

Educating for Commitment: Insights from Postmodernity

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The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

W. B. Yeats *The Second Coming*

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

Rumi.

Introduction

Conviction, passionate intensity, and clear ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing used to be good things in the church in which I grew up and in which I came to Christian faith. I recall my puzzlement when I first encountered Yeats's poem during adolescence: it stood on their head my emerging understandings of "the way things should be" in the sphere of faith and religion. The lines haunted me as I grew into priestly and educational adult ministry; their negative admonition restrained me from dogmatism and forced me to come to terms with ambiguity as the cultural, theological and ecclesiastical landscape around me became more unstable and conflicted. But I found myself increasingly longing for a positive invitation into a wider space, such as the one towards which Rumi's poem points, as I engaged in pastoral work during the AIDS epidemic, as I encountered adults re-entering the church after long periods as spiritual seekers and consumers, and as I became aware that it is impossible to argue another person into or out of a theological position by rational means.

As a Christian educator I know that conviction is the goal religious inquirers seek, though for many it is conviction outside dogmatism or rigidity that beckons. I know the value of passionate intensity in exploring faith, though it is most compelling alongside a risky openness to emerging truth. I know the desire of fellow Christian educators for theology and practices that support each other and that enable contemporary people of faith to hold convictions with integrity. I also know the temptation to retreat into the polarities of certitude in the midst of conflict and instability. Yeats warns me of the dangers of such a retreat, but it is Rumi's confident assertion of another place to meet that speaks to my personal and professional longings. His invitation is irresistible.

When I move from personal experiences to survey the larger religious scene, the need becomes even clearer for a location where passionate conviction can be nurtured without succumbing to violently exclusive polarities of wrongdoing and rightdoing. Churches and their members are being called not only to rise to the ongoing theological challenge of interacting with a pluralistic, postmodern secular culture, but also to tackle the urgent questions arising from plural understandings of doctrine within denominations and even congregations. Shifts and transformations are occurring both at and within the churches' theological boundaries. Many

mainline, liberal/progressive Christian churches are embroiled in theological controversies, many of which result from the emergence into full light of their inner pluralism in theology and praxis that have always been hidden realities. Such conflicts are exemplified by the divisions in the Episcopal Church¹ surrounding the ordination of gay and lesbian people; these conflicts have the potential to transform both doctrine and practice, but the transformation process is likely to be protracted and difficult. The current situation is one of division over high stakes issues with little prospect of immediate solutions.

Considerable discussion is under way about the kind of ecclesiology and theology that is necessary and possible under current circumstances. How can a church remain united in the midst of theological and practical divisions whose scope seems to far exceed the diversity that has always been present? What ecclesial structures can and should be put into place, temporarily or permanently, in order to maintain unity? Are our existing theological methods adequate to address emerging issues within a rapidly changing context? Within my own church, the traditional Anglican theological framework of Scripture, tradition, and reason, interacting and correcting each other within a context of common prayer, may need to be re-evaluated if it is to sustain the theological unity of the denomination under present circumstances. How is “reason” defined in its postmodern understanding, and how is it understood as operative in relation to the authority of Scripture and tradition? Should we rely more heavily on the unitive role that shared worship and Christian practice, rather than doctrine, have always played in the denomination? Is it necessary to propose the addition of a fourth structural member to the framework of Scripture, tradition and reason – namely “culture” understood as a principal means by which theological method is shaped?

Few, however, comment about the implications of the present conflicted situation for Christian education. Several questions arise: Is it possible that religious commitments can be made and convictions held with passionate intensity without succumbing to polarizing and exclusionary understandings of wrongdoing and rightdoing? How much does Christian conviction and commitment depend on the presence of clear and uncontested doctrines? What kinds of habits, practices and dispositions should educators help Christians to cultivate in order to develop and maintain conviction amid secular pluralism outside the church and theological division within it? The conflicts that have prompted these questions have arisen within the social, cultural and intellectual context of postmodernity, and have been powerfully shaped by it. It is possible that postmodern insights about the need for a new understanding of the role of reason in structures of human belief, together with postmodern awareness of the historical and cultural context of theology, can be helpful to Christian educators as we attempt to develop

¹ I write out of my experience as a priest in the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. and a member of the worldwide Anglican Communion. The issues I address pertain to both contexts, but I focus on the former, since doing justice to the complex cultural issues operating within the worldwide communion is beyond the scope of this paper. Throughout this paper, however, I refer to the theological and ecclesial approach of my denomination as “Anglican” in order to indicate that the American Episcopal Church is inextricably part of the larger whole.

practices that foster faith conviction in the midst of pluralism and difference. Perhaps postmodernity not only raises questions and presents challenges, but also provides new frameworks in which the work of forming commitments and holding convictions can be done.

Gavin Hyman defines postmodernity as an epistemology that reacts against modernity's characteristic "desire for an all-encompassing mastery of reality by rational and/or scientific means."² Postmodernity embraces narrative as the primary mode of knowing, a mode that avoids foundationalist questions of legitimation and external validity. It rejects, however, the possibility of a totalizing metanarrative, so that all expressions of knowledge through "little narratives" are necessarily local, specific and contingent.³ The postmodern is above all characterized by "the return of the 'other' that modernity sought to repress."⁴ It is possible that religion, "which is one candidate for the 'most repressed other' in modernity"⁵ may take up a renewed role in postmodern thought and discourse, if it can move outside modern categories of rationalism and foundationalism.

In this paper I draw on two key elements of postmodern epistemology as I discuss how Christian education can foster faith commitment in the midst of pluralism and disagreement: postmodernity's rejection of the rational as an all-sufficient mode of knowledge and its corresponding movement towards practical wisdom, and postmodernity's embrace of the local, contextual and conflict-laden nature of all ways of knowing, including all construal of religious truth.⁶ The paper is necessarily concerned with the Christian education of adults and older youth, since they are more likely to be developmentally able to engage with issues of faith in the critically reflective manner required by the postmodern context. Interesting questions for further research do arise, however, about the kind of Christian education for children that would provide a helpful foundation for such critical reflection, within the framework of children's very different developmental needs.

I begin by exploring Richard Bernstein's retrieval of the tradition of practical wisdom as a way of framing and understanding theological discourse that constructively avoids Enlightenment rationalism. I use Kathryn Tanner's cultural understanding of theology to address questions about the relationship of conflict to the development of doctrine, and to raise questions about what a postfoundationalist understanding of religious truth might be. As I explore the theological contributions of these thinkers, I indicate new directions that will enable Christian

² Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism?* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16.

⁶ I am aware that an exploration of the questions and possibilities raised for Christian education by postmodernity's simultaneous embrace of narrative and rejection of metanarrative is also called for; this is beyond the scope of this paper but will be addressed in subsequent work.

educators to foster faith commitment in ways that fall outside rational certainty and do not rely on foundationalist understandings of truth, but yet are laden with cultural, theological and spiritual wisdom. Throughout, I bring some of the theological methods and insights of my own Anglican tradition⁷ into conversation with postmodernity. I find there a congruence with postmodernity's concerns that may enable Anglicanism to address its current contested and pluralistic theological context in ways that have illuminating implications both for the practice of Christian education and for other traditions facing similar issues.

Lack of Conviction or Passionate Intensity—A False Dichotomy?

In Beyond Objectivism and Relativism Richard Bernstein writes about epistemological issues in the field of scientific knowledge, but his arguments are also valuable in the field of theology. He critiques the Cartesian polarities of objectivism/subjectivism and absolutism/relativism that lie at the heart of modern epistemology, and uses the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer, nuanced by the thought of Habermas, Arendt and Rorty, to transcend them. He argues that human rationality has many dimensions. Objective foundationalists are convinced “that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness.” On the other hand, relativists assert, “there is no substantive overarching framework or single metalanguage by which we can rationally adjudicate or univocally evaluate competing claims of alternative paradigms.”⁸ Bernstein claims that neither position is adequate. He argues rationality is a holistic and communal practice that is closer to the Aristotelian tradition of practical wisdom⁹ than to either objective foundationalism or relativism. The way for communities to move beyond the dichotomy is by developing “collective praxis”¹⁰ grounded in conversation and communication and oriented towards wisdom.

For Bernstein, the key to overcoming Cartesian dualism is a recovery of the hermeneutical and linguistic dimensions of scientific knowledge. Gadamerian hermeneutics frames understanding as an active, practical, moral, emergent activity, shaped by and in dialogue with the traditions in which interpreters are themselves embedded¹¹. Bernstein goes beyond Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, however, in attending (prompted by Habermas) to “the

⁷ My primary source for a contemporary exposition of Anglican identity and theological method will be the work of The Most Rev. Rowan Williams, present Archbishop of Canterbury. While Williams represents only one strand of the richness and irreducible diversity of Anglican thought, it is one that is both open to and critical of the insights of postmodernity. Also, although he is not writing specifically out of or for the North American context, his work takes a broad denominational and historical perspective that encompasses specifically regional concerns and issues.

⁸ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 165-9.

depth and pervasiveness of conflict—of the *agon*—which characterizes our theoretical and practical lives.” He acknowledges that understanding is irreducibly plural and always embedded in community. His goal is providing a conceptual framework for “cultivating the types of dialogical communities in which *phronesis*, judgment, and practical discourse become concretely embodied in our everyday practices.”¹² He views this as an urgent task in the light of the very real threats to human flourishing and, indeed, existence, posed by powerful polarizing cultural forces arising out of objective rationalism.¹³

I believe that if theology is to avoid the polarities of rationalist dogmatism and postmodern relativism, it needs to pay similarly conscious attention to the hermeneutical, dialogical and communal dimensions of theological truth, and to understand theology as an activity in the service of practical wisdom. In the face of urgent theological disagreements, it is tempting either to seek with passionate intensity the comfort of fixed truths, or to retreat into an “anything goes” liberalism that masks a lack of conviction. It is more challenging to embrace the need to develop clear interpretive foundations for our theological statements, to allow truth to emerge from the messiness of conversation in community, to test the results against the criteria of wisdom, and to recognize the role of reflective practice as well as rational thought in the construction and evaluation of theological truth.

The Anglican tradition offers an example of a theological *ethos* that is grounded in practice and community life. Anglicans have historically been more concerned with holiness of life than with disputes about the nature of the truth of particular doctrines. Most Anglican controversies, including the present conflicts around sexuality, have centered on the practices of the diverse communities that comprise the communion, and it has been the action of common prayer rather than assent to common doctrines that has historically served as the communion’s clearest self-understanding of its identity.¹⁴ Anglicanism has always acknowledged that dogmatic statements attempt to speak truth about God, and that we have a responsibility to ensure that this truth is expressed in the most adequate terms possible. At the same time, it has had patience with the long processes of communal reflection and practice that constitute the ways in which Anglicans fulfill that responsibility and has, indeed, seen the action of the Holy Spirit at work in that process:

...As soon as you grant that [speech about God presupposes a truth about God] you make a doctrinal claim. The existence of new, distinctive patterns of life and language, from Pentecost onwards, constantly poses the question of what it is about God that would

¹² Ibid., 223.

¹³ Ibid., 229.

¹⁴ Even attempts to define formal grounds for Anglican identity in, for example, the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral adopted by the Episcopal Church in 1886 in the interests of ecumenical cooperation, have relied upon ancient and generally accepted documents (the Scriptures and the Nicene Creed) and equally ancient practices (the two dominical sacraments and the historic episcopate, locally adapted) rather than upon any more specific and therefore contentious doctrinal formulae.

make sense of all this. The slow and difficult evolution of a doctrinal language, creeds and definitions, is a witness to how that question is dealt with; and, broadly speaking, definitions represented by our creeds and by the shape of our common worship have to do at heart with maintaining the possibility of speaking about a God who becomes unreservedly accessible in the person of Jesus Christ and in the life of the Christian community.¹⁵

In the Anglican tradition “doctrine is a set of instructions for performance”¹⁶ and “telling the truth about God and humanity is thus, predictably, inseparable from becoming holy.”¹⁷

Anglicanism is able to embrace a postmodern repudiation of naïve and non-perspectival rationalism without letting go of the possibility of conviction and passionate commitment. Its theological standpoint relies upon the practices of a diversity of communities of spiritual holiness within and even outside the Anglican tradition. Its doctrine emerges through critical reflection, sustained conversation, and dialogue within and between those faith communities, and is generally formalized through agreements about shared practices rather than in fully articulated theological statements¹⁸. Anglicanism’s theological reliance on the wisdom of shared discernment grounded in common prayer is deeply congruent with Bernstein’s philosophical reliance on the power of dialogue and conversation within communities of practical wisdom. In keeping with the denomination’s non-dogmatic tendency this theological methodology has, however, been largely unarticulated, especially for a popular audience. The current pressure from some quarters of the communion for a more dogmatic, even fundamentalist approach to issues such as the ordination of gay and lesbian people, based on a literalist interpretation of Scripture, runs deeply counter to the classical Anglican approach. It is an understandable reaction to the context of rapid social change and the perceived threat of postmodern relativism. But it is incumbent on Anglican theologians and educators to develop more explicitly articulated and accessible methods of theological reflection so that all members can rise to the challenges and make use of the opportunities of postmodernity using the existing riches of their tradition.

This need for a sustained and intentional conversation between Anglicanism and postmodern thought points towards methods of Christian education that are holistic,

¹⁵ Rowan D. Williams, "Teaching the Truth," in *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church*, ed. Jeffrey John (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 1992), 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁸ It is significant that the long-standing dispute in the Episcopal Church about the theological status of gay and lesbian people has taken place through the vehicle of discussions about amending Prayer Book rites to permit the blessing of same-gender unions, rather than through attempting to produce either doctrinal statements or canonical regulations. Episcopalians still adhere to the ancient formula of “lex orandi, lex credendi,” preferring that their theological positions be embodied and articulated primarily in liturgical practices. Such a preference has always left open a great deal of margin for local interpretations and variations, and places a high value on diversity within the community of faith.

hermeneutical and sapiential, providing those seeking faith with theological and spiritual approaches that move beyond rationalistic categories. Educators are called to attend more fully to the formative value of the aesthetic as well as the doctrinal dimensions of Christian faith and worship – the Anglican understanding of “the beauty of holiness.” We must find appropriate ways to offer usable hermeneutical tools to church members and seekers alike, so they can subject Scripture, doctrines and practices to a more self-aware and adequate scrutiny. Greater emphasis on educating for a lived spirituality will redress the intellectualist imbalance from which Christian education has suffered even within traditions, like Anglicanism, that are grounded in common prayer. A commitment to enabling Christians to engage in theological reflection on the meaning and implications of their own religious practices and the shared practices of their communities is essential if Christian education is to assist in shaping individual lives and communities toward the end of holiness. Such a balance of critical reflection and committed practice will also provide Christians with a firm and open place to stand as they engage in dialogue with those of other faiths and none, without retreating into the illusion of certainty that is held with passionate intensity, and often with rationalistic dogmatism, by many stripes of fundamentalism.

Is There a Field Out There? –An Emerging Understanding of the Nature of Theology

Bernstein provides a philosophical model by means of which theology and Christian education can participate in the postmodern movement away from a naïvely rationalistic understanding of truth. Kathryn Tanner’s theology of culture provides a way of understanding the theological task itself that addresses the postmodern privileging of contextuality and the present reality of church conflict, and that exposes the difficulties inherent in modern foundationalism. Tanner understands culture anthropologically in postmodern terms as a complex set of local, negotiated categories of meaning that are continually evolving in response to internal divisions and external challenges. Cultural systems have fluid boundaries that are actively appropriated rather than passively received by their members. Issues of power and politics are integral to cultures. This understanding contrasts sharply with the modern picture of culture as a given, unified, changeless, holistic, bounded, and a-historical field. Postmodern cultural theory does not jettison the modern categories: “they have just been decentered or reinscribed with a more primary attention to historical processes.”¹⁹ It places more weight on difference both within and between cultures, and on the reciprocal relationship between individuals and groups and the fluid, internally and externally contested cultures to which they belong.

Tanner’s contribution to questions about faith commitment in the midst of pluralism and disagreement lies in her description of all theology as a cultural expression. According to Tanner, theological truth is an evolving human construct about God made within a particular

¹⁹ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, ed. Kathryn Tanner and Paul Lakeland, 7 vols., vol. 3, *Guides to Theological Inquiry* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1997), 56.

context, using the cultural materials to hand. It is arrived at through a complex process of community negotiation over contested questions about how Christian faith is lived. Tanner's non-foundationalism does not retreat into nihilism; she is clear about the central role of the Holy Spirit in the process of shaping religious truth by means of cultural construction and reinterpretation, and about the freedom of God to direct this process.²⁰ She does not completely resolve the inherent conflict between her reliance on cultural forces as constitutive of the forms of faith and her leap to the transcendent absolutism of God, and I believe her argument would be strengthened by an even greater attention to the role of faithful practice as a source of theology. Nonetheless, her postmodern analysis of the constitutive role of culture for theology and the implications of this for community life and practice rings substantially true and provides an invaluable framework for discussing issues of truth, conviction and commitment within a context of pluralism and disagreement.

Tanner proposes, like Bernstein, that issues of truth and identity are most adequately addressed within practical, communal and conversational frameworks. She describes theology as operating along a continuum between "everyday theology" and "academic theology." In the former, theological questions arise piecemeal, within ordinary life. They are resolved by means of strategies that value adequacy and efficacy above consistency and epistemological rigor. In the latter "the same questions" are raised "in a more general and abstract way." They are investigated "in a sustained fashion according to criteria less attuned to the urgencies of everyday life; criteria, for example, that put a premium on clarity, systematicity, and consistency of expression."²¹ Tanner does not disavow academic theology, but proposes that dialogue with everyday theology will strengthen its ability to address the contested, practical questions that shape all theology as a cultural activity within a specifically located setting. Christian educators must strive to bring academic and everyday theology closer together in the lives of ordinary Christians. We do this for the sake of the integrity of theology, but even more urgently for the sake of the integrity of persons' faith commitments.

Tanner views theology as a hermeneutical task in which "materials are selected and rejected, and their senses mutually modified, in light of one another."²² It proceeds by way of the same kind of overt conflict over high stakes issues that characterizes current intra-church disputes. When assessing the adequacy of particular theological constructions, it is most helpful to ask about the consistency of their "style" and about their *ad hoc* usefulness. Looking for overarching coherence and attempting to impose this on communities of faith is a course of action that almost invariably causes division and rarely contributes to the discernment of truth. Tanner's vision of the kind of faith community in which differences of interpretation do not result in fracture is optimistic. It closely resembles Bernstein's vision of the dialogical

²⁰ Ibid., 136.

²¹ Ibid., 71.

²² Ibid., 88.

community in search of practical wisdom, and it relies for its existence upon a set of conversational practices with a similarly ancient pedigree:

Another way of avoiding divisiveness—one proposed most commonly in the early church—does not, however, involve such an attempt to discourage diversity of interpretation. Instead, it seeks to avoid divisiveness by encouraging Christian social practices to become *a genuine community of argument*, one marked by mutual hearing and criticism among those who disagree, by a common commitment to mutual correction and uplift, in keeping with the shared hope of good discipleship, proper faithfulness, and purity of witness.²³

Tanner's vision challenges Christian educators to raise the awareness of ordinary Christians of the hermeneutical structures and choices underlying their own and all theological thought. Postmodern Christians need to become skilled theological practitioners and critics, and communities of faith need to become skilled users of the interpersonal tools that will facilitate constructive theological dialogue and conversation.

Tanner's theology offers a startlingly accurate description of what is going on in current disputes about Christian practices and the doctrines upon which they are founded. Its strengths lie in its acknowledgment of postmodernity's positive understanding of diversity and creativity, its recognition of the complexity of most practical situations of theological import, and its vision of the need for tools to enable communities to hold together in the midst of difference. The tools Tanner offers for preserving catholicity in the face of the threat of sectarian division emphasize agreement on widely used and usually ancient theological formulations such as the Creeds. "Certain judgments about the meaning of Christian discipleship" should be ruled "out of bounds" only when their "erroneous character has become a matter of uncontroversial recognition." Given the culturally constructed nature of even the ancient Creeds, however, and their continuing availability to the ongoing task of theological construction, even they provide no guarantees of either unity or harmony. "Further controversy" is to be expected as the task of constructing theological positions continues.²⁴ For Tanner, a push towards enforced uniformity in doctrine and practice is a kind of idolatry that denies the freedom of the Spirit of God continually to act in new ways in human history.

Can Tanner's cultural understanding of theology be used in particular ecclesial contexts as a normative as well as a descriptive framework? In relation to the present controversy in the Anglican communion following the consecration of a gay bishop, for example, Tanner would likely advise caution about premature moves towards uniformity, attentiveness to contextual factors behind local opinions, hermeneutical clarity about all disputed interpretations, and mutual commitment to creating and sustaining a community in which disagreement can be a

²³ Ibid., 123-4.

²⁴ Ibid., 173.

constructive force. And in fact, the commission set up to coordinate deliberations on the topic at the level of the worldwide Anglican communion is attempting to shape its proceedings according to principles that are congruent with Tanner's, despite the desire in some quarters for a more foundational, prescriptive and even legislative approach. In a more local context, my own experience of the attempts of an Anglican diocese to sustain public theological discourse about the role and status of gay and lesbian Christians reveals that using the tools Tanner proposes, even in an instinctive and largely unreflective manner, does produce conditions which create the space for the protracted and often uncomfortable process of constructing and adapting theological and practical positions. Christian education played a substantial part in creating this space by providing position papers, protocols for conversation, and methods of critical reflection that could be used effectively by those on the "everyday theology" end of Tanner's spectrum as well as by clergy and academic theologians.

My experience in relation to this particular theological issue bears out the fact that Anglican theological method has historically made use of a framework congruent with Tanner's, despite the fact that it does not share her vocabulary of cultural anthropology. Rowan Williams writes that for Anglicans, dogma represents

... the Christian concern with truth; but this concern is less to do with rationality or comprehensive elucidation, more involved with the need to preserve the possibility of the kind of encounter with the truth telling Christ that stands at the source of the Church's identity.²⁵

He echoes Tanner's understanding that it is the Spirit's continual action that conditions all cultural expressions of dogma; he uses similar language about the freedom of God being the theological imperative that requires the church's doctrinal formulae to be living and contested realities. Where Anglican theology has historically been weak, however, has been in its lack of attention to the kinds of Christian education practices that would create in its members an awareness of these standpoints, and foster competence in engaging in the kinds of theological conversations that they call for. Anglicanism has relied upon a loose system of largely unreflective education and formation (often amounting merely to socialization) that no longer serves its members well in the present context of pluralism and disagreement.

Tanner's cultural understanding of theology means that its constructed, contextual and contested character can be explicitly acknowledged, can be seen as a strength, and can be used in developing the practical wisdom necessary for Christian life in community. She envisages Christian conviction as dependent, not on coherent, uncontested or totalizing systems of doctrine, but on effective, practical use of emergent doctrines in the course of Christian living. Faith communities are held together by consensus, in a sometimes-fragile equilibrium, which

²⁵ Rowan D. Williams, "The Incarnation as the Basis of Dogma," in *The Religion of the Incarnation: Anglican Essays in Commemoration of 'Lux Mundi'*, ed. Robert Morgan (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), 88.

nevertheless provides the setting for the kinds of theological conversations that will enable faith commitments to be made.

If what Tanner proposes is the case, the role of the Christian educator shifts from purveying divinely appointed and timeless doctrines to facilitating participation in an active, ongoing process of communal critical reflection about questions of theological import, particularly as these are lived out through community practice. Whether such questions arise out of urgent polemic and division, or whether they come from a more quotidian need for congruence between faith and practice, the Christian educator's task is to provide the tools and settings in which all Christians can wrestle with their faith in contexts of pluralism and disagreement. Christian education must invite individuals and communities to reflect on their operative theologies. It must provide them with the necessary tools for sustained dialogue and conversation about disputed issues, and raise awareness of the hermeneutical assumptions behind all acts of interpretation. It can use cultural frameworks to teach about the development of doctrine and to foster understanding of doctrine's contextual nature. All of these activities will contribute to fostering faith commitment in the midst of pluralism and disagreement. Christian educators have much to gain from attention to Tanner's cultural theological approach.

Meeting in a New Field—Implications for Christian Formation

My experience tells me that Christian educators are eager to embrace the challenges issued by postmodern culture and even by the doctrinal divisions within their churches, and to respond to them constructively and in ways that will enable persons to hold convictions and develop commitments. My reading of a representative postmodern philosopher and theologian tells me that postmodern thought itself provides a usable framework and promising tools with which to address the challenges postmodernity raises. If we are to do this effectively it is less important to develop new educational practices than to create new frameworks of understanding within which to use the old. It is high time that we stopped allowing the ancient riches of our traditions (not to mention the workings of the Holy Spirit among us) to be constrained by the misplaced assumption that they must be made to fit the rationalist and foundationalist intellectual categories of modernity. Perhaps the churches' most urgent business is to embrace the ways in which doctrine transcends fixed and non-contextual cultural categories, and emerges instead out of conflict and communal practice. Perhaps we are being called to stop attempting to package the wisdom of faith in the box of naïve, non-perspectival rationalism, or uninterpreted foundationalism. Perhaps the vocation of Christian educators is to take our place right in the midst of these shifts in perspective, retrieving and developing tools and methods by which church members and faith seekers alike can encounter a living God in a new field.

Moving beyond modern categories of understanding truth will not lead us into relativism and lack of conviction. Conviction can be lived and commitment sought with a passionate intensity that probes, questions and reflects upon faith as a living reality forged in the crucible of communal practice. Christian education undertaken in such a spirit will be holistic, hermeneutical and sapiential, observantly open to otherness, and fully engaged with the emergent

theologies of Christian communities. It will bear fruit in people of faith whose convictions embody a balance of critical reflection and committed practice. "I'll meet you there."

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