

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

- Topic: Theological Education in Post-Christian Context
Convener: Jerry T. Farmer, Xavier University of Louisiana
Presenters: Mark Gstohl, Xavier University of Louisiana
Phillip J. Linden, Jr., Xavier University of Louisiana
Mary Ann Stachow, Xavier University of Louisiana

This solicited session centered upon the challenges of undergraduate theological education in a post-Christian context. Each of the three presenters are faculty in the Department of Theology of Xavier University of Louisiana, the only Catholic and historically Black University in the Western Hemisphere.

Mark Gstohl's presentation was entitled, "Culture and Christ: The Role of Historical Theology in a Post-Christian Context." He focused on the term "Post-Christian" as referring to the fact that the traditional Christian beliefs of the existence of a loving God revealed in Christ and proclaimed by the church are not normative in the current context. He went on to argue that the historical theologian must redefine his or her task in order to meet the needs of the present context, suggesting that the traditional methodology be expanded rather than totally transformed.

The historical theologian's task is not merely to describe how the church has interpreted various concepts at different points in history, but to seek to understand why such interpretations existed. The historical theologian also must be mindful of exposing the students to a wide variety of views, ideas, and individuals. This approach of examining the convictions of individual Christians can lead persons to a greater awareness of their own convictions. Thus, Gstohl insisted, when his students reflect not only on the Christian tradition, but also on their own convictions, they become theologians themselves. Finally, Gstohl noted that the prophetic stance of St. Katharine Drexel (the foundress of both Xavier University of Louisiana and the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament) against the powers and principalities of her time, provides the historical theologian the opportunity to not only illustrate the Christian faith in action, but to allow the story to transform the lives of the students and encourage them to impact their world.

The title of Phillip J. Linden, Jr.'s presentation was "Method in Religion and Theology in the North American Context." His focus was an exploration of the potential of theology to bring *faith* back to life again. He pointed out that while those in the United States think of their society as Christian (religious), both historical reflection and current challenges to the religious reality force one to examine traditional religious belief and values. One seeks to understand why religious belief and values have little or no discernible role in the shaping of American public policy. He asserts that the religious liberty clauses of the U.S. Constitution merely assure the furthering of American individualistic interests

with impunity. And that First Amendment clauses have become a blueprint or a roadmap for the current efforts at global conquest by Western Civilization. Within these struggles, Linden notes, religious faith is upheld only as a private matter and an individual experience of an *abstract* God in an *absolute* Church or religious group. He then reflected on the 1988 Williamsburg Charter from the perspective of the article of Richard Wentz, "John Williamson Nevin and American Nationalism." Linden stressed that if the religious experience is merely translated into a myth of individual utility, then all it is capable of is the solidifying of a new world or global "nationalism" that seeks mainly to confirm existing dominance. He concluded by stating that there is no salvation for the individual that is not at the same time real for humanity in one of many spheres of human existence.

Sr. Mary Ann Stachow's presentation was on "Teaching Undergraduate Scripture in a Post-Christian Context." She suggested that her talk could also be entitled "Teaching as a Subversive Activity," agreeing with Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann's insight that the time is past when a teacher in a church-related university or college can assume that students in a given class come with any clear understanding of God, or of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Students have been raised in a culture that in all its major areas, economics, politics, ecology, entertainment, etc., conducts business without serious reference to God. In his book, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, Brueggemann suggests that for American society one of the most unsettling results of taking Scripture seriously is the challenge it makes to our comfortable lifestyle and unquestioning use of an immense portion of the world's natural resources. Stachow stressed that the task of a Scripture teacher is one of "subverting" or presenting an alternative version of reality to students who are usually quite invested in getting their share of the "good life." This task is further complicated by the heavy technological and scientific nature of so much of the undergraduate curriculum. Those who teach Scripture deal with a different idiom and a different world view. She noted that students are willing to engage in collaborative activity that works for change. The question is whether one will present them with a satisfying "subversive" vision of life that will allow them to be true catalysts for change, to a life far richer than that held up by a culture of conspicuous consumption.

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