in the christological debates. One autumn morning as I sat in the Bodleian library surrounded by tall piles of nineteenth century volumes of these monophysite authors, I picked up and opened to the middle of one of these books, *The Thirteen Asetical Homilies of Philoxenus of Mabbug*.

The homily I opened to that morning was not, however, a christological text. Rather, it was a sermon on the Christian life written in the tradition of the great early founders of Egyptian and Syrian monasticism. It was an exhortation to those early monks not to criticize or judge each other, but rather, to treat each other with the gentleness of God, who especially loves the ones the world despises, and who is always so much more willing than human beings to make allowances for sin, because it is God alone who sees the whole of who we are and who we have been, who understands the depths of our temptations and the extent of our sufferings.

In the reading of those words I was given a second epiphany. I felt my eyes fill with tears of astonishment, gratitude, and hope. Knowing as I did nothing of early monasticism, within five minutes Philoxenus of Maggub had conveyed to me not only the early monastic vision of God, he carried to my alienated and fearful heart the very God of whom he spoke. I had come once again face to face with the elusive God I had met five years earlier in the Hebrew text of Genesis, and for the first time this God was wearing an unmistakably Christian face.

I left the library that morning resolved to do my research on Philoxenus’ monastic theology. Unfortunately, this was not to be. Philoxenus was not, after
all, noted in the ancient world for his ascetical theology, but for his christology. Even more significantly, however, in the Protestant world of theological scholarship, there was a conviction that the real contribution of the patristic church was made in "the hammering out of doctrine" that took place in the early controversies and Ecumenical Councils. The early monastic movement was understood to be no more than a backwater of the early church, comprised largely of irrational, body-hating, world-denying crazies who were interested only in the "spiritual life." Serious scholars studied the development of doctrine.

The clean intellectual issues of the christological controversies at this point seemed to me not so much clean as they were sterile alongside the monastic material, but christology was what I was supposed to be doing, and so I did it. At first, everything was straightforward. The christological texts were, in fact, incredibly complex, and in spite of my doubts about whether I had enough theological ability to understand them, I enjoyed getting inside the thought patterns of its ancient combatants to make sense of the logic of their theological puzzles. To that end I continued to read widely in the eastern patristic writers.

Slowly, slowly the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries began to come into focus. Slowly, slowly I began to learn that the God of the monks was the God of the christological texts. Something was happening to me as my heart began to make connections the university was breaking.

I am not sure at what point I realized I was in a crisis. I only know that one day I woke up with a severe anxiety attack that lasted for weeks. Day after day when I sat down to work, I was paralyzed. I could not read, I could not write, and I could not think. I did not know what was the matter with me. Only gradually it dawned on me. Without even being aware of it, I had committed myself to the God I was encountering in the texts. The problem, now, was that I had also been completely drawn into the logic of patristic christology. I was afraid of my mind that had gotten me in so much trouble in the past. I was terrified that I would find at the end of my research that all the ancient christology I was studying was basically implausible, and so I would have to abandon the God to whom I had already committed myself as implausible as well.

In my paralysis, I did not know what to do. Then, one day, when I was at my worst, I brought myself to talk with the chaplain at Pusey House, whom I knew slightly. He gave no advice, but seeing that I was suffering from exhaustion, he offered to arrange a three-day rest for me in the guest house of the Anglican Benedictine convent off the Iffley Road in south Oxford. In spite of my rationalistic and low-church Protestant prejudices, I accepted.

I was in bad shape when I got off the bus at the Fairacres stop two days later. I only vaguely remember being welcomed at the front gate and led to the guest house by a smiling, stout, middle aged oblate, dressed in a habit. Dimly, I recall her explanation of the rules of the house and the delicious, comforting smell of food cooking. And I almost remember slowly climbing the stairs to my little room on the second floor, where I shut the door, lay down, and fell into an immediate sleep on top of the bed, still dressed in my coat and hat and mittens.

What happened some time later, however, is sharp in my mind. I was awakened by a knock on my door. Confused and still in my outdoor clothes, I stood up, and nearly before I could say "come in," Mother Jane was in the room. Immediately, her presence overwhelmed me. She was a tall, striking woman in her graceful habit, and she had a welcoming face with rosy cheeks and very clear eyes, but what was overwhelming wasn't any of that. Before she said a word I noticed that there was something odd about the way she walked, and the way she held herself. There was a freedom in her that I had never seen in any woman, or any living human being, for that matter, a freedom that I had not even imagined to be possible. This was a woman, a woman radiating intelligence, energy, and kindness, absolutely without fear, completely at home in the world and fully, unapologetically herself.

While I stood there, dumbly, she walked toward me. Then, she bent toward me to give me a kiss. The kiss was too much for me. I threw my arms around her neck, sobbing. She patted me soothingly for a few minutes, then asked me gently what was wrong. Somehow, within a few minutes I gulped out honestly not only all my anxiety about my research, but the fear, and humiliation, and hurt I had felt as a woman around the use of my mind my whole life.

I don't recall the exact words of her reply. They were something like "it is God who gave you your mind; never be afraid to use any of God's gifts to its fullest." Because like the God of the early monastic writers she had seen me clearly in all my particular pain and guilt, and she had looked on me with love, she was able to free me from my fear. At the same time, because she was a woman who herself so clearly embodied what she said, she showed me that a human being, and a woman, could live in this freedom from fear, full of integrity and joy, her thought, her feelings and her prayer not divided.

In the days that followed, I slept and ate, thought and prayed in a state of peace that I had never known before. As an enclosed order of contemplatives, the sisters had no contact with visitors. In the chapel, however, during the offices of prayer which I was allowed to attend, I watched the sisters attentively as they prayed. I saw them look out the window, listen to the birds, fidget, concentrate or day-

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dream and I knew that for them prayer was neither the pious, private emotional activity that was, as I had been taught, the superstitious opposite of thought, nor was it the rationalistic exercise I had known in seminary. The sisters obviously lived in an intellectual world more real, messier and less truncated than the one I was trying to live in, and they had the same fearless freedom I had met in Mother Jane.

In Mother Jane and the sisters at the convent I met the same integration of the heart and the mind that I had encountered in the great eastern teachers of the early church. For Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Philoxenus of Maggub, as well as for the teachers of Egyptian desert monasticism, there can be no real split between the spiritual and the intellectual. The reason that this is so lies, ironically, in their insistence, first, that human beings are made in the image of God, and second, that the heart of that image is rationality.

As for the exercise of rationality, for the patristic writers, to be rational means to see the world as it really is, that is, to look on the world and especially the people in it, with the clear eyes of God. But how does God see the world as it really is? Not according to the ancient church by looking at it either with the judgmental eyes of a God who sets the rules, or with the unemotional, impartial, analytical gaze of the hard scientist seeking abstract universal truth. God looks at the world through the eyes of love. If we, therefore, as human beings made in the image of God also want to see reality rationally, that is, as it truly is, then we, too, must learn to look at what we see with love. For the teachers of the early church, rational thought—especially about God or about other people—is only rational when it is also loving.

As for the characteristics of this love, God’s rational love is not an abstract, impartial love that looks on all things and all people with the same calm and benign gaze. Of course God’s love is universal in that it extends without fail to every single thing, be it plant, or person, or plateau God made. This had been part of my discovery of God in the Hebrew text of Genesis.

The beginning of my turning point to Christianity, however, came the day I heard from Philoxenus that only God can judge us because it is God alone, who, looking with compassion on the depth and variety of our individual experience and our suffering, really knows us as we are. For the early monastics, the particular, the realm of difference and of experience is not the enemy of rationality. The very trustworthiness of God’s rationality depends upon the focused particularity of God’s love of the individual. But this implies that, because we are made in God’s image, the trustworthiness of our knowledge of others, and the world as well depends upon our ability to see and love the messiness of the particular as well.

History matters to Christians precisely because our religion is a religion of the particular. This, in fact, is what the incarnation is about. God came in flesh and blood among us as a particular human being. Jesus was born in first century Palestine into a particular home, and he died a specific and individual death. In between, he taught and healed real, individual men and women, and he made very specific, non-universal friends and disciples like Mary and Martha, Peter and John. By all this particularity it seems to me that God has demonstrated to us that individual, messy human lives are not only of value to God: it is by looking at the particularity of human lives that we become able to see reality. This, in fact, is why I have used this autobiographical form to reflect on the meaning and characteristics of Christian rationality as it relates to spirituality.

My own educational experience is not unique. Many women and men in this room share my experience. I also know that a number of the destructive assumptions of the ethos of rationality that undergirded my original education are still alive. A major purpose of higher education is to teach people to think. But human beings cannot really think if they are not allowed to be who they are or take account of what they know, even if it is frightening or inconvenient. The heart of the child worried that the world would run out of coal was at last comforted and strengthened by a woman who said and demonstrated in her own person, “God gave you your mind; do not be afraid to use it.” In the last analysis for the Christian there can be no split between the intellectual and the spiritual. The way of God, and the way of knowing are one.
The late Justice Potter Stewart was the source of the noted remark, "I don't know how to define obscenity, but I sure know it when I see it." Much the same can be said for spirituality. Obscenity, despite endless debates and not a few court decisions, still lies mostly in the eye of the beholder. Spirituality, which cannot profit from legal decisions about community standards for its possible identity, usually has to rely on the fickleness of academics to try to speak its name, though this fact has never prevented people from just doing it and not bothering about defining it. Academics, unfortunately, do need to be attentive to issues of description and definition.

Both spirituality and obscenity are also linked by a common semantic explosion—everybody seems to be talking about them, though often at cross-purposes. The debate over obscenity, of course, gets into the news more frequently, but the documentation on the prolific growth of the term "spirituality" in recent American culture is substantial, and it involves not only those interested in religion. I await the moment (perhaps not far off), when a product will be advertised on national television because of the contribution it makes to some form of spirituality.

In 1961 the Italian medievalist Gustavo Vinay referred to spirituality as "a necessary pseudoconcept we don't know how to replace" (706). It is certainly the kind of pseudoconcept which seems to have a life of its own, whether academics oppose it or attempt to profit from its ubiquity. Given the relative novelty of "spirituality" to many, as well as the ambiguity that allows it to be used so variously (often in contradictory fashion) a case could certainly be made that the term should be dropped from the contemporary study of religion. But I am convinced that despite the ambiguities of the word, there are important issues at stake in spirituality's recent popularity, as well as considerable contributions that the study of spirituality can bring to religion in the decades ahead.

Trying to present this case is not easy, because it requires a survey of the history of the term followed by reflections on definition and methodology in religious studies—issues that make all but the most academic eyes glaze over.

Spirituality is not a new word in English. As used in the fifteenth century, it generally meant either an episcopal gathering (i.e., a spirituality of bishops, the equivalent of a pride of lions), or ecclesiastical possessions or revenues. These are not the meanings most of us have in mind when we talk of spirituality today, however much we hope bishops may be spiritual men. But as early as the fourteenth century "spirituality, (or spirituality)" was to be found in the more ancient sense of the quality or condition of being spiritual, as can be seen in Piers Plowman (Passus 5

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of the B text) where Wrath relates how he delights in setting friars against parish priests:

I, Wrath, walke with hem and wisse hem of my bokes,
Thus they speken of spiritualte, that either despitheth oother
Til they be bothe beggars and by my spiritualte libben,
Or ellis al riche and ridden aboute (lines 146-48).

It is noteworthy that Langland’s view of spirituality is already particularized into special forms, and is also capable of being twisted to the devil’s purpose by Wrath. The problems of spirituality and its perversions seem to go back to its earliest English appearances.

Where then did the term originate and what is its history? The role of the spirit (ruah) of God in the Old Testament was the foundation for the New Testament emphasis on the importance of the “spirit” (pneuma) and the qualifier “spiritual” (pneumatikos) in the foundational Christian documents. In Luke-Acts the Spirit is in Jesus in the act of establishing the community (e.g., Lk. 4:14, Ac. 2:32-33). Paul identifies the Risen Lord with the pneuma (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:17, 1 Cor. 6:17), and John emphasizes the rebirth in the Spirit and in truth (e.g., Jn. 3:3-8, 4:23, and the Last Discourses). As is well known, the Christian opposition between “flesh” (sarx) and “spirit” originally had nothing to do with a dualistic anthropology contrasting body and soul, but rather addressed the concrete human choices between life lived according to egoic satisfaction and that conducted according to God’s purpose. Despite popular accounts to the contrary, few patristic and medieval theologians missed this point, though they often had difficulties harmonizing it with the dualistic Platonic anthropology they adopted from Hellenistic sources. (For more information regarding the term’s history, see Leclercq; Alexander; or Principe. For New Testament study, see Schweizer.)

Spiritualis, the Latin translation of pneumatikos, appears 22 times in the Vulgate of St. Jerome, but it was not until the fifth century that we find the noun spiritualitas, appearing in a letter anciently ascribed to St. Jerome: “Age ut in spiritualitate proficias,” that is, “Act in order to grow in spirituality.” (This fifth-century text, found in PL 30:115A, has been doubtfully ascribed to both Pelagius and to Faustus of Riez.) It is clear that in this text, the term still bears the meaning that pneumatikos had from the origins of Christianity—increase your hold on the Spirit of Jesus, the source of the Christian life. This is the way in which the substantive was used in its rare appearances in the early Middle Ages. (See Leclercq 281-84) In the twelfth century, however, spiritualitas was employed more frequently and more diversely. Not only was it used in the traditional sense of the power animating Christian life, but it began to be used by Scholastic theologians, Gilbert of Poitiers for example, in a naturalistic and philosophical way, as what pertains to the soul as contrasted with the body. The perhaps unavoidable mingling of these two meanings in later Christian history has been one of the less happy consequences of Scholasticism—the root of those conceptions of spirituality which willy-nilly used it as the reason for giving the physical world and especially the human body a largely negative role in what they conceived of as authentic Christian life. Thomas Aquinas forms an interesting example of a bridge figure. According to the Index Thomisticus, the term appears about seventy times, and Thomas seems usually to think of spiritualitas in the traditional sense of integral Christian perfection, as when he says that “Sanctificatio gratiae pertinet ad spiritualitatem,” or “Sanctification by grace belongs to spirituality.” But he is not above using the newer philosophical mode in which spirituality means what belongs to the soul as soul. It was also in the thirteenth century that spiritualitas found a juridical use, being applied to ecclesiastical offices and goods.

The later Middle Ages was the era of the great migration of Latin terminology into the vernaculars of Europe whose descendants we still use in our theological constructions. According to Lucy Tinsley’s study, the first emigre of spiritualitas appears in the Old French espiritualité of the mid-thirteenth century, though this word was most often employed in the jurisdictional sense. The fourteenth and fifteenth-century Middle English examples cited above are indicative of the spread of the term throughout the late medieval vernaculars. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, in Johannes Altenstaig’s Vocabulary of Theology, the Latin adjective spirituale still kept its biblical meaning as referring to the whole person’s way of acting (Raitt, 454-56), but during the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there seems to have been a gradual shift of “spirituality,” both in Latin and in the vernaculars, toward signifying only the inner dispositions, the interior states of the soul. This is the way we find it used in John of the Cross, for example, in the words “And if, now that the spirit has achieved spirituality [espiritualidad] in this way...” In seventeenth century France “spirituality” was widely used in the sense of “Everything connected with the interior exercises of the soul free of the senses which seeks only to be perfected in the eyes of God,” as one dictionary puts it (Leclercq 298-94). But the crisis of mysticism caused by the condemnation of Quietism at the end of the seventeenth century had its effect on the popularity of “spirituality,” as we can see in Voltaire’s ironic references to “la nouvelle spiritualité” of MadameGuyon and Francois Fenelon (Principe 132). In the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries the terms “devotion” and “piety” became far more popular among both Catholics and Protestants. Jon Alexander, for example, points out that “spirituality” was used in the nineteenth century mostly by free religious groups, the same groups who kept alive interest in such suspect figures as Madame Guyon (248). On the academic side, the dogmatic categories of ascetical and mystical theology favored by the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Battista Scaramelli (1687-1752) won the day. Up to the middle of the present century, among Roman Catholics at least, ascetical and mystical theology was still the preferred term for what is now almost universally referred to as either spiritual theology or spirituality.

The reasons for the revival of the term “spirituality” in France around the beginning of this century remain something of a mystery. Auguste Saudreau, who was using the term in 1900, issued his Manuel de spiritualité in 1916, and Pierre Pourrat’s very successful four-volume La spiritualité catholique was published between 1918 and 1928. The Jesuit Joseph de Guibert also began employing the term extensively, and in 1932 the first fascicule of the great Dictionnaire de spiritualité appeared. By 1943 when Etienne Gilson gave the inaugural lecture for the establishment of the chair of the history of spirituality at the Institut Catholique in Paris, spirituality had definitely arrived.

Spirituality became popular more gradually in English, being first introduced among Catholics in dependence on the French, and, according to Principe, appears first in 20th century English in the 1922 translation of Pourrat (154). Alexander’s survey of the Catholic Periodical Index turned up only 11 uses in titles of articles between 1930 and 1964 and no less than 146 uses between 1965 and 1976 (149). By the 1970s the all-powerful gravitational pull of spirituality was as evident in America as it was in France. One sign was the capitation of the journals. The French Jesuit periodical which had started out “Scaramelianly” as the Revue d'ascetique et de mystique in 1920 changed its name to the Revue d’histoire de la spiritualité in 1972, and in 1977 the American journal Cross and Crown became Spirituality Today.

God alone probably knows how many appearances of “spirituality” can be found in journal articles of the past fifteen years. On the American scene, these same fifteen years have witnessed the publication of the Classics of Western Spirituality series (seventy-seven volumes since 1978), and the commencement of World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, of which eleven volumes have appeared since 1985. A number of single-volume dictionaries of spirituality have also become available, as well as countless books, academic and popular, with “spirituality” in the title. It is now possible to take a Ph.D. degree in spirituality in at least four American universities (Fordham, Catholic University, Duquesne and the Berkeley GTU). Perhaps most surprising has been the willingness not only of non-Catholic Christians but even non-Christians to embrace the term spirituality, as has been demonstrated by the World Spirituality project (though, to be sure, this was not without its conflicts and difficulties). One may think of the growth of the term “spirituality” in the past generation as either a good or a bad thing, but it is certainly a major new factor on the map of American religion.

In the second and longer part of this paper, I wish to consider the role of spirituality, whatever it may be, primarily in terms of religious academia, that is, the teaching of religion in all its aspects. I will do so under three headings. First, what is spirituality and how are we to relate it to other disciplines that concern the study of religion? Second, should it be taught? And third, how should it be taught?

Without by any means making an exhaustive search, I recently turned up some thirty-five different definitions of spirituality, both “first-order” definitions, that is, ones concerned with the phenomenon itself, and “second-order” definitions treating of the study of spirituality. Most of the second-order definitions are of the theological variety. (Second-order definitions of an anthropological and historical-contextual type usually add nothing to the first-order definition except the qualification of “the study of.”) It would be, of course, possible to add qualifications about the perspective used in such study, though in the case of defining mysticism this appears to have been rarely done, at least in the sense of entering into the definition itself. Walter Principe, on pp. 135-36, makes an interesting distinction between three levels of spirituality: (a) the real or existential level; (b) the level of a formulation of a teaching about the lived reality, as in Ignatian spirituality; and (c) the study by scholars of the first and especially the second levels.)

At first glance, this might seem to indicate total semantic chaos, but things are not quite that dismal. These descriptions and definitions tend to fall into broad groups exhibiting common features, however much they differ in details. At this stage in the evolution of the discipline (if such it be), semantic confusion and vigorous debate is probably not a bad thing, especially insofar as it tends to clarify the current state of the question. I also think that it is possible for scholars to disagree about what is primary in the notion of spirituality and still work together in productive fashion because they are convinced that there is something primary about spirituality itself, however conceived.

Sandra Schneiders in her important 1989 article
"Spirituality in the Academy" suggests two kinds of approaches to spirituality—"a dogmatic position supplying a 'definition from above' and an anthropological position supplying a 'definition from below'" (Schneiders, 682). I think that the picture is actually more complicated than that, because there is a third option, an historical-contextual one. I would like to suggest that rather than the model of above-and-below (which is not a very nuanced view of how much contemporary theology deals with the problem of relating God and world), it would be better to think of recent views of spirituality as trying to relate various theological, anthropological and historical-contextual ways of conceiving the connection between limited and unlimited value systems. It is also important to note that a number of investigators provide both general definitions of spirituality, as well as scientific definitions of Christian spirituality, a process that often enables them to combine two or all three approaches.

Be not afraid. I do not intend to discuss thirty-five different definitions of spirituality, anymore than I would as many legal definitions of obscenity. But I do need to provide some key examples of important definitions and to reflect on what camps they fall into in order to frame my own understanding of the state of the field. I apologize for the way in which often subtle and extensive presentations will be summarized here—few of the authors cited will probably be happy with my brief characterizations of their position in the paragraphs that follow.

Older examples of definitions of spirituality, largely Catholic in provenance, were often second-order definitions emphasizing the theological character of the discipline to the exclusion, at least by implication, of anthropology, history and the human sciences as having any constitutive role. Pierre Pourret was more resolute than most of his followers when he affirmed early in this century that "Spirituality is that part of theology which deals with Christian perfection and the ways that lead to it," but this view has not been absent from recent Catholic thought either. For example, one can cite C. A. Bernard, who sees spirituality as "a theological discipline studying Christian existence by describing its progressive development and elucidating its structures and laws" (37), as well as Eugene Megyer. Those who take this approach often prefer the term "spiritual theology" to spirituality itself, James A. Wiseman, for example, who describes spiritual theology in Lonerganian terms (143-59). Non-Catholic scholars, such as Bradley C. Hanson, take a similar line, arguing that spiritual theology involves not only "a rigor of reflection" but also "a strongly existential relation to the subject matter" (49). The Anglican writer Kenneth Leech is another example of someone who understands spirituality primarily as spiritual theology.

Leech's preface to Experiencing God: theology as spirituality describes his book as "An exploration in spiritual theology, that is, in the search for a transforming knowledge of God."

However, many recent discussions of spirituality, even by Catholics, have hesitated over the term "spiritual theology," perhaps because of their fear that this may involve the reduction of spirituality to a mere appendage of dogmatic or moral theology. For example, more than thirty years ago, Louis Bouyer, although he spoke of spirituality as based on dogmatic theology, insisted that "Christian spirituality (or any other spirituality) is distinguished from dogma by the fact that, instead of studying or describing the objects of belief as it were in the abstract, it studies the reactions which these objects arouse in the religious consciousness." Thus he saw the discipline, which he, however, also spoke of as "spiritual theology," as being intimately connected to both human psychology and history (viii-ix). I find something of the same in Josef Sudbrack's article on "Spirituality" in Sacramentum Mundi, though he avoids any definition. The problem is this: Is spirituality a theological discipline or a separate field of the study of religion? And, if it is a theological discipline or specialization, how does it relate to the other aspects of the study of theology, whether conceived in traditional or in non-traditional ways?

A significant option, argued by some of the most weighty twentieth-century Catholic theological voices, is built upon a distinction between a generic notion of spirituality based upon human hunger for transcendence and specifically Christian spirituality which is to be measured by the norm of revelation (which does not necessarily have to mean that Christian spirituality is just a specialization of dogmatics). Perhaps the most interesting spokesman of this view has been the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, in three typically dense and powerful papers distinguished between spirituality as a "basic practical or existential attitude which is the expression of how one understands ethically committed existence," and the properly Christian spirituality which is nothing other than "the subjective aspect of dogmatic theology." (For the former notion, see "The Gospel as Norm..." in Spirituality, 7; for the latter quotation, "Spirituality" in Explorations, 211. In "Spirituality," 212, von Balthasar defines theologia spiritualis as "the Church's objective teaching on how revelation is to be realized in practice.") Another example can be found in the Dominican Jordan Aumann who says that "...spirituality refers to any religious or ethical value that is concretized as an attitude or spirit from which one's actions flow." For Aumann, spirituality is not restricted to any particular religion; it pertains to the field of religious psychology. It becomes the basis for spiritual theology when the spirit in
question is understood as the Holy Spirit, so that properly Christian spirituality is “a participation in the mystery of Christ through the interior life of grace” (17 and 18). Principe also appears to follow this line, explicitly appealing to von Balthasar, but creating his own definitions of general spirituality and specifically Christian spirituality. General spirituality is “the way in which a person understands and lives within his or her historical context that aspect of his or her religion, philosophy or ethic that is viewed as the loftiest, the noblest, the most calculated to lead to the fullness of the ideal or perfection being sought” (136). Note the important anthropological and historical elements here. The definition of Christian spirituality is “life in the Spirit as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ and daughters and sons of the Father” (135). Finally, although Karl Rahner was not at pains to give a definition of spirituality, on the basis of his distinction between transcendental experience and supernatural experience (and how he applied this to mysticism), one can think that a position along these lines would not be foreign to him (See McGinn 286-89).

Despite these nuanced theological options, the majority of definitions today can be described as variants of “anthropological” understandings (taken in both a philosophical and social scientific sense), that is, ones that put the greatest stress on spirituality as an element in human nature and experience. Many scholars see spirituality primarily as a “depth-dimension” of human existence. These definitions involve, implicitly or explicitly, a notion of human authenticity, and often also of transcendence, or at least of self-transcendence. Let me cite some examples to give you the flavor. Spirituality involves “the inner dimension of the person...[where] ultimate reality is experienced” (Ewart Cousins, xiii) or it concerns “the constituent of human nature which seeks relations with the ground or purpose of existence” (G. Wakefield, v), or it is seen as “a capacity for self-transcendence” (Joann Wolski Conn, 3). Shifting from attempts to characterize the inner ground itself to characterizations of our experience of it, we find an even larger number of definitions/descriptions. Spirituality has to do “with becoming a person in the fullest sense” (John Macquarrie 40 and 47), or is “one typical way of handling the human condition” (Raymundo Panikkar, 9). For J.C. Breton, it is a way of engaging anthropological questions in order to arrive at a richer and more authentically human life, something which does not seem much different from Jon Alexander’s view that it concerns those aspects of human life which are seen by their subjects as intentionally related to what holds unrestricted value (Breton, 97-105). Sandra Schneiders praises the basic line taken by Breton, but tries to be more precise by defining spirituality as “the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives” (“Theology and Spirituality 684). This position leaves open the possibility for forms of non-religious, or secular spirituality, as does Edward Kinerk who thinks of spirituality as the expression of a dialectical personal growth from the inauthentic to the authentic (Edward Kinerk 6). Michael Downey, on the other hand, would seem to exclude this because, in his preface, he sees spirituality as concerned with the relational and personal dimensions of the human person’s relation to the divine. Perhaps the vaguest expression of the anthropological approach known to me occurs in an article of Rachel Hosmer, who begins her piece with the observation: “Spirituality in the broadest sense defies definition. It refers to whatever in human experience is alive and intentional, conscious of itself and responsive to others” (425). However, like the theological positions cited above, Hosmer goes on to talk about specifically Christian spirituality, which she describes as “focused in Christ and his Body the Church as the community of believers and the locus of the encounter between the human and the divine.”

The advantages of the anthropological approach are many, as Sandra Schneiders among others, has pointed out (“Spirituality in the Academy” 683). First, this option seems to be that adopted by the majority of recent investigators (though the argument from numbers should not be decisive). Second, this approach allows for ecumenical Christian and wider interreligious use of the term, and even, in most cases, for the possibility of a secular spirituality (which many today argue is an important option.) A third advantage, at least from the academic point of view, is that it encourages the study of spirituality from the viewpoint of the human sciences and thus gives it entry into academia on as broad a base as possible. The disadvantages, however, are equally evident. Many of the definitions or descriptions cited above are so vague that they make any definition of spirituality as a field of study impossible—if spirituality is everything that is good and positive about what is human then all it needs is a round of applause rather than cultivation and study. Even those definitions, like that of Sandra Schneiders, which clarify more precisely exactly what aspect of human behavior is the subject matter of spirituality, as well as the perspective from which it is to be studied, run into the difficulty of distinguishing that subject matter and perspective from what it is that religion is supposed to study, or from the object of ethics broadly conceived (Cf. Hanson 48-49). In trying to determine what spirituality is
by taking anthropological route alone, it may well be that
all we have come up with is another name for religion.
More careful distinctions between religion, ethics and
spirituality are certainly in order at the present time—their
creation would seem to be important to the academic
future of the discipline.

There is a third approach to defining spirituality, one
less often found in a pure form perhaps, but still worthy of
note. I refer to this as the historical-contextual approach
because it emphasizes spirituality as an experience rooted
in a particular community's history rather than as a
dimension of human existence as such (not that it excludes
this). I myself had something like this view in mind in the
"Introduction" to Christian Spirituality 1, when I spoke of
Christian spirituality as "the lived experience of Christian
belief in both its general and more specialized forms," and
later termed it "the effort to appropriate Christ's saving
work in our lives" (xv; cf. 254). This quasi-definition has
been criticized with some justice, in particular by Carlos M.
N. Eire, for being vague and difficult to distinguish from
moral theology, though I did try to make such a
distinction by restricting spirituality to "those acts in which
the relation to God is immediate and explicit" (ibid., xvi).
However, I have no interest in unyielding defense of this
particular formulation in a paper whose point is that there
is no fully adequate definition.

Several other recent students of spirituality have
emphasized the contextual element in helpful ways. In his
Christian Spirituality, Rowan Williams says, "And if
spirituality can be given any coherent meaning, perhaps it
is to be understood in terms of this task: each believer
making his or her own that engagement with the
questioning at the heart of faith which is so evident in the
classical documents of Christian belief” (1). Urban T.
Holmes also adopted a historical-contextual approach,
defining his task as answering the question “How has
Christian humanity throughout its history understood what
it is to seek God and to know him?” (3). A good example
of a description of spirituality that emphasizes the
historical dimension while being able to include the other
two elements can be found in the French historian Andre
Vauchez who speaks of spirituality as “the dynamic unity of
the content of faith and the way in which it is viewed by
historically determined human beings” (7). Recently,
Philip Sheldrake’s Spirituality and History has also
emphasized the importance of history in the study of
spirituality.

The emphasis on the historical rootedness of
spirituality in a particular community, of course, would
seem to cast doubt on the possibility of a secular
spirituality, unless we think of certain secular traditions
(e.g., Marxism) as taking on the aspects of a quasi-religious
community. It is also clear that a historical-contextual
approach alone, since it rests primarily on the witness of
adherents who say they have a spirituality, cannot, of itself,
address normative questions. (In the discussion of the
oral version of this paper, the interesting question of the
possibility of a “Satanic spirituality,” or a “Nazi spirituality”
was raised. I would argue against seeing these as authentic
spiritualities, but it would be difficult to do so on a
historical-contextual approach alone, since significant
communities would assert that these represented their
“authentic,” and even “transcendent” values). Therefore,
the historical-contextual approach, of its very nature, has
the advantage of implying the other two, that is, it must

We teachers usually expect our students to be changed in some (often, we hope, fundamental)
way by our teaching. Under Itard’s influence the undomesticated boy is changed—socialized. In the
same way that he learns to wear clothing, he learns that objects have names, that pleasing people has
rewards, that even caring people may be unjust.

Strikingly, the highly socialized Itard is as much changed in the process of teaching as the boy,
Victor, is transformed. The teacher moves from eager, detached intellectual curiosity to more
sympathetic—even empathic—involvement with his pupil. He discovers the nature of the boy as he
goes, and adjusts his pedagogy as best he can to meet what he perceives to be the needs of the
learner. At some point he begins to see his pupil as a human being, not as an animal. Not quite an
equal, but more than just a creature to be tamed.

It is significant that Truffaut, the director, takes the role of the teacher in this film. The film thus
raises other questions. Does Truffaut’s film theory—that a film’s director may be its single dominant
creator or auteur, surpassing writers, actors, and cinematographers in control of a film’s style, form,
theme, and content—apply to teaching? To what extent is the teacher an auteur in the learning
process? Does art seek principally to educate or to change? Is the viewer changed by the film?

Margaret Franson
have a relation to the beliefs of the community, the theology that formalizes these, and eventually, if not in every instance, to the truth claims of those beliefs. And it also must take into account what the study of the practice of beliefs within historical human communities has to say about human nature as such, that is, it must be open to anthropology, conceived of from both philosophical and social-scientific perspectives. The mutual implication of all three approaches to understanding the meaning of spirituality hinted at here provides, I believe, an important insight into the current situation regarding the status of the term.

What may seem like helpless confusion, or open warfare between different approaches, may, if we turn it on its head, actually be an advantage. I do not believe that we have any really adequate definition of spirituality at the present time—and we may never have (just as we will probably never have a fully adequate definition of religion). Theologically speaking at least, Hans Urs von Balthasar provides us with a reason for this when he reminds us: “No mission, no spirituality, is capable of being defined in its living center. They all come from the infinite variety of the divine life, which always exceeds the compass of the human mind” (“Spirituality” 226). If it is indeed the case that spirituality is one of those terms where exploration will never yield clear and universally acceptable definition, then it is primarily in the ongoing discussion among the three approaches outlined above that we will, if only in some asymptotic fashion, approach a more adequate understanding of what spirituality is in itself, as well as possibly work out better ways to study it. What I would insist upon at the present time is that all three options remain in conversation, though this conversation will doubtless take different forms depending on the context, that is, whether it takes place as a part of the humanistic study of religion or in specifically religious educational institutions.

This brings me to the second question, this is, should spirituality be taught? There are those who think that spirituality cannot be taught, at least in the way in which other subjects can be. To these we may respond that it has always been taught. As Ewert Cousins has reminded us, “The transmission of spiritual wisdom may be the oldest discipline in human history” (xiii). The question is rather the relation of this ancient tradition of handing on spiritual wisdom to the highly developed ways in which modern society trains the next generation, especially through its formalized academic institutions.

To my mind, the transmission of spirituality in the first-order definition will, and should, take place primarily outside academia within the traditions of spiritual training which academics need to study but which they too often imitate at their own peril. I am frankly hesitant about how much of a “practical” element can and should be incorporated into the academic study of spirituality, both within religious schools and in secular academic settings, though I am convinced that for committed Christian academics teaching itself is a spiritual discipline. A number of the current projects concerning the study of spirituality seem to involve confusions about the relation between intellectual appropriation and personal commitment that would be impossible to implement in non-religious institutions and possibly unwise even in religiously-affiliated institutions of higher learning. Something of this seems to me present in Schneiders’ insistence on the “participative” dimension of the study of spirituality (“Spirituality,” 693-95).

These dangers kept in mind, however, it seems clear that there is considerable consensus today among those involved in the study of religion concerning the necessity of incorporating spirituality, in some way, into the curriculum. This is particularly evident among those who view spirituality as spiritual theology. Numerous modern theologians have reflected on the sad history of the separation of theology and spirituality, that “diastase” that Hans Urs von Balthasar traced back to the incipient distinction of polemical and inner-churchly theologies in the patristic period and which grew immeasurably worse in the late Middle Ages due to the separation between the rational theology of the Scholastics and the affective theology of some mystics (See “Theologie und Spiritualität,” 577-84). For the Swiss theologian, the very structure of the covenant between God and humanity witnessed to in the Hebrew Bible requires the reintegration of spirituality and theology. Reflection on Scripture, especially the unity of dogmatic and paranetic teaching in the Pauline letters, leads him to conclude: “On this basis one can already ask oneself the question whether it makes sense in the future to distinguish any longer between theology and spirituality” (ibid. 586). We need not accept the whole of von Balthasar’s program for overcoming the disjunction between spirituality and theology to use him as a spokesman for agreement among contemporary theologians concerning the need to bring theology and spirituality back together (Cf. Bechtle 305-14). If theology finds its ultimate purpose in the conversion of the subject, as my teacher Bernard Lonergan argued, it seems impossible to exclude spirituality from the task of religious self-appropriation which Lonergan saw as theology’s goal. As Regina Bechtle noted, for Lonergan “knowing oneself in relation to God and giving oneself over to the discipline of transformation emerge as prerequisites and not just frills for one who would do theology” (ibid. 308).
Even those who do not wish to take a primarily theological route into the study of religion, both in religiously-affiliated and non-affiliated schools, have begun to argue that spirituality should take a place in the curriculum. Every religious tradition needs to understand its past, and there is something that answers to the broad description of spirituality in all religions, at least in the sense that beliefs have always been practiced and were always intended to be appropriated on a deep personal level. This history of appropriation has often been neglected in narrowly rational models of the study of religious traditions that concentrated only on doctrines and institutions. Spirituality may not be the only way to correct this myopia, but it is certainly one way that should not be neglected. From the perspective of the study of religion in non-religious higher education, this historical-context approach to spirituality makes a particularly strong case for the need to include spirituality in some way in the curriculum.

To be sure, there are those, even among believers, who doubt the wisdom of this. Bradley Hanson, for example, questions whether spirituality can be taught within a religiously-neutral academic environment because of the degree of existential involvement spirituality always entails (49-50). Precisely this issue of subjective interest, as well as the admitted vagueness of the term, would lead many non-religious educators to rule spirituality out as a fit subject of study. But I want to argue against these positions, claiming, as Walter Principe and others have done, that spirituality can and should be an integral part of the curriculum both within theological education and in the humanistic study of religion.

To those who say that the “existential orientation” entailed in spirituality is incompatible with the objectivity that is at least the ideal of the humanistic education, I reply that we need more adequate distinctions among various kinds of existential orientations. In the religiously-related school, existential orientation will mean one thing; it will mean something rather different in a department of religious studies or a non-church related Divinity School like the one where I teach. Here the existential orientation entailed in the study of spirituality need not be directed either immediately or mediately to the student’s own religious life, but should at least include the student’s willingness to investigate a particular spirituality as one way of expressing the central concerns of living the human condition, however foreign that may be to him or her on a personal level. Put more existentially, the study of spirituality requires a desire to try to appreciate how religious people actually live their beliefs.

In some ways I think the final question I wish to address, that is, how spirituality is to be taught, is the most difficult and the one on which there may well be the most disagreement. There have been a number of recent articles that have set out programs for the incorporation of spirituality into academic curricula. In 1981, Edward Kinerk, using insights from Bernard Lonergan, suggested that a curriculum for the study of spirituality could be constructed by the application of questions for analysis that would allow one to find the form of a spirituality, followed by questions for comparison and contrast among spiritualities that would eventually lead to questions for evaluation (7-19). In 1989, James A. Wiseman advanced another Lonerganian plan. Treating spiritual theology as a “subject specialization” in the terms of Lonergan’s Method of Theology, he tried to show how the subject matter can be specified by the use of the five categories of symbolic expression that P. Joseph Cahill in his book Mended Speech identifies as the core of any religious tradition. The five symbolic expressions are: (1) a body of normative literature, such as the Bible; (2) theological formulations, broadly taken; (3) visual art forms; (4) aural art forms; and (5) popular devotions and the like. This subject matter would then be approached through the mediation of Lonergan’s eight functional specializations (research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics, communications. (Wisemans) 147-57). Walter Principe’s article also contains brief reflections on the teaching of spirituality both from the theological perspective and the history of religions point of view. More recently, Sandra Schneiders has provided a rather detailed picture, basically Ricouerian in inspiration, which treats spirituality as an interdisciplinary “field-encompassing field” which should be descriptive-critical, ecumenical, holistic, and participative. Each of these four programs has merits. Read individually, each seems convincing, at least in part; taken together, their considerable differences demonstrate the problems of curricular development in an area still so unsure of itself.

This is not the occasion for a detailed evaluation of these plans and exactly why I would not want to implement any one of them myself. This is not to deny the important contribution they represent, nor to put a stop to the discussion of exactly how to implement the teaching of spirituality into the curriculum. However, I do want to go on record with what may seem a rather anomalous statement after my insistence on the importance of spirituality for the teaching of religion; that is, I am not at all sure that spirituality needs a separate niche in the curriculum in order to be adequately assimilated. The creation of programs of spirituality is an important part of the process of giving spirituality the voice it deserves, but need not be taken as the only way to achieve the goal.
Speaking as a Christian theologian, I believe that it is quite possible to teach spirituality effectively in and through traditional disciplines such as theology, both historical and constructive, ethics, and also the history of Christianity. In saying this I do not mean to exclude other disciplines, or the necessity of being open to non-Christian forms of spirituality, especially because so much good theology today is theology that is being done in dialogue with other traditions. The reason for this has been well put by von Balthasar when he says, “Nothing in the Church is mere abstract principle: everything that is valid for all rests on concrete persons, or better, on concrete talks entrusted to concrete persons...” (“The Gospel as Norm,” 20). This attention to the concrete person and the concrete task in the study of religion—not just to institutional structures and intellectual systems—necessarily implies what I understand as spirituality. As long as we do not treat this hunger for the concrete in an elitist fashion that would narrow the scope of spirituality to the thought of a few great masters, the incorporation of this perspective in our teaching will help us be attentive to what we seem unable not to call spirituality.

We may ask in closing how the efforts of believing teachers and educators relate to first-order spirituality, that is, to the personal appropriation of Christian faith. Each teacher must have her or his answer to this question. Generalization is particularly difficult here, perhaps impossible. So let me instead tell two stories. The first involves a vision of sorts, but contemporary vision that might have been given to anyone concerned with the teaching and dissemination of spirituality.

A Long Island commuter stands on a platform watching trains speeding past each other east and west in their rush towards what seem to be opposite goals. This particular commuter happens to be a religious editor who suddenly grasps this as an image of the mutual ignorance and lack of connection between Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. If only something could be done to get the trains to slow down, he thinks, to stop, to converse window-to-window, might they not realize that their opposition is not as great as it seems? This sudden illumination, a kind of modern analogy to Augustine’s third kind of vision (the intellectual vision discussed in the twelfth book of the Literal Commentary on Genesis), was the actual beginning of the Classics of Western Spirituality Series, which was originally designed to be one-half (60 volumes) of a joint enterprise called the Classics of Eastern and Western Spirituality.

I doubt if the recipient of this commuter-vision would want to describe himself as a mystic, despite his interest in spiritual traditions. The astute among you will have noticed that the moment of illumination he was given did not refer directly to God, but to the contemporary audience of spiritual seekers. However, this moment of enlightenment and the work that has gone into making it at least partly real surely is not without relation to the personal appropriation of belief on the part of the hundreds of thousands who have profited from better access to classical spiritual teaching, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. To hand on what we have been given, even imperfectly, is to play a role.

Reflecting on this role reminds me of the story that some of you may remember from the end of Gershom Scholem’s great book, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism. Scholem says he heard it from the Hebrew novelist S. J. Agnon. I conclude by quoting it in full:

When the Baal Shem had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer—and what he had set out to perform was done. When a generation later the ‘Maggid’ of Meseritz was faced with the same task he would go to the same place in the woods and say: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers—and what he wanted done became reality. Again a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov had to perform this task. And he too went into the woods and said: We can no longer light the fire, nor do we know the secret meditations belonging to the prayer, but we do know the place in the woods to which all belongs—and that must be sufficient; and sufficient it was. But when another generation had passed and Rabbi Israel of Rashin was called upon to perform the task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle [obviously, he was an academic] and said: We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was done. And, the story-teller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of the other three.

Works Cited


As I watched *Wild Child* for what must have been the fourth or fifth time, I found myself longing for the periodic appearances of Madame Guérin. Itard's "teaching" seemed so brittle and severe compared to Mme. Guérin's more sensible and sensitive ministrations. To long for Guérin is, I think, to renew one's commitment to the affective dimension of teaching and learning. But we still lack an adequate vocabulary for speaking about this matter without making it seem as though we are seeking simply to "make people feel good about themselves." The wild child certainly felt better in the wild. But was he better off there?

Mark Schwehn
"Acting is Believing," Charles McGaw, late of the Goodman School of Drama, entitled his famous basic acting textbook. And, before we ask "Believing in what, exactly?" we might pause to consider the word "believing." The word takes us into a distinctly different realm of actions from that in which we would find ourselves were the phrase “acting is feeling,” though that is surely what some people want most from their actors—public, projected feelings. In a brief passage of the Ars Poetica (68-5 BCE) directed to the actor, the Roman critic Horace wrote that, if he is to make an audience weep, the actor must first feel the grief himself (Carlson 24). Nor are we in the realm of the intellectual, though certainly no small part of the actor’s preparation might fall under the title, “acting is thinking.” In the words of the nineteenth-century English tragedian Henry Irving “a good understanding is as necessary to a player as a pilot is to a vessel at sea” (Cole and Chinoy 125). Laurence Olivier would have countered that acting is doing, a primarily physical exercise, since one of his life-long mottoes was “the best way to begin to do a thing is to do it.”

McGaw’s choice of the word “believing,” however, takes us into the spiritual domain. And, given the fact that so many colleges and universities dedicate significant resources to the study of acting and its associated theatre arts, it is appropriate to talk about the teaching and practice of acting at a conference with the theme “spirituality and higher learning.”

In 1987 Soul Purpose was founded at Valparaiso University. The objectives of the group were 1) to provide students with the opportunity to combine their love for theatre with their Christian commitments, 2) to serve the Church by spreading the Good News of Christ Crucified through the medium of theatre, and 3) to create new works for the chancel drama repertoire.

We are, of course, not the first to focus on the spiritual dimension of acting. Robert Benedetti has devoted his useful survey of acting in the twentieth century, Seeming, Being, and Becoming, to the “perception of acting as a necessary spiritual enterprise” (Benedetti 2). Jerzy Grotowski of the Polish Laboratory Theatre, which flourished in Cracow during the nineteen-sixties and seventies deemed the actor “holy” and sought to elevate him to a spiritual state (Benedetti 66). In his study The Theatrical Event, David Cole likens the actor, first, to a shaman who makes trance-journeys to the other world where he presents the wishes of the community to the gods, and then to the one who returns from the land of the gods, spiritually possessed, to present the gods’ words in dramatic form to the community. We could go on citing references to acting as a spiritual enterprise; spirituality is something of a favorite theme of twentieth-century acting philosophers. In the interests of reminding ourselves that all philosophy is but a footnote to Plato, himself no lover of the theatre, we might quote the Ion. Socrates, speaking to the rhetorician: “Are you not carried out of yourself, and does not your soul in an ecstasy seem to be among the persons or places of which you are speaking . . .?” (Cole and Chinoy 8) So, there is, then, a long history of emphasizing the spiritual dimension of acting.

Soul Purpose’s first play was The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God, a dramatization of a story by

John Steven Paul teaches theatre and is the Chair of the Division of the Visual and Performing Arts at VU, where he also serves as advisor to Soul Purpose, VU’s chancel drama troupe. His extensive experience in directing this year resulted in King Lear, as well as A Lesson from Aloes, and in the Christ College Freshman Production, a yearly workshop presentation developed and staged entirely by first year students in VU’s Honors College. For a number of years he has written occasional pieces on theatre for The Cresset. This paper, the third presentation at the Lilly Fellows Conference ’92, wrapped around a performance by Soul Purpose. The objective of this format was to reveal the integral relationship between theory and practice in the work of this drama troupe. The troupe performed “And They Danced,” a play by John Steven Paul based on a sermon by The Rev. David H. Kehret and developed in workshop by Soul Purpose. In the play, Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead after which a joyful celebration takes place in Bethany. The right-justified text in this layout attempts to bring that performance into the context of the paper itself.

John Steven Paul
David Kehret, associate campus pastor at Valparaiso University, based on Mark 12.28-34. In the story, an unsuspecting young lawyer has a life-changing encounter with the Son of God. The play was performed as a part of morning services in churches and high schools. Like the lawyer, Soul Purpose actors have been repeatedly surprised at their proximity to the Kingdom of God as they have performed their plays in the midst of God’s people at worship.

There has been no more influential commentator on the art of acting than Konstantin Stanislavski. Born in Moscow in 1863 to a wealthy merchant family, Stanislavski’s whole life, from the time he acted in amateur theatricals on his family’s country estate, was devoted to actors and acting. He is justly famous as the co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, the original producer of Anton Chekhov’s major plays, and for his revolutionary approach to the art of acting. More than an acting teacher or even a systematic theorist, Stanislavski was like Socrates, a pragmatic, persistent questioner guided by a single question: how does the actor act? Stanislavski’s efforts to induce naturalistic performances from his actors echoes the work of his Russian contemporary, the behavioral psychologist Anton Pavlov. But Robert Benedetti asserts that Stanislavski’s most important contribution to contemporary theatre was to “give us a focus on the spirituality of the actor” (Benedetti 41).

Stanislavski articulated his system in a series of three books, known as the “ABC’s of Acting:” An Actor Prepares, Building a Character, and Creating a Role. The first of these alone could constitute an acting curriculum for years of study. In An Actor Prepares, Stanislavski states his aim: . . . not only to create the life of the human spirit, but also to express it in a beautiful, artistic form” (Stanislavski 15). The system itself is comprised of ten components, the most famous of which is “Emotion Memory” (also translated as “sense memory” or “affective memory”) in which the actor calls to consciousness an emotion from her own life analogous to the one being experienced by the character she is portraying. Using his system (which, by the way, he taught the actor to metamorphose her own self into a new self by the power of the experiences of the character. The experiences were to be happening as if to the actor herself. “Metamorphose” is Robert Benedetti’s term and he uses it, he writes, literally to mean meta-morphose, a form above or a transcendent reality.

Stanislavski’s approach to creating a scenic truth in which an actor could believe was first to break down a large action into its component parts and then direct the actor to focus on each of these smaller actions in sequence. To bake a loaf of bread is an example of a large action consisting of many individual steps. Within each step, the actor comes into contact with many discrete material objects: ingredients, utensils, equipment. In their training regimen, Stanislavski’s students were not given any stage properties with which to work. (A radical idea in a period where the Naturalistic style dictated that stage settings be chock-full of environmental minutiae.) They were told to work “with air.” After a time, the students would come to

An Actor Prepares is composed in the form of a series of acting lessons with several students directed by “M. Tortsov,” the voice of Stanislavski. Each chapter of the book takes up a different part of what has come to be known as “the system:” relaxation, concentration, given circumstances, imagination, and so forth. Two of the later chapters in the English translation by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood are entitled “Faith and a Sense of Truth” (chapter VIII) and “Communion” (chapter X). We would not be wrong to expect a spiritual emphasis in chapters with titles such as these.

In the chapter on scenic truth, one of Tortsov’s students protests “I don’t see how there can be any question of truth in the theatre since everything about it is fictitious, beginning with the very plays of Shakespeare and ending with the papier maché dagger with which Othello stabs himself.” Tortsov counsels the student not to be concerned about the material from which the prop dagger has been made. “Of significance to us,” he says, is the reality of the inner life of a human spirit in a part and a belief in that reality. We are not concerned with the actual naturalistic existence of what surrounds us on the stage, the reality of the material world! [ . . . ] Put life into all the imagined circumstances and actions until you have completely satisfied your sense of truth, and until you have awakened a sense of faith in the reality of your sensations . . . . Truth on stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues. Truth cannot be separated from belief, nor belief from truth. They cannot exist without each other and without both of them it is impossible to live your part or create anything. (121-122)

In And They Danced, Jesus’s friends and disciples look on in astonishment as he calls forth Lazarus from the tomb. The play is divided into three sections: 1) the events surrounding the resurrection itself, 2) the joyous celebration following the resurrection, and 3) a meditation on the lesson to be learned from the story of Lazarus. The players begin in simple black and white costume. For the celebration they each don three items of gaudy-colored party clothing. During the meditation, the players gradually shed the party-clothes, returning to their black and white.

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recall just how they had taken the physical action on which they were focusing in real life. Through a combination of imagination, concentration, faith, and recall the students came to believe in the truth of the moment.

And They Danced begins with a funeral preparation.

Lazarus is dead. Against everybody's hopes, Lazarus is dead. Esther is methodically preparing a casserole meal. Her actions are mimed. She reads the recipe instructions aloud to herself:

"Four double handfuls of bulgar wheat, steamed until it cracks open.
A measure of flour.
A pinch of salt.
A pinch of dried herbs, rubbed together and sprinkled into the mixture.
One egg, beaten.

Enough broth to give it moisture.
Mix together.
Prepare another bowl . . .
Rub around with olive oil.
Press a clove of garlic into the surface.
Place first mixture into the new bowl.
Firm down.
Sprinkle bread crumbs over the top.
Pat in.
Place a damp towel over bowl."

An essential step in the creation of scenic truth is opening and sustaining communion among the actors en ensemble. Stanislavski defines communion as "spiritual intercourse," which occurs when one is giving to and receiving something from an object. An "object" here does not refer to an inanimate thing, rather it is an umbrella term which might also be translated as "an other." Among the "others" with which actors seek to be in communion are 1) other parts of themselves, 2) other objects (actual or imaginary), 3) other actors, and 4) the others in the audience.

"With whom or with what are you in communion at this moment," Tortsov abruptly asks a student at the beginning of a lesson. "Why, not with anyone or anything," the student replies. "You must be a marvel," the amused master responds, "if you are able to continue in that state for long." In the waking moments of life, according to Stanislavski, human beings are in communion with something or someone nearly all of the time. One of the students reports that he had difficulty "communing" with a string quartet while it was performing a famous piece of music. The young man felt that he was distracted by the chandelier hanging in the auditorium. Tortsov counters that the student was in communion with this particular lighting fixture:

You were trying to find out how and of what that object was made. You absorbed its form, its general aspect, and all sorts of details about it. You accepted these impressions, entered them in your memory, and proceeded to think about them. That means that you drew something from your object, and we actors look upon that as necessary. You are worried about the inanimate quality of your object. Any picture, statue, photograph of a friend, or object in a museum is inanimate, yet it contains some part of the life the artist who created it. Even a chandelier can, to a certain degree, become an object of lively interest, if only because of our absorption in it. (184)

The problem for the actor is to stimulate this kind of communion on stage.

At the height of the celebration of Lazarus's resurrection, at the height of singing and the dancing, the gaudily costumed actors realize that none of the joy that they are experiencing would have been theirs had Lazarus not first have died. To signify their understanding of this truth, each actor deliberately, agonizingly removes an item of party-clothing—a scarf, a vest, a hat — and wistfully drops the object. Each of these has a material reality and a symbolic reality. They are happily familiar with these pieces of clothing and it's frightening to give them up. More than clothing, they are fragments of an old life which must be buried so that new life can be born.

Stanislavski's approach to this problem begins by making his actors aware of the types of communication of which they are capable because of their "spiritual resources." One type is communication with actual objects on stage, similar to the way it happens in off-stage life. Another type is that which communications theorists would call "intra-personal." Here Stanislavski identifies a center of vital energy located near the solar plexus which, he says, the Hindus call "Prana." The actor "communes with himself on the stage" by opening communication between the brain "the cerebral centre . . . and the nerve center of the solar plexus—the seat of emotion" (Stanislavski 187). Actors may also commune with imaginary or non-existent objects, such as apparitions. Such communion is particularly difficult to achieve and often results in actors only "representing" (a particularly negative term for Stanislavski) themselves in such communion.

As might be expected, Stanislavski devotes much of this chapter to achieving communion between actors. "Spiritual intercourse" between actors may be achieved by means of external, visible resources; that is, the sensory faculties, but also through the wordless interchange of feeling. He is at a loss to articulate this process:

My difficulty here is that I have to talk to you about something I feel but do not know. It is something I have experienced and yet I cannot theorize about it . . . . What name can we give to these invisible currents, which we use to communicate with one another? Some day this phenomenon will be the subject of scientific research. Meantime let us call them rays. (199-200)

Note that Stanislavski sought to teach actors how to enter into spiritual intercourse with one another not as themselves but as the dramatic characters into which they had transformed themselves. Such transformation was accomplished identifying the character's feelings and then finding analogous feelings in their own lives, thus fusing
actor with character. The feelings transmitted would be personal ones but in the form of the character’s feelings. This is an immensely difficult accomplishment, but when actors do achieve the desired communion it is always between, for example, Hamlet and Ophelia, rather than between Branaugh and Thompson.

As difficult as communion is to achieve between actors it is “even more difficult [to establish] mutual communion with a collective object; in other words, the public” (Stanislavski 191). It was actors’ pre-occupation with the audience that Stanislavski sought to overcome through his teaching. He believed that in order to achieve truth on the stage, to achieve communion among themselves, actors would have to stop playing to the audience. This seemed a radical even ridiculous idea at the time. What else, after all, were actors for, if not for playing to an audience? Stanislavski had no intention of severing the actor-audience relationship, indeed he sought to deepen it. What he wanted from actors was total, relaxed concentration within and upon the objects of the stage environment. This concentration could be maintained only through a paradoxical state he called “public solitude,” a moment of communion with an object so complete that it shut out an audience that might be a little as two or three yards away. In this way, communion with the audience was achievable, not directly or consciously but indirectly and unconsciously:

When the spectator is present during such an emotional and intellectual exchange, he is like a witness to a conversation. He has a silent part in the exchange of feelings, and is excited by their experiences. But the spectators in the theatre can understand and indirectly participate in what goes on on stage only while this intercourse continues among the actors. (186)

Stanislavski asserts that the audience “wishes, above all, to believe everything that happens on stage” (Stanislavski 126). To borrow a phrase, the audience is quite willing to suspend its disbelief in return for the opportunity to enter into a spiritual intercourse with the actors in the mutual creation of scenic truth.

Stanislavski, a thorough-going aesthete, believed in the truth of art without need for external referents. “Truth on the stage,” Stanislavski wrote, “is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues.” Our creed is similar: “We believe in all things, seen and unseen.” When Soul Purpose performs a play based on a scriptural text or elaborates a story from the Bible — that is, when we fill in Stanislavski’s blank whatever with the phrase “the body and blood of Christ” — the terms belief, faith, truth, and communion take on a new and different meaning. Yet we do not leave the actor’s discipline behind. Indeed, Stanislavski’s beliefs and our own are mutually informative and equally important in the creation of truly Christian religious drama.

Were we to replace Stanislavski’s whatever with the truth of Sophocles or Shakespeare, or Chekhov, or Sam Sheppard we would not be undermining or diluting the essential spirituality of the actor’s art. What Soul Purpose and I suggest, however, is that when whatever becomes the Gospel of Christ then acting is more than communing with objects real or imagined, with self, with ensemble, environment or the audience; it is communion with God. That communion, accomplished by grace, through faith and the wondrous Stanislavski System, is attained through a form of communication which we more often refer to as prayer.

The actors of Soul Purpose pray at times in solitude, sometimes in public solitude, often in concert with the audience. They hope they will not be accused of praying ostentatiously like the Pharisee in the Temple. Their prayers are solitary, concentrated, contemplative. They are also public; prayed in communion with God, their ensemble, and their audiences, also known as congregations of worshippers, who, more than anything else, wish, above all, to believe everything that happens on stage.

Works Cited


The purpose of Soul Purpose is to bring the truth of Christ crucified to God’s people. At times this purpose is best served by making direct contact with the audience during the course of the play. The actors occasionally step out of character consciously attempting to deepen their communion with the audience while maintaining it with one another.

The sub-title of this presentation is “Artistic Performance as Expression of Personal Spirituality.” One of the assumptions underlying the work of Soul Purpose is that acting can be viewed as an expression of personal spirituality. Acting for Soul Purpose is a form of prayer, but one integrally connected to Stanislavski’s views on the spiritual aspects of acting.

26
WRITING IN THE DARK:
THE SHOWINGS AND POLITICS OF DENISE LEVERTOV

James Champion

In fact, since there are few features of postmodern art and writing that cannot be found in such figures as Marcel Duchamp and James Joyce, one sometimes wonders whether what is touted as postmodernism in our day is not really modernism reinventing and remarketing itself. In any case, as our late twentieth-century aesthetic habits undergo change, postmodernism displays, with a sly twist, the same audacity modernism always did show—the audacity, in Pound’s admonishing words, to “make it new.” I offer these remarks with the aim of framing a background for reading Denise Levertov today. In surprising ways, such contexts inform the religious turn her work has taken, and it is that poetic shift which I wish to highlight in the following discussion. Just as Levertov, throughout her career, has focused keenly on aesthetic, political, and spiritual contexts, they warrant consideration when approaching her own work.

When Levertov’s poetry is mentioned in the same breath as postmodernism, for example, it helps to find a context for the sort of postmodernism evoked. David Griffin, in an introduction to a series of works on postmodernist thought, has made a distinction between “eliminative” and “revisionary” postmodernism that can be useful here. Where eliminative postmodernism “overcomes the modern worldview” by deconstructing the ingredients “God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence,” the revisionary variety seeks instead to construct a new worldview through a renewed understanding of “modern premises and traditional concepts.” Revisionary postmodernism, according to Griffin, tries to overcome those features of the modern world—such as individualism and militarism—that are leading to ecological devastation. It sets its sights on “a new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious intuitions” (Griffin x). Such a position incorporates spirituality, rather than scorn­

current spiritual expressions as so much subjective nostalgia. It is on this latter point especially that Levertov can be aligned with Griffin’s revisionary postmodern thinking. For increasingly she has integrated spirituality into her politics and her poetic enterprise.

Such integration did not come with an overnight con-
version; it has followed gradually from a steady deepening of this poet’s genuinely humanistic bent. But if not marked by sudden conversion, there is something new and distinctly religious in Levertov’s poetry of the 1980s. It is the kind of development critics quickly mistake for a retreat into orthodoxy and convention. Religious commitment—so the knee-jerk assumption goes—must be reactionary somehow, a backwards step probably explainable by the prevailing temper of those years. This was a decade, after all, in which poets who had rebelled in the 1960s, like Allen Ginsberg, were becoming respectable members of the academy they had once disdained.

This explanation doesn’t fit Levertov. She has simply traveled an alternate path. From Candles in Babylon (1982) to her recent collection, Evening Train (1992), she has continued to understand her work in terms of a pilgrimage. Rather than endorse either the conservative or the subversive posturings in contemporary writing, her route has led her around the skirmishes between various positions in the poetic field. An example is the war (of periodical proportions) fought between the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, who espouse “eliminative” postmodernism (a group I will return to in a moment), and a growing neo-formalist movement that wants poetry to return to the good old days of traditional versification. Levertov, meanwhile, has gone on her way continuing to work against reactionary poetic practice, on the one hand, while, on the other, avoiding the trap of collapsing all language into a one-dimensional play of signs. Her aim is different: by opening up space for an interplay of sacramental symbols and prophetic criticism in her poems, she has sought to witness against the multifarious oppressions of our times, yet also to receive language in moments of embodied illumination.

Levertov’s direction can be made clearer by contrasting her views on such issues as poetic image and poetic voice with those of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets (for practical purposes, cited as the Language school). These writers have attempted in recent years to deconstruct all settled notions of meaning and to expose a great many lies about the so-called imaginative writer. Their prototypical gesture is the dispersal of the self. With the speaking subject of poetry displaced, parody then becomes the prime imaginative mode. For poets such as Ron Silliman and Charles Bernstein, this is the mode demanded by our contemporary situation. What used to be called “culture,” they say, has today become a “mediascape” with nothing transcendent above, below, or behind it. According to the Language school, there can be no origin of meaning when images refer only to other images. This phenomenon of an endless simulation of images is the irreversible result of their electronic processing. In other words, when images are incessantly mediated by cinema, television, and video, the traditional idea that a creative human subject makes the images no longer applies.

The disappearance of the author as “genius” and the impotence of the “authentic” image in the face of technologically reproducible ones signal a fundamental change. One commentator, Richard Kearney, summarizes this development in terms of the way imagination is increasingly figured today: “we find both the classical metaphor of the mirror reflecting the sun (Plato’s Republic) and the modern metaphor of the lamp projecting its own light from within human subjectivity (Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason) being subsumed into the postmodern metaphor of circular looking glasses—each reflecting the surface images of the other in a play of infinite multiplication (Derrida’s Dissemination)” (8).

Levertov responds to this state of imaginative affairs from a standpoint that calls into question the predominant metaphor. She has focused less upon positioning herself in relation to various schools than upon the task of re-visioning the imagination. Though she no longer belongs to a particular school (as she was once associated with Black Mountain), she can be aligned with artists whose vision is currently drawn away from the endless play of surfaces and signs to those horizons where the question of the sacred portends. In the process, she offers distinctive views on authorship and on the nature and possibilities of image. While she is no stranger to the play of proliferating words on the flat page or to the task of undercutting the self-enclosure of the authorial ego—it was already a key concern of the Black Mountain poets—she intuits options besides the shattering of the subject into language. Drawing on a number of traditions, including the Hasidic and the Christian, she responds to the contemporary crisis of imagination by continuing to explore the possibilities of poiesis, that is, of making a world in which we may poetically dwell. Kearney, in Poetics of Imagining, describes this position as a counter-cultural one: it holds, even today, “that

For Victor to “know” what “milk” is, his teacher insists that he recognize the word “milk.” To teach Victor about spirituality, would the teacher give him words like “cross,” “altar,” “holy water,” and “wafer” (not to be confused with “bread”)? Although much knowledge rests with a knower’s ability to link concrete and linguistic realities, spiritual knowledge includes realities like “grace,” “forgiveness,” and “faith.” The current educational climate of assessment, however, encourages a concrete view of knowledge, edging out those things which are “known” but cannot be measured. With this view of knowledge, the direction of spiritual education is unclear. In other words, assuming Victor acquires a knowledge of “milk,” would he be able or willing to learn about “grace”?

Beth Hoger
imagining is a mode of being-in-the-world which makes and remakes our Lebenswelt by disclosing new possibilities of meaning" (10).

Repeatedly in Levertov's prose writings, one comes upon claims for the imagination as a mode of awareness essential to human life. For instance, in "A Note on the Work of the Imagination" (1961) she describes imagination as "that breathing of life into the dust, [which] is present in us all embryonically—manifests itself in the life of a dream—and in that manifestation shows us the possibility: to permeate, to quicken, all of our life and the works we make" (Poet, 205). In "An Admonition" she calls for a poetry "of embodiment, incarnation . . . in which the personages may be of myth or of Monday, no matter, if they are of the living imagination" (Poet, 61). In a collection of poems from 1960, With Eyes in the Back of Our Heads, imagination becomes a dark, mysterious force, while in her next work, The Jacob's Ladder (1961) it is thought of as light. Throughout these various interrogations, however, imagination is always found to be embodied within us.

In Levertov's more recent, religious verse, the imagination maintains primacy of place. This is manifestly the case in the collection, Breathing the Water (1987). In a series of "Showings" that closes this work, the poet enters into the life, conflicts, and even the particular visions of the fourteenth-century figure, Julian of Norwich. There is an insistence throughout this sequence on disclosing the contradictions of experience. Yet the poet also notes strange reversals that can occur between contraries, such as visibility and invisibility. The final "showing" is startling. It begins with an image of Julian herself "laughing aloud, glad / with a most high inward happiness." The poem then becomes an address and a call to this mystic across centuries of affliction:

She lived in dark times, as we do: 
war, and the Black Death, hunger, strife, 
torture, massacre. She knew 
all of this, she felt it 
sorrowfully, mournfully 
shaken as men shake 
a cloth in the wind.

But Julian, Julian—
I turn to you:
you clung to joy though tears and sweat
rolled down your face like the blood
you watched pour down in beads unaccountable
as rain from the eaves:
clung like an acrobat, by your teeth, fiercely,
to a cobweb-thin high wire, your certainty
of infinite mercy, witnessed
with your own eyes, ...

(81-82)

In the intensity of this moment, Julian becomes the poet's companion of imagination. The fullness of the encounter suggests transfiguration, yet without any need to explain the event with psychological motivations or doctrinal truths. It is a stance typical of Levertov—the same stance evident in a talk she gave (in 1990) at a symposium on the topic of "Faith and Works." In that address, we do not find her declaring the tenets of her Christian belief, but rather discussing her poems which acknowledge the nuances of doubt, "poems written on the road to an imagined destination of faith" (158).

Imagination, for Levertov, is the force that enables the writer to mediate what she once called "presentness." This phenomenon does not arise from the act of registering many concrete things in a poem (contrary to the conventional wisdom of creative writing programs). The mediation of "presentness" is, first of all, a process that requires an involved reader. In "trust," the reader can grant a poem ontological status by responding to its capacity to propose a world—its capacity, that is, to refer to the real by recreating the real in a new sphere of related meanings.

For re-creation to occur, this "new sphere" also demands form, but form as crafted by the shaping imagination, not as superinduced. Just how form can be intrinsically related to content is a question that has occupied Levertov throughout her writing life. She has ventured a number of articles on the topic, and on the related issue of "organic form." She has written on technical matters, such as "the function of the line," while also discussing ongoing changes in her own poetic structures. After moving to America in 1948, she was initially influenced by William Carlos Williams, a mentor who admonished her (in his letters) to pare down her language and to discover "hidden intrinsic form." Over four decades later, Levertov continues her inquiry into "exploratory form"; this is a term derived from Gerard Manley Hopkins, a figure she has recently turned to in order to articulate interconnections between perception and design (Marten 13).

While Levertov has had other major influences on the matter of form, the most important overall remains the Black Mountain school. In particular, the impact of Charles Olson's theory of "Projective Verse" must be noted. Olson's concept of the poetic line as breath-spaced, and his notion of "composition by field"—rather than by "inherited" rules about line and stanza—opened up possibilities for new forms in a decisive way. By implication, his sense of poetry as an act of being enlarged the very condition of language and thought for a number of poets of Levertov's generation. In reaction against enervated verse tied to outmoded conventions, Olson's shifting of the poetic ground provided a much-needed catalyst for experimentation with line-breaks, line-placement, and free-verse cadences. A poetry fundamentally open in its construction was especially germane for Levertov, given her propensity for focusing urgently on the immediate. Her sense of the poem as discovery—as a communicative procedure in its very construction—is nullified by formal platitudes that look first to a final product.

Along with open form and composition by field, Levertov derives from Olson and the Black Mountain
school support for her impulse to challenge the limits of the lyric ego. This challenge stems, in part, from a reaction against the predominance in American poetry of the "confessional" school (Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and others). While confessional poetry at its best does much more, at its worst it tends to be governed by a voice that speaks of its own sensitivity and constantly posits a self to be regarded. Against that tendency Levertov, Robert Duncan, Creeley, and Olson sought to get outside the self and to let go of the unitary, authoritative ego in their poems. Olson, for example, after denouncing "the lyrical interference of the individual as ego," attempts "to wash the ego out" in the cosmology of The Maximus Poems ("Proprioception," 182). Or one thinks of Jack Spicer’s efforts to suspend completely the "I" to allow for a literal "dictation" of the Other. Levertov certainly does not go as far as Olson or Spicer in letting go of the controlling, authorial voice. At the same time, she shares with Spicer what he calls, in After Lorca, "a need for a poetry that [is] more than the expression of my hatreds and desires" (51). In other words, Levertov does not want merely to traffic in a solipsistic poetic voice that displays wit and confesses moods, while mistaking arbitrary, private associations for discovery. Such verse, always to be found in enormous quantities, renders poetry innocuous by treating it as merely ornamental to thought.

Forms the Spirit Enters

Levertov criticizes ornamental poetry in "An Admonition" (1964). She reinforces her attack by quoting Wordsworth to the effect that "language is not the dress but the incarnation of thought" (Poet, 16). That she "really means the incarnational metaphor," as one critic puts it, and that the metaphor carries theological tenor for her has become increasingly apparent over passing years (Breslin, 147). Similar intimations emerge in her proposal to alter Creeley’s famous formula: "Form is never more than the extension of content." Levertov’s version, "Form is never more than the revelation of content" (Poet, 60) divulges an element in her thinking that turns up in her earliest poems: namely, a certain "sacramentality," which, time and again, directs her attention to something numinous in the most ordinary things.

Levertov’s sacramental sense often finds purely secular occasions for expression. For instance, there are no standard signals of the sacred in the opening stanzas of "Pleasures":

I like to find
what’s not found
at once, but lies
within something of another nature,
in repose, distinct.
Gull feathers of glass, hidden
in white pulp: the bones of squid
which I pull out and lay
blade by blade on the draining board—
tapered as if for swiftness, to pierce
the heart, but fragile, substance
belying design.

"Pleasures" is found in With Eyes in the Back of Our Heads, a collection from 1960. Its tone and setting are very different from the following poem, "This Day," which appears in Oblique Prayers (1984). The Christian sacrament itself is present in the opening words of this second poem:

Dry wafer,
sour wine.

This day I see

God’s in the dust,
not sifted
out from confusion.

Over the course of this poem, both transcendent and mundane things come to be acknowledged. Gradually, the poet lets go of an impulse to impose her own mental state on the sacrament and her own design on the transpiring day. Order and rigid certainties are let go—but that is when the substantial arrives. "Something of another nature," spoken of in "Pleasures," does appear:

this day I see
the world, a word
intricately incarnate, offers—
ravelled, honeycombed, veined, stained—
what hunger craves,
a sorrel grass,
a crust,
water,
salt.

Levertov is not inclined to deploy sacramental images in her work because in some formal arrangements taste requires them. Rather, such images are experientially rooted and timed. They grow out of, accompany, and articulate the author’s "sense of life as a pilgrimage" (Poet 63). In other words, her sacramentality forms one of the deep roots of her life’s work, and it is entwined with her poetic in existential ways. For example, while Levertov’s struggle to downplay the ego in lyric poetry owes much to Black Mountain aesthetics and to a project of de-centering shared with Creeley and Duncan, her goal of attaining a different disposition of self has religious sources too.
Going outside the self becomes, finally, not an aesthetic program—nor a celebration of the death of the subject—but rather, an uncovering of the “relationship of self to the world” (Marten, 5). Within the living language of that relationship, a poem can become, according to Levertoff, “the poet’s means of summoning the divine” (Poet in the World, 47).

In any discussion of Levertoff’s religious roots, some unusual biographical factors should be mentioned. She herself often remarks on the sensuousness of her childhood in Wales. Moreover, she recollects a practice of spiritual intuition which she traces to her Welsh mother’s strong mystical heritage. In a sense, these factors combine in the poem “The Instant,” from Overland to the Islands (1958). Writing in the present tense in this work, the author captures, through the eyes of a child, a moment of illumination that impresses itself upon her during an excursion with her mother. The scene is quickly set: the two walkers become engrossed in a sensuous gathering of mushrooms, while the normal boundaries of valley and sky are distorted by an enveloping mist. The mother is suddenly startled by a distant vision: “It is Eryri!” It is the legendary Welsh name the mother calls out in excitement, as the peak of Mt. Snowdon is briefly illumined “fifty / miles away.” For an instant, the mystical “home / of eagles, resting place of / Merlin, core of Wales,” bursts into awareness. For an epiphanic second, “Light graces the mountainhead / for a lifetime’s look, before the mist / draws in again” (Collected Earlier Poems, 66). Here in this fleeting narrative is an archetypal pattern of an encounter with the “core” of the ineffable, a pattern of spiritual adventure that repeatedly turns up in Levertoff’s oeuvre.

If Levertoff’s mystical interests were fostered by those of her mother, her father’s Hasidic background must have supplemented the effect. In short, Paul Levertoff’s influence on the author is also strong. That he was a Russian Jew who became an Anglican priest is noteworthy. Most remarkable, though, is what Denise Levertoff relates about her father in her Biographical Note in The New American Poetry: “His lifelong hope was towards the unification of Judaism and Christianity. He was . . . author of a Life of St. Paul in Hebrew, part translator of The Zohar [into English]” (440). That this interest amounted to more than a scholarly pastime is confirmed by a number of stories. One item of evidence is Levertoff’s report that her parents made their home a center for receiving and relocating Jewish refugees from Nazism before World War II.

It makes little sense, no doubt, to draw a one-to-one correspondence between the ideas of parent and child. Yet it is tempting to speculate on ways Paul Levertoff’s passionate concern with two religions could have influenced Denise Levertoff’s thought. For one thing, it would have contributed to the richness of the intellectual, artistic, and political environment in which she grew up, and which she has often fondly recalled. But beyond that, I wonder whether the father’s conjoining of one religion, which claims that the decisive event in history has happened, with one that says it has not, is one source of the daughter’s capacity to think both in terms of “always already” and “not yet.”

For along with Denise Levertoff’s sacramental sense of what is “given,” we often find poems that speak out about the justice that is not. This is the prophetic element in Levertoff’s thought, an element that has informed her life as an activist-writer committed to social protest. Viewed from another angle, it is the facet of her poetics that leads her to include “A Speech: For Antidraft Rally, D.C.” in the same collection (Candles in Babylon) as “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymous.” It is why, in a recent volume, A Door in the Hive (1989), we find “Annunciation,” a celebration of Mary, but also “Land of Death-Squads.”

One reason to call Levertoff’s social and political criticism prophetic is that it does not offer utopian solutions. The phenomenon watched for is idolatry in whatever form it appears—including political hyperactivism. In what this poet calls our “Age of Terror,” the goal is less a matter of offering blueprints for social change than it is to sustain hope. The goal is to create what Wassily Kandinsky, in Concerning the Spiritual in Art, calls “another art,” an art “capable of further developments” and which “possesses . . . an awakening prophetic power” (26). One place to glimpse such a power is in the first poem (also the title poem) of Candles in Babylon:

Through the midnight streets of Babylon
between the steel towers of their arsenals,
between the torture castles with no windows,
we race by barefoot, holding tight
our candles, trying to shield
the shivering flames, crying
 ‘Sleepers Awake!’

hoping
the rhyme’s promise was true, that we may return
from this place of terror
home to a calm dawn and
the work we had just begun.

As a single voice keeps alive the ethical imagination in the condition of exile, this poem turns on the word and the possibility of “hope.” We learn that it is not the hope of an isolated individual, but hope that must be lived out with others. Nor is it a delusional belief that the enemy can be conquered; the principalities that rule by torture are always too powerful for that. But in the depth of this darkness, a power remains to resist it. In keeping alive the memory of the calm center and of freedom from domination, these things are possessed paradoxically in an awakened power of anticipation.

In one of its facets, Levertoff’s prophetic concern is to write “a record of the night.” At root, this is a refusal to put poetry into the service of beautification when it is “the global panorama of oppression and violence” that must be
shown ("Work that Enfaiths," 153). In the mid and late 1960s, this stance resulted in a series of works examining and protesting the Vietnam War. A number of poems in The Sorrow Dance (1967)—in particular, "Life at War"—depict incomprehensible atrocities with extreme images. The poet reveals the complicity of the political state, while also bringing "the war home" to her readers in an attempt to summon people to action. Relearning the Alphabet (1970) confronts the interrelated problems of racism, imperialism, poverty, and war; using disjunctive language, here too the poet tries to get beyond mere didacticism by struggling to find new forms of expression adequate to widely felt "political anguish." In To Stay Alive (1971), Levertov explores a number of political questions, the daily ambiguities of radical action, the tensions of revolutionary protest, and—always looming—the issue of death. As Paul Lacey points out, To Stay Alive attempts in particular to integrate conscience and poetic utterance. This work thereby becomes a key step for Levertov on her way towards an "osmosis of the personal and the public, of assertion and of song" (64).

In response to Levertov's anti-war verse, a number of critics over the years have charged her with distorting the nature of poetry. For instance, Charles Altieri, in Enlarging the Temple, launches an attack upon Levertov and "the limits of the aesthetics of presence." While some of Levertov's anti-war poems certainly fail, it is not because, as Altieri has it, "she tries to adapt the principles that have shaped her work to social questions" (226). The underlying complaint seems to be that Levertov has included within the province of poetry something that, by definition, doesn't belong. Poets should recognize a greater gulf between the imagination's "song" and empirical reality. But such a view is, finally, another "ornamental" one, however sincere it may be in refining poetry's high art. By contrast, Levertov's prophetic song allows for indictment as well as celebration. While failing sometimes, her deeper instinct is to keep waiting for those moments—hardly detached from the social world—when something of spiritual substance breaks through form.

In one of his prose writings, the poet Philip Larkin poses the question, "What remains when disbelief has gone?" (98). The question nicely reverses the one more endemic to the modern world: namely, what remains after the loss of faith, Nietzsche's "death of God," et cetera. The insinuation that disbelief can be lost renders relative the dark "truth" of the modern world.

Whether we are today in a modern or postmodern era, our relationship to belief and disbelief is more dialectical than either the despisers of religion or the authoritarians within religion would have it. Both groups resent, so to speak, the inefficiency of this unsettled predicament. Perhaps that is why Levertov, in her explorations of Christian faith, so often turns for guidance to the non-Christian, Rainer Maria Rilke. For in Rilke's poems, one finds a steady recognition of, as well as a warning about, the hidden longing in the modern world to escape our human situation. To hear some current claims about the enhanced life awaiting us in hyperspace (by way of computers) is to understand why Rilke, early in our century, repeatedly pointed to machines as our preferred means for escaping the human predicament. It is really a longing, his poems keep telling us, for processes of feeling less vulnerable and more efficient than those of the human soul.

Levertov takes her place with those artists who stay with the tensions of the human. That stance turns out to be not a revamped humanism, but an attempt to reopen the issue of the holy, and of what it means in our time. She has increasingly committed herself to the Christian story, although she remains travelling as the poet-pilgrim through the "imagination's holy forest."

The following poem of Levertov's can of itself serve as a conclusion to this discussion—which is convenient, for I have little idea of how to analyze the piece. It is taken from Oblique Prayers and a sequence titled, "Of God and of the Gods." You can find poems of Levertov that make different sorts of assertions. But here, in this moment, even if fragmented, I think it is apparent that some new reality has finally found her.

Of Being

I know this happiness
is provisional:

the looming presences—
great suffering, great fear—

withdraw only
into peripheral vision:

but ineluctable this shimmering
of wind in the blue leaves:

this flood of stillness
widening the lake of sky:

this need to dance,
this need to kneel:

this mystery:

Works Cited


Two paradoxes impress me as a result of the film. The first is that teachers are simultaneously powerful and weak in their roles as educators. Teachers have great power to affect either positively or negatively students' self-confidence or self-image. In some ways they also possess power to shape how students will learn to think and therefore how they will see the world and experience it. On the other hand, teachers are also weak because they are incapable of teaching certain things to certain people no matter how earnestly they try. They are also weak in that to some extent they haven't a clue as to what they have or have not accomplished.

Another of the paradoxes explored in the film has to do with the violence of education. The most obvious violence occurs in the course of teaching Victor language, although we don't think of it as violence unless we compare it to the teacher's insistence that Victor wear shoes. The shoes bring Victor into conformity, and they also give him capabilities he could not have in bare feet. However, the shoes keep Victor from climbing trees as efficiently as before. Language is a system of symbols which is absolutely essential for communication, and we would be lost without it. However, forcing reality into a system of symbols so as to communicate is only done at the risk of losing access to certain features of reality which the chosen symbols of any given language do not account for. Very early in life children lose forever the physical capacity to see the world as someone with a completely different language is able to see it. We do well to remind ourselves that our words are a family of icons, and we must always be vigilant lest we fall into thinking that our words alone can contain the whole of reality. When we forget that our words unwittingly hide things from us and sometimes even rob us, they become idols.

Frederick Niedner
Schooling Christians: "Holy Experiments" in American Education
Edited by Stanley Hauerwas and John H. Westerhoff.
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, 281 pp. + xii

This collection of essays has its origins in a consultation sponsored by the Lilly Endowment on the challenge of Christian education in a liberal society. Three essays were added after the event for a total of eleven diverse contributions gathered into four broadly defined sections. The first section examines the contemporary cultural context in which the task of Christian education must be pursued. It contains pieces by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Mark Schwehn, and Jean Bethke Elshtain. The second section—comprising essays by James Skillen, Charles and Joshua Glenn, and Patricia Beattie Jung—brings up the question of public education policy in America. The third takes up issues specific to Christian higher education. It features a version of James Tunstead Burtchaell’s well-known cautionary work on patterns of secularization in church-affiliated academies, taking Vanderbilt University as the paradigm. This substantial study is appropriately paired with Michael Cartwright’s essay in which he articulates a rationale and conditions for a fruitful reconnection of college and religious sponsor in the case of Allegheny College. Stanley Hauerwas also makes a contribution in this section, pointing to the challenge of telling the Christian story in a way that makes it captive neither to oppressive ideologies nor relativistic reactions to the same. The final section takes up the issue of Christian formation in the church. There Michael Warren speaks to the problem of maintaining the integrity of the Christian gospel in a commercialized culture dominated by electronic media; and John Westerhoff, in the concluding essay of the volume, makes specific recommendations for faith formation in the church and parochial school.

Although many topics are explored and differing standpoints adopted in this anthology, one of the chief and overall theses of Schooling Christians is that the American Christian community can no longer assume that it is well served by the public school system. There are, of course, many ways in which no community is well served by a great number of our public schools, given their embarrassingly dismal academic performance of late. This point is well-known and widely lamented in the press. It need not be rubbed in by the religiously inclined. But the point of this volume is that even if students received excellent intellectual training in public schools, such schools would fail to provide the kind of education the Christian community should desire in its principle institutions of learning. For if the aim of education is not only the instruction of the intellect, but the formation of character according to some particular conception of the good, the public schools in America—as a matter of principle as well as policy—cannot provide such an education. It is for this reason, writes John Westerhoff, that “Christians need to question seriously their support of public schools” (266).

In the Introduction, co-editors Hauerwas and Westerhoff suggest that the broad support the public school system has received to date from substantial sectors of the Christian community stems from that community’s suppression of the deep conflict between a religious under-
standing of life and the presuppositions of modern liberal society (vii). The conflict might be expressed along the following lines: while a religious understanding of life naturally seeks cultural wholeness and expression in the public realm, the ideology of modern liberalism relegates religion to the private domain in an attempt to construct a public square devoid of religious conviction and independent of any particular conception of the good. In a liberal society, all “sectarian” beliefs will be tolerated, of course—but only if those who hold them agree that all such beliefs are equally valid and equally irrelevant to matters of public concern. The common life is to be conducted on essentially secular principles to which we will all subscribe and agree by virtue of our common share in Reason.

While the demands of civility in a pluralistic society may require that the secularizing tendencies of modern liberalism be accepted in the political domain, it is less clear that they should be welcome in the field of education. For when the liberal idea is extended to educational institutions of a nation under conditions of deep religious diversity, it effectively prevents diverse communities of belief from maintaining and passing on their own traditions through the schools. It is one thing to ask members of diverse communities not to impose their particular conception of the good upon members of other communities through the coercive powers of the state; it is quite another to ask them not to communicate their deepest beliefs, ethical values, and religious sense of existence to their own children in the process of formal education. Although pretending to neutrality in all matters religious, the secular vigilance of the state in the common school puts religious communities, it seems, at a distinct disadvantage. For what they take to be central to life is excluded from education. As a pervasive cultural ideology, liberalism tends to “undercut” traditions, as Patricia Beattie Jung points out in her essay (120).

This dynamic is nowhere more powerfully presented than in Nicholas Wolterstorff’s lead article, entitled “The Schools We Deserve.” There he argues that the principle of liberalism combined with the fact of deep cultural diversity will inevitably yield a religiously and morally vacuous education in the common school. The principle of liberalism is that no group shall impose its conception of the good upon another group through the coercive powers of the state. In a state sponsored common school, this principle entails that no particular conception of the good to which anyone objects may be taught. As deep cultural divisions in the States have multiplied and grown, more and more of the common curriculum has in fact been found objectionable. Indeed, much of the recent history of the public schools in America has been a history of litigation, where specifically religious and ethical elements of common school instruction have been challenged and thrown out because some group has found them offensive. As cultural diversity increases, the religious and ethical content of the curriculum in the common school must decrease. And rightly so: the inverse proportion necessarily follows from a consistent and evenhanded application of the liberal principle, which is a rule of democratic fairness. The inevitable result, however, is an education that serves no one community just because it offends no one community. “What we each care about most deeply,” Wolterstorff writes, “is increasingly removed from public discussion as being irrelevant to the goals of the discussion” (21).

Here Wolterstorff strikes a chord that resonates throughout the anthology. “In the United States over recent decades” write Charles and Joshua Glenn in their essay on religion and public education, “there has been an attempt to render public schools inoffensive to all parents by progressively removing from curriculum and school life any elements to which there could be any objection from any quarter” (96). “As a consequence [of the liberal principle in a situation of cultural conflict],” notes Westerhoff, “nothing that any particular ethnic, racial, cultural, or religious group care strongly about will be introduced into a school curriculum unless there is consensus, or the others do not object, or it can be introduced in an ‘objective-comparative’ manner” (265). Where public schools “have been drained of all flavor by the liberal ethos,” Jung claims, “students, faculty, and staff alike find that they are unable to give public witness to their deepest convictions” (121).

But the trouble with liberal principle in the common school, Wolterstorff contends, goes deeper still. In its consistent application under conditions of deep cultural diversity, the liberal principle comes into conflict with itself. For it is in accordance with the conception of the good on the part of some parents that their children be instructed in the virtues and beliefs consonant with that conception in school as well as at home. Yet the presence of a particular kind of religious and moral instruction in the common school would violate the rights of parents who might wish to have their children instructed along other lines. The liberal solution to this potential conflict is to enforce silence on the matter and delete any element of instruction any one group finds offensive or repugnant. But this strategy is not as neutral as it may seem. For, as Jung points out, “character is shaped by what is omitted from a curriculum as well as what is blatantly endorsed within it. Thus a liberal education is far from substantively neutral. It actually favors secularism and cultural assimilation” (117). If we remain committed both to the liberal principle and to the common school in a situation of deep cultural diversity, then we will be unavoidably confronted with the irony of a society founded on the notion that each
James Skillen argues that the government should relinquish its monopoly on publicly supported schools and treat democratic fairness as expressed in the latter. And such a principle for the organization of church-affiliated colleges (Cartwright), or to convert classroom teaching into a form of democratic drama (Elshtain). Yet there may be more of a consensus position in the works than the editors would lead us to believe.

To isolate this position, it might be helpful to make a provisional distinction between the ideal of a liberal polity and the ideology of liberalism. According to Alasdair MacIntyre—surely one of liberalism’s strongest critics—the aim of the “liberal project” is to create a society in which people “who espouse widely different and incompatible conceptions of the good life” can “live together peaceably within the same society, enjoying the same political status and engaging in the same economic relationships.” (Whose Justice? Which Rationality? 336) Given the fact that many nations are in fact composed of people who differ widely in just these respects, it is difficult to know why one would want to reject such a political ideal. None of the authors in this anthology have taken it upon themselves to criticize the ideal of a liberal polity where a basic roster of rights is extended to all citizens irrespective of creed. Most, if not all, of the authors seem prepared to accept some version of liberal polity as the appropriate institutional umbrella under which the task of education in a pluralistic society must be carried out.

What most of the authors find problematic, however, is the ideology of liberalism by which our polity has been founded and secured. Although this ideology is somewhat amorphous and subject to various interpretations, it includes several identifiable core components: a contractarian political philosophy, whereby the chief task of government is construed as the maintenance of a framework of rights within which autonomous individuals can pursue their particular versions of the good with the maximal amount of freedom consistent with the freedom of others to do the same; an Enlightenment conviction that universally shared human reason will provide an adequate base of general principles for the common life of society; and the related conviction that civil concord is best served by relegating non-rational, tradition-based beliefs and practices to the domain of private life. A liberal society, then, will gladly tolerate such differences between people as
admit of no rational adjudication—on the condition that they make no real difference. In private we can believe and do what we like; in public we must shed our differences and appeal only to what we hold in common.

While the first component of the ideology of liberalism is closely tied to the ideal of a liberal polity that few are willing to reject out of hand, the second component has been largely discredited by the postmodern realization that, as Jung put it, “the search for a foundation for the moral life that would prove to be persuasive to all rational human beings has dead-ended. This project,” she maintains, “failed because it demanded of its participants that they deny their particularity—their traditions and communities—and adopt an abstract, ahistorical, impartial point of view. Such a request is ultimately impossible to fulfill. It rests on a misleading epistemology: no such non-perspectival position is attainable” (119). If it is the case that the moral life can be sustained only in the soil of a tradition made credible by narrative, then the ideology of liberalism is rightly rejected as an educational liability. Moreover, the idea of a common school as a tradition-free zone of instruction looks decidedly less attractive. Coherent moral education will be best conducted within a particular tradition rather than apart from all traditions. Better a plurality of schools free to draw upon the full resources of a rich and finely textured conception of the good than one common school with a curriculum thinned out to the level of public consensus.

The method of liberal tolerance—the third component—is built on the modernist assumptions of the second component and therefore draws its share of fire as well. The liberal project of tolerance was to construct a clean, open, and expansive public square based on rational consensus, while all weirdness and particularity is shuffled off and consigned to private chambers. In a liberal society, people would be free to hold to any tradition-bound beliefs they like, as long as they agree not to act on them in public. But if the modernist presumption of common reason that underlies this method is itself a constituent of a particular tradition—the western Enlightenment tradition—then the pretense to neutrality on the part of liberal tolerance begins to look more like a stratagem with a definite secular bias. The self-appointed referee turns out to be a contestant in disguise. While the ideology of liberalism privileges itself in the public realm to the disadvantage of all religious traditions, it cannot make itself plausible without recourse to its own particular Enlightenment narrative.

Although a number of contributors explicitly reject the liberal method of tolerance, it should be pointed out that they do not reject the ideal of tolerance as such. In fact, what they intend to propose is a more consistent form of tolerance, a form of tolerance free of the antinomy mentioned above. Rather than merely permitting religious expression in private life, such tolerance would encourage religious expression in the public realm as well; rather than marginalizing religious traditions and communities, it would seek to make room for them in the common life of the nation; rather than admitting persons into the public square on the condition that they leave their differences behind, it would allow them to enter as whole persons to find what agreement they can without sacrificing their identity. This alternative understanding of the relationship between the liberal polity and tradition-bound communities would allow distinctive communities to interact with each other in the public square “in ways that do not compromise their integrity, but make possible various and diverse contribution to our common life” (x). Consensus would no longer be sought on the basis of a common, tradition-free reason, but rather in the overlap of particular traditions. Such a postmodern reconfiguration of public space is not a rejection of the ideal of tolerance; rather, as

I would not say that Victor is team-taught when he is brought under the tutelage of M. Itard and Mme. Guerin, but I did think, when I saw the film, that it was advantageous for Victor to have two teachers, M. Itard functioning as the curriculum developer and disciplinarian, Mme. Guerin serving as the counselor and nurturer. So I immediately leaped to the conclusion that I could be a better teacher if I had an assistant like Mme. Guerin. Perhaps, however, I simply need to combine these qualities in my own teaching: to combine discipline with reward, sternness with gentleness, rigor with compassion, and authority with openness. If I cannot stay open to the sheer wonder of the “wild child” in my students, I suspect I can neither teach nor learn.

Arlin G. Meyer
Skillen rightly contends, it represents a more jealous adherence to that ideal in that it "allows for greater tolerance than does liberalism" (85-86).

If the ideology of liberalism suffers from an errant epistemology and a masked particularity that makes its promise of consensus empty and its form of tolerance repressive, then its prompt rejection could come as an ironic benefit to a liberal polity such as ours. For a liberal polity—insofar as it is republican—depends upon the civic virtue of its citizens for its political health and long term viability. If such virtue is best nurtured by narrative and cared for in community—and would soon grow flaccid were it uprooted and transported to the thinner climes of abstract principles—then it behooves the liberal polity not to frustrate but to foster those communities that in turn foster the virtue of its citizens. Furthermore, if the fundamental thesis of Mark Schwehn's essay is correct, religiously based communities might also serve as an asset rather than a liability for the educational enterprise as well. Schwehn rightly notes that much of recent reflection in epistemology has pointed to the communal character of human inquiry. If this is indeed the case, he argues, then it is entirely natural to think that virtues of character—like faith, humility, and self-denial—will play a crucial role in the advance of knowledge. For such virtues make us into the kind of people who can learn with and from others. As religion has served as a traditional source of support for just such virtues, making sense of them in the narrative it tells and cultivating them in the practices it recommends, it follows that religion can play a positive role in establishing the kind of ethical environment in which learning can flourish.

The promotion of civic virtue and the creation of ethical learning environments are contributions to society that religiously based communities can make—when they are at their best. But frequently they are not. Throughout the anthology there is remarkably little attention paid to the downside of communities as defined by religious orientation—the propensity of such communities to close in upon themselves, to develop embattled outlooks upon a world they have not bothered to understand, to become centers of willful ignorance, suspicion and hatred of the other, to become—in short—sources of the kind of vicious civil conflict that called forth the idea of a liberal society in the first place. Schwehn mentions the problem of tribalism (38), Jung wants to avoid the dilemma of "exclusively liberal or rigidly traditional forms of moral education" (115), and Cartwright faults the "Christian college" that tends to confirm itself in its own errors by exchanging genuine dialogue for a "monological" culture (206). But on the whole the problem of striking a balance between passing on a rich and finely textured conception of the good to the next generation with conviction while at the same time encouraging an openness to self-critique and transformation receives proportionally little by way of sustained attention in this collection of essays on the problem of Christian education.

But this is not too surprising, given the nature of the consultation. The authors were invited to address the problem of Christian education primarily on the political level. Here the basic units of analysis are societies, institutions, and contesting principles; the basic division is between "us" (the Christian community) and "it" (liberal society); and the basic point is change, alteration, and reform. Thus ambiguity goes by the boards, as clarion calls for action require a more decisive and unnuanced partitioning of the social terrain than might otherwise be allowed. For this very reason parents, who must make decisions about the education of their children this side of sweeping societal change, will find little practical guidance in this volume. In reality, pros and cons exist on both sides of the fence that divides public and private education. Not all public schools are in the desperate moral straits many of the contributors to this provocative volume would have them in—even if, as a matter of principle, they should be in such straits. Nor are all parochial schools paragons of religious formation, even if they intend to be. Thus the polarized and highly generalized discourse addressed to institutional change agents concerning "liberal society," the "state of education in America today," and the "Christian community" will probably not be helpful for parents charged with the education of their children in any concrete and necessarily complex situation. What stands before us is this particular child and that particular school. For them, the challenge of "schooling Christians" in a liberal society will involve making careful assessments of the combined influences of a particular church, school, home, neighborhood, and media culture—and often negotiating uneasy trade-offs between the positive and negative factors present in each of them—even if they are otherwise occupied in pressing for just the kind of institutional changes recommended by some of the contributors to this provocative volume.
Learning, Believing, Being, Doing


Mark Schwehn’s project in this urbane book is to argue for “a religiously informed reconception of the academic vocation in particular and of academic life in general” (x). The rhetoric of most recent books about higher education is that of aggressive stridency and their ethos is that of unfair spitefulness. Schwehn’s book is refreshingly free of both!

Schwehn observes that those who write about academia regularly cite three objectives for the academic enterprise: “making knowledge, transmitting knowledge and skills, and helping students learn how to lead more ethical, fulfilling lives” (4). These objectives are often regarded as being in opposition to each other; and, of the three, the objective of “making knowledge” has acquired hegemony, in the sense that when an academic speaks of “doing my own work,” it is this that he or she has in mind, and in the sense that esteem in academia depends largely on how one’s peers evaluate one’s contribution to this objective.

Schwehn takes Max Weber’s famous speech delivered near the end of his life at the University of Munich, “Science as a Vocation” (“Wissenschaft als Beruf”), as a paradigmatic statement of this view that the advance of Wissenschaft constitutes the essence of the academic vocation. What he singles out from this address, apart from its central claim, is Weber’s emphasis on the inevitable specialization of Wissenschaft in the modern world, Weber’s emphasis on the disciplined self-mastery required of all who aim to advance Wissenschaft, Weber’s insistence that the pursuit of Wissenschaft is to be value-free, and Weber’s emphasis on the loneliness of all those who advance Wissenschaft.

No doubt part of what motivates Schwehn’s attempt at “reconception” is the wish to alleviate the unhappiness and dis-ease which the hegemony of the Weberian model has produced in the modern academy. What he emphasizes, however, is not that; but rather, what he sees as an alteration in fundamental epistemology which has occurred over the last couple of decades, from the “foundationalism” or “objectivism” of Weber’s implicit epistemology to the view that knowledge of the truth emerges from the disciplined inquiry of communities and that beliefs are justified by reference to the standards of communities. “[C]ommunitarian accounts of knowledge and truth have undermined the epistemology that informed Weber’s conception of the academic calling,” he says (40). He takes Richard Rorty and Parker Palmer as exemplars of the new epistemology.

Schwehn proposes, in the light of this new epistemology, that instead of thinking of the university as an institution enabling individuals to pursue Wissenschaft, we think of universities (and colleges) as communities of inquiry into the truth. He is sensitive to the fact that universities never, and colleges seldom, constitute a single community. Universities are, however, collections of communities of inquiry.

Schwehn proceeds from this point to discuss the virtues required for the existence of communities of enquiry; it is especially here that religion enters his picture; “I believe,” he says, “that the most promising argument for an integral relationship between religion and higher education is and has always been essential to the process of learning, even with the secular academy” (41). The virtues which he emphasizes are humility, faith, self-denial, charity, and friendship.

In summary, “This reorientation of academic life entails at least three
radical revisions of the Weberian conception of the academic calling. First, teaching, not Wissenschaft, becomes the activity in terms of which all others — publication, collegiality, research, consultation, advising—are to be understood, interpreted, and appraised. Second, the cultivation of those spiritual virtues that make genuine teaching and learning possible becomes a vitally important aspect of pedagogy. Finally, both charity and philia, the loves that Weber banished from the academy, become once again central to its self-conception and to its overall mission in the world” (58-59).

Schwehn concludes his discussion by asking whether perhaps there is “a peculiarly modern and secular spirituality that gives a deep measure of meaning to the academic vocation as Weber described it and at the same time blinds its practitioners to their own necessary reliance upon virtues that are distinctively religious” (95). He imaginatively uses an analysis of Henry Adams’ The Education of Henry Adams to suggest that what underlies the modern Weberian academy is the conviction that if there is to be meaning in our lives, we must make meaning.

This bare-bones outline of Schwehn’s argument gives no sense of the richness of his discussion nor of the wisdom present in many passages. Indeed, I think that arguably the finest passage in the book is an aside (p. 29ff) in which he observes that “the principal dangers inherent in communitarianism are tribalism and the subsequent violence that often arises among rival tribes....objectivism arose initially and...it subsequently attained cultural dominion primarily because it was intended by its architects as a way of avoiding violence.” I have offered this outline, however, because I wish to pay to Schwehn’s argument the tribute of engaging it. There can be no doubt that the academy in the West is undergoing, and must undergo, fundamental alterations in direction and self-understanding. Schwehn’s book is a significant contribution to the necessary debate.

But I have my doubts, here and there. In the first place, about Schwehn’s characterization of Weber. Schwehn rather often contrasts Weber’s view with his own as striving for mastery over the world through calculation and control versus seeking the truth of matters (cf. 58). I doubt that this is fair to Weber. In that same speech, of which Schwehn rightly makes much, Weber says that the goal of the academic is “to state facts.” On my reading, Weber did not see the academy as in the service of technological interests. His impulse was always to say that each sphere of culture or society has its own interior logic. He did, indeed, see “instrumental rationality” as pervading the modern academy as it does all other spheres. But what he had in mind is that the modern academic repudiates habit and impulse in favor of a rationalized disciplined pursuit of the goals of the academy—namely, “to state facts.”

Furthermore, Schwehn interprets Weber’s conception of the academic calling “as a transmutation, sometimes a subversion, of terms that were religious in origin and implication” (40). But this too seems to me not quite on target. Weber argued that what got our modern world going was the explicitly religious notion of working in a calling. But he also held that now that it is going, it is self-perpetuating without any appeal to religion. Religious terms and values are not so much transmuted and subverted as simply left behind!

Secondly, I read the recent history of epistemology somewhat differently from Schwehn. There has indeed been a demise of foundationalism. But I think the decisive blows were not delivered by the communitarians but by the historians of natural science who, by studying in detail great episodes in the history of modern science, succeeded in persuading us that if there is such a thing as “the logic” of science, that logic is not a foundationalist logic. Once that point was made, other aspects of the regnant self-image of the academy came unstuck. In particular, what came unstuck was the traditional view that the learning of the academy is to be a generically human enterprise. We now are all familiar, and more or less comfortable, with such notions as feminist philosophy and black history and liberation theology and third-world sociology—all of which would be anathema to the Enlightenment. Schwehn, it appears to me, still holds to the ideal of the learning of the academy as a generically human enterprise; his argument is that we have to conceive of that enterprise as accomplished in communities of inquiry. I think that what is happening today is something much more radical: We are seeing the rise and affirmation of avowedly particularist, perspectivalist learning. It’s not just that learning takes place in communities; rather, one’s learning unavoidably and justifiably reflects the perspective of one’s community.

Thirdly, I have some hesitations about Schwehn’s way of seeing the bearing of religion on the “new academy.” The “self-conscious cultivation of a spiritually informed ethos on inquiry” is what he calls for (45); and he sees the spiritual as informing the inquiry at the point of those requisite virtues of humility, faith, self-denial, charity, and friendship. He calls them “spiritual virtues.” But in what sense are they spiritual? They are spiritual in their origin, he says; he sees them as emerging from the religion of the Hebrews. And they are spiritual, he speculates, in that ultimately they may well need religion for their sustenance. He admits, though, that as a matter of fact one might have these virtues and be resolutely anti-religious; he cites Jeffrey Stout as a paradigmatic example. Furthermore, once one sees what these virtues actually come to, it’s not clear that Judaism contributed essentially to their presence among us. Friendship was praised by Aristotle. And as to faith, which consists for Schwehn, in a subversion, of terms that were religious in origin and implication” (95). But this too seems to me not quite on target. Weber argued that what got our modern world going was the explicitly religious notion of working in a calling. But he also held that now that it is going, it is self-perpetuating without any appeal to religion. Religious terms and values are not so much transmuted and subverted as simply left behind!

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In short, I think Schwehn is right to see in the new “communitarianism” new possibilities for the role of reli-
igion in the academy. But I see these
now possibilities not so much in Rorty
and Palmer, as in the flowering of per-
spectivalism in the contemporary
academy. May it be that the religious
person has a distinct perspective on reality
which ought to be contributed to the
pluralist dialogue of the academy? May it be that he or she has distinct
things to say in the dialogue, and not
just distinct contributions to make to
the character-formation necessary to
keep the dialogue going?

On the other hand, let us not for-
get Schwehn’s comment about com-
unitarianism and violence: Keeping
the dialogue going will prove to be no
mean feat!

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., Higher
Education as A Moral Enterprise.
Washington, D.C.: Georgetown

Perhaps the most common justifi-
cation proffered for church-related
and independent Christian colleges is
their attention to values. It is implied,
and sometimes straightforwardly
asserted, that faculty at public universi-
ties care less about the moral life of
students and that the curriculum and
the ethos of a public or independent
college or university is less conducive
to moral formation than that of the
church-related university. Having
received my graduate degree from one
state university and having taught at
another, I know these claims about the
moral inferiority of the species “state
university” to be false. In Higher
Education as A Moral Enterprise, Edward
LeRoy Long, Jr. effectively demonstra-
tes that every university (state-sup-
ported, independent, or church-related) can have and ought to
have morality as the foundation for
their mission and self-understanding.
Moral commitment is not what distin-
guishes the church-related university
from other universities, but what
should distinguish the university, per-
se, from other institutions.

Defining the educational mission
of the university in terms of orthopraxy,
rather than orthodoxy or orthognosis,
Long argues that the purpose of the
university is neither to transmit a body
of correct beliefs nor to convey to stu-
dents “what every well-educated per-
son should know,” but rather to be a
properly-functioning community
charged with three primary tasks:
“(1)...the identification, maturation,
and enrichment of selfhood...(2)...the
discovery/construction, extension, and
dissemination of knowledge and cul-
ture...(3) the responsibility for the
well-being of society” (6).

Long’s goal, then, is to explain
the procedures which will ensure the
accomplishment of these tasks, to
identify the moral values which must
be present in individuals and in com-
unities if the university is to meet
with success in its proper function.
And it is when he turns his attention to
these procedural matters that Long’s
book is richest, rich not only in terms
of insight, but in language which pithi-
ly identifies inadequate educational
approaches. For example, in criticiz-
ing the emphasis upon competency
testing, Long writes, “But efforts to
hone competence apart from the culti-
vation of moral selfhood can make
“the best and the brightest” into merely
the smartest and the most schem-
ing” (21).

In the second part of the book,
Long argues that the purpose of the
university is neither to transmit a body
of correct beliefs nor to convey to stu-
dents “what every well-educated per-
son should know,” but rather to be a
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Enlightenment conceptions of rationali-
ty.

Thomas D. Kennedy is Associate
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Christ to the World, an anthology of
readings in Christian ethics, forthcom-
ing from Eerdmans in the spring of
1994.
a part. Thus, his emphasis throughout the book, is upon procedural, rather than substantive, morality. In the absence of knowledge about what is morally good, the university can, nevertheless, be a community engaged in morally sound activities of the formation of "selfhood," in discovering and extending knowledge, in attending to the well-being of society. But, in the absence of some shared concept of the good, in the absence of substantive moral knowledge, can the university agree about what kind of self the university should form? about what kind of knowledge is important? about what will contribute to the well-being of society?

Perhaps, though it is unlikely. I am convinced that our answers to these questions will be far too thin to be intellectually and morally satisfying. We may be able to identify and form or convey the kind of self and the kind of knowledge a liberal polity values; we may be able to identify what it looks like for the university to be moral in a society in which we share no common concept of the good. But whether these can sustain the commitment of any but the moral athletes among us, I doubt.

It is precisely here that there could be a difference between the liberal university and a church-related university with a self-consciously non-liberal conception of the good. Such a church-related university could articulate its own conception of the good and the grounds for thinking its conception superior to alternative conceptions. Those students who share that conception of the good could be initiated into the pursuit of the good in that community and the curricular and non-curricular life of the community as a whole structured around the pursuit of that good in a university setting. Those students who do not share the university's concept of the good would nevertheless benefit from the opportunity of listening and observing a community in pursuit of the good, as well as from the knowledge conveyed and skills gained from any adequate university education. A church-related university might differ from other universities in its bold articulation of a good far more substantive than the procedural good of a liberal university and in its willingness to form a common life consistent with the good. But those church-related colleges and universities whose conception of the good is so thin as to closely resemble that of the liberal university will have to find some justification other than moral superiority for their claim upon potential students. For, as Long ably argues, all universities can and ought to understand education as a moral enterprise. Long has provided the liberal university with a great deal of practical wisdom to guide the pursuit of moral excellence. Those who are resigned to a liberal conception of the good, as well as those whose conception of the good is much thicker, can learn a great deal from Long's reflections upon the university.

Thomas D. Kennedy

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Raphael

Raphael’s wings are gold, an airy gold that thins to transparency like sun falling on a wall and yet are deep and wide as sun taking a field full in the morning or leaving wheat in the evening. When he flies away, they are a streak of salmon or carmine along the edge of the sea, and where his feet touch last, whitecaps rise to rollers and throw themselves in ecstatic, bright hosannas over and over against the eroding shore.

Two Poems by

Robert Siegel

How to Catch a Poem

It begins with one leaf rubbing against another, a light, a rift in the clouds, the weight of a feather spiraling down, a ripple on water—

its shape rising from the dark and fusing with a sound, a touch, a peculiar scent. Now it begins to show plumage, the gleam of a pelt, pausing to stare with an ebony eye. One twitch—it’s gone, fled into that darker wood behind the eyes. Stunned, you trace its tracks on paper, stumble, pick yourself up and go down each sly cheat of a path vanishing in a thicket, lie still, listening for its breath, a twig breaking where you think... Avoid food or sleep, follow all day, at night listen for its cry under the moon. Finally, you may gather enough to show its presence. Delay finishing what you have. Take your time. Return home and frame the cast of its footprint: that is the poem.
The Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, established in 1991, addresses two critical problems faced by church-related institutions of higher learning in the United States. First, though many church-related colleges and universities are seeking to recover or refortify a sense of purpose and identity, there has been no sustained national conversation expressly designed to renew and deepen a sense of corporate vocation among these schools. Second, settings for the formation of younger scholars who wish to pursue their vocational commitments at church-related colleges and universities scarcely exist in the United States. In brief, the hegemony of the secular research university has gradually eroded both institutional and individual senses of Christian vocation, leaving many schools and many Christian scholars in need of renewed vision and mutual support.

The Lilly Fellows Program therefore consists of two distinct but integrated programmatic initiatives. First, it has established and will steadily expand a national network of church-related institutions of higher learning and sustain among them a discussion of Christian understandings of the nature of the academic vocation. The network represents a diversity of denominational traditions, institutional types, and geographical locations. Representatives from the network institutions meet at Valparaiso University for an annual fall conference. Additionally, several workshops and mini-conferences are scheduled annually on the campuses of the network institutions. A biannual newsletter reports network activities, provides listings of young scholars interested in teaching at church-related institutions, and includes reports from conferences and workshops.

Second, the Lilly Fellows Program offers young scholars in the humanities and the arts a chance to renew and deepen their sense of vocation, and to enrich their postdoctoral intellectual and spiritual life within a Christian community of learning. Each academic year three Postdoctoral Fellows are appointed for two-year periods, selected from candidates interested in considering the relationship between Christianity and the academic vocation. The Fellows are prepared, through a variety of teaching experiences, through participation in a weekly colloquium, and through regular association with mentors, to seek permanent employment within church-related institutions of higher learning.

The Program also sponsors one Senior Fellow, selected from nominees from the network schools, to spend the year on the Valparaiso University campus, working closely with the Lilly Fellows Program. The Senior Fellow engages in research and writing, is a resource person for the Postdoctoral Fellows, participates in a year-long colloquium, and contributes to the annual conference the following fall.

These initiatives bring focus, clarity, and energy to a critical aspect of a much larger project: the imaginative reformulation and implementation of an agenda for church-related higher learning for the twenty-first century.

For more information about the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, contact:

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