

Mini-Plenary Discussion with Chuck Melchert (“CM”), REA:APPRRE Annual Meeting, 11/22/09, facilitated by Janet Parachin (“JP”)

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Participant 1: Translate or interpret?

CM: No difference. It's the same thing because translation IS interpretive.

Participant 1: So what about the Talmud, for example the *oral* Torah at Sinai? One word can be plumbed and explored, that's its richness.

CM: May be farther apart in time than you think, I don't agree they were transmitted at the same time.

Participant 2: Clarify the differences between theology and doctrine?

CM: The terms are conflated, part of the problem in calling what we teach “Religion.” Theology is about beliefs, not practices. Especially since the Reformation, most debates and wars have been over doctrine. We've just recently realized that other faiths don't have "systematic theology" in the Western sense. That came down to us from Aristotelian and Platonic philosophical systems.

Participant 3: At Tri-Faith Conference in NYC a Muslim cited Matthew 25—“What *you* (plural) have done...” Christians are more creedally intense than Jews or Moslems-hierarchical structure almost mandates creedal focus, doesn't it?

CM: Buddhist hierarchy is different- “higher ups ask more complex questions.”

Participant 4: Upper levels of Christian theology are decidedly masculine; feminists can break it open

CM: About 2/3 of the most brilliant young theologians “on the practice bandwagon” are women.

Participant 4: Yes- embodied, earth-centered, below, HERE. Are we still not very far along? Still stuck in thoughts of dead white men.

CM: In the academy, it's pretty open. In the churches, nope!

Participant 5: I've studied Edward Farley's *Theologia*. Theology for him means systematic theology/doctrine “fragmentation of theology.” We must recover the ancient idea of interpreting praxis theology of believers. Believers study religion, clergy study theology. (Now CPE and Catechetics are considered “especially” not theology, which is

very wrong.) Farley also has great criticisms of Christian Education.

Participant 6: My young son said to me that if I used Hebrew better I'd be better off. I grew up not heavy into tradition, got into Catechetics. What's the role of that kind of traditioning? We don't turn it over and over, grappling like rabbis do.

CM: I would've thought the opposite. Theology is not the same practice as traditioning. That's a great field of scholarship: WHY are our traditioning patterns different? For example, when I screwed up as a kid, my dad would tell me sternly, "Melcherts don't do that."

--tradition and transformation in religious education

Participant 7: In Sunday school Bible study we mostly sat around and wondered about scriptural stories. I told them "hey, you're being theologians!"

Participant 8: Karl Rahner says that everyone who takes his or her faith seriously should be theologians. The differences between kids and adults, and between laypeople and theologians is significant but NOT constitutive.

CM: HOW do we teach loving behavior? What did Jesus do to show us? Well, for one, He died.

Participant 9: Because He did we don't have to.

CM: Oooh, letting ourselves off the hook. What does it mean to live in this time, place and context? Barth said must be re-written every 10 years.

Participant 8: Can we do this interreligiously?

CM: Oh, YES! If there's one God, we MUST.

Participant 9: How can we let go and let the sacred Spirit take over?

(PBS film "God on Trial" in which the Auschwitz inmates put the Lord in the dock)

Participant 8: It's an eschatological issue. Wisdom tradition is common to the Jews, Christians and Muslims. Will that help bring us together?

CM: The odds against it are enormous, but that's MY eschatological hope! We all have the right answers, don't we? We must relativize and realize that each is a tradition. There was relative peace in the Middle Ages....

JP: The Golden Rule takes God out of the equation.

CM: So what to do with non-Abrahamic (i.e. non-monotheistic) faiths without a personal God?

Participant 10: Whitehead pointed out the metaphysical background of all education, but especially religious education.

1903- Ed Thorndike "all education must be scientifically grounded." He and others led the way to leaving theology behind.

1940's- Randy [Crump Miller] had to ask for a new attempt to get back to theological roots (*The Clue*, etc)

CM: David T Hansen, Philosopher of Education at Teachers College of NY, has done extensive observations with Philip Jackson and others.

2001 published "*Exploring the Moral Heart of Education: A Teacher's Creed*."

What kind of people do you want your students to become? Character education, or just acquisition?

TENACIOUS HUMILITY is the fundamental description of a good teacher.

CM closes with extended quote from Hansen 2001:

Good teaching involves enriching, not impoverishing, students' understandings of self, others and the world. It means expanding, not contracting, students' knowledge, insights and interests. It means deepening, not rendering more shallow, students' ways of thinking and feeling. And it entails paying intellectual and moral attention as a teacher. It does not imply moral and intellectual apathy, indifference, or inattentiveness to students and the curriculum.

This way of seeing IS a way of loving them!