

Editorial:

Multireligious and Multicultural Conversation in Christian Academic Institutions

KOINONIA produces a journal and annual forum sponsored by a Christian seminary – one that is explicit about its rootedness within a particular, Reformed stream of biblical interpretation, theology, and ecclesiology. We have always sought after and published work by students in programs with no religious affiliation and those in programs with affiliations with other religious traditions. My thoughts on the role of multireligious and multidisciplinary conversation in Christian schools have been inspired, in part, by consideration of the recent convocation address of Princeton Theological Seminary’s new president, Iain R. Torrance. In this address he voiced his hopes and dreams for the seminary in light of the work of Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth since 1991.

I was intrigued by President Torrance’s decision to construct his first official address to the seminary community around the scholarship of a nonChristian religious leader. And my curiosity was piqued by his hints as to what he sees as “the founding charism of this school”.

Torrance’s decision caught my attention in part because *KOINONIA*’s editorial board members had, a year earlier, decided to invite two nonUS student-scholars – who had been nurtured within two different nonChristian religious traditions – to serve as panelists for our annual forum on the topic: “The Prophetic Dimension of Martyrdom in the 21st Century.” Princeton Seminary’s systematic theology student Matthew Lundberg delivered the central paper entitled: “The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of Life: Liberation Theology, Martyrdom, and the Prophetic Dimension of Theology”. Lundberg’s essay, these two nonChristian responses, and the responses of three other Princeton Seminary students compose the forum section of this issue.

During our board’s discussion about whom to invite for this forum’s panel, some serious issues were raised by our book review editor, Ron Choong, and our practical theology editor, Ajit Prasadam, about the way in which the mission of *KOINONIA* fits into the overall mission of Princeton Seminary. Both Choong and Prasadam are citizens of nations in which Christians are a small

minority. They asked us to give careful thought to the question: “To what ends, and in what ways, should scholars in an explicitly Christian school engage explicitly non-Christian religious perspectives?” We considered how to avoid making decisions that could appear to be motivated by political correctness, and to create, instead, the space for the deeper listening and riskier speech that, I believe, God’s Spirit uses to enlarge the perspectives of both listener and speaker – so both can perceive possibilities for positive individual and social transformation that were unimaginable prior to such vulnerability.

We thus provided more contexts for conversation. Instead of rooming at the seminary’s guesthouse, our non-Princeton participants stayed with my family, where in lieu of the formal seminary dinner, we enjoyed a longer (and louder) evening for panelists and board members. We scheduled a breakfast attended not only by panelists and board members but by quite a few Princeton Seminary and University doctoral students. Despite accumulating snow, several of us accepted Choong’s impromptu invitation to his home for lunch, where the conversation continued.

Many of Torrance’s reflections upon Sack’s work could give future *KOINONIA* boards, and scholars in other schools with a faith affiliation, some guidance in pondering methods of multireligious conversation. I will summarize three of these remarks especially pertinent to *KOINONIA*’s experience with this issue’s forum, and reframe them as recommendations.

1) *Become bilingual. Master the skills of both “narrowcasting” (addressing one’s own group via tribal language) and “broadcasting” (addressing groups outside one’s “tribe” via public discourse).*¹

Pushpa Iyer, a panelist from India pursuing a PhD in conflict analysis and resolution, pointed out repeatedly that *KOINONIA* had failed to clarify whether the goal of our forum was Christian theological analysis of a Christian theological proposal, or public analysis and public amelioration of public horrors. Our journal needs to decide if our forums will be “tribal” or “public” – or if we should alternate between the two in different years. If future forums involve multireligious conversation, our calls for papers must specify more clearly that submissions must work as public discourse. This does not mean eliminating references to ethical or other absolutes derived from the speci-

¹ Torrance, Iain R. “Convocation Address: Princeton Theological Seminary 14th September 2004.” www.ptsem.edu/know/Convocation04.htm (29 Sept. 2004): 1-2.

ficity of a Christian or other religious perspective. But it does mean taking on the discipline of noting repeatedly to oneself and to one's audience the particularity of the source of such absolutes.

2) Adopt “a different way of understanding what we hold in common and what we acknowledge as being different.”² Practice the “exorcism” of “the notion . . . that there is a single truth . . . that is unreachable but objective . . . [so] that it follows that if I am right, then you are wrong.”³

Torrance notes that Sacks links this call for “exorcising Plato’s ghost” with a “a plea for space . . . where people can meet on equal terms.”⁴ Although arguing for the immense importance of such space, Torrance sees it as “nothing like enough,”⁵ and suggests that another argument Sacks proposes – that “the supreme religious challenge is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image,”⁶ – holds more power for limiting the potentially destructive aspects of tribalism. Torrance describes Christian ethics as being about the alignment of grace and truth, and about the resulting transformations which he connects with forgiveness, which can create “a kind of moral space or discontinuity so as to enable a new beginning.”⁷

Panelist Santiago Slabodsky, an Argentine liberationist rabbi, reminded us that both Christian and Jewish tribalism have resulted in martyrdoms (variously conceived) of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. By taking the risk of reinterpreting both Jewish history, authoritative Jewish texts, and current Israeli politics in the light of church history and Christian theology, Slabodsky found areas of overlap in terms of “substantive ethical perspectives”⁸ in both Christian and Jewish theological traditions. His critique of some strands of Zionism reveals what I see as an often misconstrued, misused, and dangerous type of “single truth” theory: the justification of violent defense of territorial, economic, or other hegemonic claims by an appeal to divine truth. His paper demonstrates that exorcising that kind of single, objective truth need not involve opening oneself to seven new demons of moral relativism, nor

² Torrance, “Convocation,” 3.

³ Torrance, “Convocation,” 3.

⁴ Torrance, “Convocation,” 3.

⁵ Torrance, “Convocation,” 4.

⁶ Torrance, “Convocation,” 4, citing Jonathan Sack’s *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilization* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 60.

⁷ Torrance, “Convocation,” 3.

⁸ Torrance, “Convocation,” 2.

cutting oneself off from the texts of one's tradition. At the end of his address he exhorted us all to be guided by "the first agreement": the right to disagree" – and by an awareness of "the collaboration of 'the Other' in our own constructions."

3) Be "unwilling to take refuge in relativity, trying instead to distinguish between that which is absolute and that which is universal."⁹ But realize that, "Appeals to universals are of little help to us in today's world. . . . [T]hey are too thin to nurture resolve. . . ."¹⁰

Appeals to universals provide little motivational nourishment if the only absolute behind them is a shared commitment to relativism. But it is harder, of course, to discover and appeal to ethical common ground between the differing sets of absolutes which two (or more) religious perspectives claim as their guidelines for action. This is especially difficult given the diversity among ethical absolutes actually adhered to by the immensely varied faith communities rooted any religious tradition with a long history. But this approach holds the promise of tapping the creativity and motivational energy that image-thick, narrative-thick, and practice-thick religious perspectives can generate.

The topic of martyrdom elicits great motivational energy and lends itself to narrative and imaginative "thickness". We were delighted that each panelist's paper offered a proposal for further study and/or action based upon their theological and/or ethical conclusions.

Matthew Lundberg's central paper differentiates between 1) preConstantinian "martyrs of confession," 2) recent "martyrs of solidarity" killed for acting on behalf of the oppressed, and 3) the passive "crucified people" who are killed to terrorize the living. Drawing heavily on Brueggemann and Sobrino, he delineates the Hebrew prophetic pattern of "telling the truth about reality" and "proposing better solutions," then examines how it operated in the life and death of Jesus and of recent martyrs of solidarity. In light of arguments in violent contexts over "Who decides who is a martyr and who is not?", Lundberg answers that the hermeneutics of theology demands that martyrs reproduce in their lives the dynamics that

⁹ Torrance, "Convocation," 3.

¹⁰ Torrance, "Convocation," 3.

led to Jesus' death and its salvific character. He proposes four theological implications of using martyrs as a hermeneutical lens: 1) theology must engage social problems via God's option for the poor; 2) it will therefore always be conflictive; 3) it must serve the church, the Christian faith, and the world; 4) it should see the martyrs as a quasi-sacramental source of access to the realities of Christ's cross and resurrection.

Citing ancient martyrologies, Lisa Powell's response argues that, "The Christian martyrs, in their imitation of Christ" offer more than a quasi-sacramental source of access to Christ, but "become Christ in his ubiquity". She states that "it possible to see a clear continuity between the particulars of ancient Christian martyrs and those of contemporary Christian martyrdoms in Latin America." She proposes early Christian martyrologies be examined closely to "enrich the contemporary task of liberation theology" and to raise "challenges to theologies that have neglected and/or oppressed the poor."

Santiago Slobodsky's contends that Lundberg's Christian liberationist understanding of martyrs of solidarity "calls into question the understanding of martyrdom current in post-Holocaust Judaism." Drawing upon Jewish liberation theology, he argues that some streams of current Judaism have adopted Constantinian concepts of power that justified Christian oppression of Jews, and are thereby making Palestinians the "permanent Other" in Israel. Citing *Kiddush Ashem*, he demonstrates that acceptance of death as the price for social struggle was not part of the pre-1945 Jewish approach to martyrdom. He proposes that Jewish and Christian conceptions of martyrdom be "analyzed with respect to cross-commonalities between both brother/sister traditions."

Women who die as a result of domestic violence can be seen as passive martyrs like those Ellacuría calls "the crucified people", Debra L. Duke suggests. Noting that "Clergy are among the top four professions . . . who are perpetrators of domestic violence," she asks, "When will we as a church, dare to confront this?" It was the decision of churches to respond to the deaths of Latin American martyrs of solidarity by engaging in social action that made these deaths practically redemptive, she points out. She proposes that "It is only through our daring to stand in the prophetic sphere – and through our responding courageously to domestic violence martyrs – that the blood of these martyrs will become the seed of life . . ."

Pushpa Iyer contends that Lundberg's paper, "provides no space to consider concepts or examples of martyrdom that may not be visible from the

narrow confines of a theological lens.” Noting that the term *martyr* has a much broader use than in specifically Christian circles, she describes two current nonChristian conceptions of “martyrs for justice”: Gandhian “strategic martyrdom” in which religion may play a supporting role, and “activist martyrdom” in which faith is not explicitly brought into public life. She points out the semantic chaos that results (“martyr or freedom fighter or terrorist or traitor?”) when a religion “has the power to bestow the title of martyr on its own people alone.” She proposes “some kind of dialogue between these different theological worlds rather than for each one to continue to think exclusively within its own box. Martyrdom has to be situated within such a context of inclusive religious discussion today.”

Bifurcating theology from ethics could result from bifurcating “martyrs of confession” from “martyrs of solidarity,” Rubén Rosario-Rodríguez warns. The political acts of contemporary martyrs were the direct result of doctrinal commitments, he contends, and “that to argue otherwise is to suggest that liberation is an extra-scriptural concept (perhaps derived from Marxism) . . .” He shares “the concerns of some feminist and Womanist theologians” that Sobrino’s insistence that the crucified people “bring salvation through their suffering” could impede liberation. Noting the need to adapt Sobrino’s views on martyrdom for the North American context, Rosario-Rodríguez proposes that “if Christ is present among the poor, the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31-46), the church must also be present among the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the imprisoned.”

All involved in forum seemed extremely concerned about the interaction between religion and social justice. But it was clear that had we applied more consciously the recommendations above that were derived from Torrance’s address, we would have spent less time “missing” each other due to less than clearly stated interpretive differences rooted in religious, cultural, and disciplinary diversity. We would then have had time to consider taking more concrete action upon the various proposals suggested. One immediate action *KOINONIA*’s board did take was to appoint Elliot Ratzman, a Jewish Ph.D. student in the religion department at Princeton University, to be editor-at-large, due in part to his skill in moving back and forth between “tribal” and “public” discourse.

The open submissions in this issue were not part of a live conversation, but were chosen because they contain and/or encourage multireligious, multicultural and/or multidisciplinary thinking. In light of the ways in which

current warfare is sometimes framed as a clash between Christianity and Islam, the board found that Larry Stratton's rich account of the early 20th century conversion of son of an Anglican clergyman to Islam, and his subsequent critique of British Christendom, provided still pertinent help in seeing ourselves as others see us. Raymond Powell's article urges historians of religion to study more seriously the doctrines of the Cathars, a group persecuted as heretics by Catholic Christians, noting that – given the doctrinal emphases and economic suffering of the time – “its dualism may have made better sense of the world to average men and women than the competing Catholic answers to life's questions.”

Kenyatta Gilbert outlines a way to form a theological bridge between the prophetic and priestly aspects of preaching through a nuanced synthesis of two approaches to interdisciplinary work for theology: Matthew Lamb's revised praxis correlational model and James E. Loder's transformational model. Ariane Arpels-Josiah's paper demonstrates that John Calvin's theological anthropology and view of nature can provide rich resources for the task of living responsibly in a technologically advanced and environmentally challenged society if his work is read in conversation with the field of environmental ethics. *KOINONIA* is especially pleased to publish Brazilian pastor Raimundo Barreto's moving account of what longtime PTS professor Richard Schaul called his “third conversion”. Schaul claimed that his cross-cultural immersion in the last years of his life in the churches of poor Pentecostals in a Brazilian shantytown led not only to personal transformation but to an awareness of the ways in which Third World Pentecostalism is transforming the worldwide church.

It has been the experience of the American members of *KOINONIA*'s board that many of our richest experiences at this seminary of coming to an awareness of God's mission within the worldwide church have been through conversations with international colleagues like Barreto. As US society becomes increasingly multireligious and multicultural, American churches have much to learn about becoming gracefully bilingual from churches where Christians are a minority, such as how to participate in public discourse about substantive ethical propositions without either: 1) denying our particular religious absolutes, 2) asking those with different religious absolutes to deny theirs, or 3) wafting off into “thin” appeals to supposed ethical universals.

With the importance of multicultural conversation between American and international students in mind, I will return to some of Torrance's com-

ments at the beginning, the middle, and the end of his address.

. . . We have . . . an historic tradition of rigorous scholarship and have long *welcomed* an international community. These are factors that can *make a difference* in the world. But all of these are *material* [author's italics] things. I believe that the founding *charisms* of this school were in *matters of the spirit*. So I want initially to consider a particular *perspective* on the world . . .¹¹

. . . I used to believe that Christian ethics was fundamentally to do with geography, with map-making and *boundaries* and so was related to a spatial intelligence. Increasingly now I believe it is to do with *being transformed* and that neither universalism or prescription are its method.¹²

. . . One of my chief hopes for this school is that it may be a place where *truthfulness and grace continue to be linked*, and we do not attempt to live purely *functionally* . . . Since I arrived here four weeks ago, I have received many letters. Perhaps the most striking came from the Myanmar Institute of Theology. The principal wrote that Burma under socialism was isolated for many years. She was among the first to be allowed to go abroad. She said: "PTS gave me that chance, and since then has accepted and equipped 10 faculty members'. She listed the Institute's new programs, ending: 'These programs and activities are all possible because PTS *cared enough* about a small seminary in a Third World country'. That, I think, is close to the founding *charism* of this school.¹³ [unless noted, italics mine]

Torrance appears to be signaling a difference between, on the one hand, simply "welcoming" internationals to PTS and, on the other hand, establishing a close relationship with a church in a minority situation – a relationship which is longterm enough, and deep enough, to "care enough" to offer advanced training to ten seminary faculty. He seems to be indicating that, while mere welcoming can indeed "make a difference," it is a "material thing" that can make only a "functional" difference. He appears to be linking "matters of the spirit" with one's "perspective on the world" — and to be making a connection between: 1) the cooperation of grace and truth, 2) Christian ethics that go beyond establishing boundaries to real transformation, 3) caring

¹¹ Torrance, "Convocation," 1.

¹² Torrance, "Convocation," 5.

¹³ Torrance, "Convocation," 6.

“enough” about Third World churches to invest in longterm change, 4) the seminary’s original charism.

Even a cursory look at the history of Christian missions in the past two centuries makes it clear that Princeton Seminary has long demonstrated a particular giftedness for training scholars who can build up churches in difficult circumstances worldwide. But it is also clear to current students in the Ph.D. program that changes in the way student immigration policies are being interpreted at PTS as a result of 9/11, and the resulting changes in seminary policies in funding doctoral work, are making the completion of the doctoral program much more difficult for our international colleagues.

Many doctoral students at PTS did elect to study here because we are clear that the absolutes we have committed ourselves to are rooted in the Christian faith, and we want to study in an academic community rooted in those same Christian commitments. Most seminary Ph.D. programs can offer that. But Princeton Theological Seminary has been unique in the Reformed tradition in providing such a community with access to a breadth of expert Christian and non Christian academic perspectives — via Princeton University, its own international and internationally-renowned faculty and library holdings, and the historically large number of international Ph.D. students enrolled — which is wider than that of any other seminary doctoral program in the US.

The scholars which PTS’s Ph.D. program has produced have thus been known for their global perspective long before it was fashionable to think globally. *KOINONIA*’s board hopes that the cooperation of grace and truth, and the funding and creation of more space for risky multicultural conversation among the entire seminary community, can provide opportunities for Princeton Seminary’s unique charisms to be expressed in transforming ways that were unimaginable prior to such mutual vulnerability.

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