

Dancing for God: Evangelical Theological Education in Global Context

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I

My topic this evening is “Challenges facing theological education today.” There are many such challenges, some of which are unique to theological education and some of which are common with other educational efforts. Because of constraints on our time tonight and because of the kinds of expertise I bring to this task, I will limit myself to just one type of challenge. I will speak to you about *theological* challenges facing theological education today. In terms of the program conceptualization for this conference, I will undertake primarily to “reground theological education in our shared biblical and theological commitments.”

Because I will concentrate on theological challenges I will say very little about some things that many of you are deeply concerned about. To start with the mundane, I will say nothing, for instance, about *financial* challenges, which I know must weigh heavily on your shoulders. How to put food on students’ tables and pay electricity bills? Where will the money come from for faculty salaries, library books, computers, building maintenance, not to speak of new programs and new facilities? How to survive financially in economically depressed times when the pressures of globalization are widening the gap between the rich and the poor—not just between nations, but also within them.

I will also leave aside *institutional* challenges—an issue whose importance is often grossly underrated in Christian circles because of our narrow definitions of spirituality. How do we create healthy patterns of relationships between people which contribute to their flourishing instead of sapping their energies and stifling their creativity? How to ensure institutional longevity, beyond the life-span of a charismatic founder or a particularly gifted visionary? How to rebuild trust and reignite enthusiasm after an institution has been mismanaged for years and its staff mistreated, all in the name of the demands of God’s kingdom? How do we create workable cooperative links with other institutions nationally and internationally?

I will also say nothing about *contextual* challenges (though much of what I say will be informed by a particular reading of our contemporary contexts). Although there are many contexts and it is not easy to know where one context ends and another begins, by “context” I mean here primarily the cluster of processes grouped under the term globalization. How does the kind of knowledge demanded by the globalization processes—knowledge understood primarily as flexible technical know-how oriented toward satisfying immediate needs—relate to the kind of knowledge theological education has traditionally favored—knowledge understood as wisdom drawn from sacred texts and oriented toward life in light of the world’s ultimate future? How does one negotiate at the educational the interplay between local and global (where “global” tending to stand for culture and institutions which are spreading from the economic center toward the periphery and “local” for the resistances that periphery offers to the center)? How does one do theology in situations of increasing inequality of power and resources caused by unjust international relations?

One final item on the list of things I will not speak about: *pedagogical* challenges facing theological education. Starting with the educational processes, to what extent is the mass-education model appropriate for theological education—whether it is teacher or learner oriented—and to what extent should we work with an apprenticeship model? How should we incorporate new technologies into our educational settings? In terms of educational goals, how do we motivate students to pursue with intellectual seriousness the love of God as well as the knowledge of God and God’s ways with the world? How do we transmit to them a sense that God is a God not only of the big picture but also a God of details—a God who cares about the finest of the fine points of an argument because he is a God of truth or a God who, as Lewis Smedes put it in his recent spiritual memoir, likes “elegant sentences and [is] offended by dangling modifiers”¹ because he is a God of beauty? Beyond students’ experience in at college or seminary, how do we transmit to them habits that sustain a life-long intellectual exploration of love of God and knowledge of God in service of God’s world? How do we help them acquire a conviction that theology is done for an encompassing way of life rather than simply to satisfy intellectual curiosity, earn a living, or dazzle others with brilliance? How do we inculcate a sense that theology, like much of ancient philosophy, is itself a way of life—a life of love and knowledge of God—so that one is a theologian with one’s whole life and not just from 9-5?

II

All these challenges—financial, institutional, contextual, and pedagogical—and many more are the stuff of our daily lives as educators, and no responsible theological education can afford to disregard them. But there is a challenge that comes closer to the core of what we as *theological* educators are about. For the lack of better term, I’ll call it a *theological challenge* (by which I mean that it is “strictly theological,” for given that theology concerns the whole way of life, financial, institutional, contextual, and pedagogical challenges are also in their own way theological). Put very simply, the challenge about which I will speak concerns the place of God in theological education and, more broadly, in doing theology.

In global context, this is the most important challenge for theology that claims to be evangelical. A powerful dynamic was unleashed by globalization processes which makes, to quote Karl Marx’ *Communist Manifesto*, “everything that is solid melt into air”—the whole ways of life are being permanently revolutionized, local customs undermined, established beliefs and practices swept aside, old hierarchies of wealth, power, and prestige torn down and new ones established only to be torn down again. The last thing theology needs is to be pulled into that dynamics, either supporting or opposing it. Instead, it needs a vantage point outside globalization processes so it can properly evaluate them and so it can resist their tendency to claim our whole attention—its implicit claim that “its all about money and power”—and thereby drain us from our proper humanity and, ultimately, destroy creation. Now, more than ever, theology needs to be reminded of the old adage: the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing for theology is God.

By definition, theology is speech about God. I am familiar, of course, with the influential notion that theology is not speech about God but *speech about speech about God*. It is a second order discourse, proponents of this view claim, an analysis of the religious language that communities of faith use. I disagree. I prefer to differentiate between religious studies and theology. Religious studies is a second order discourse and therefore has as its object of study, among other things, speech about God. Theology is a first order discourse and therefore has God and God’s relation to the world as its object of study—a God who is not an item of this world and whom we can therefore study only indirectly, through the language used about God. Indeed, properly understood theology does not only study God. Its goal is to promote love of God—the creator, redeemer, and consummator of the world, the source of all truth, goodness, and beauty.

Examine, however, what most theologians and theological schools do and you would have never guessed that our primary concern was with God. Calvin’s comment in the *Institutes of Christian Religion* about Christians’ relation to “heavenly immortality” can be easily transferred to theologians’ relation to God. He writes, “There is not one of us, indeed, who does not wish to seem throughout his life to aspire and strive after heavenly immortality.... But if you examine the plans, the efforts, the deeds, of anyone, there you will find nothing else but earth.”² Nothing but earth—that is also what you will find in the plans, the efforts, and the deeds of most of us theologians, and that is so even if you disregard for a moment the kind of self-centeredness

in our work that we share with other human beings which makes us seek ourselves and our own good in everything we do.

If we are of a more pious bent, the piece of “earth” you will find in our activities is called the Christian church. We work for its numerical growth and institutional stability. In relation to outsiders, we defend the faith; in relation to insiders, we offer a communal ideology. If we are inclined toward social activism, the earth you will find in our activities is the wider world, graced with goodness, truth, and beauty or wrecked by injustice, deception, and violence. We celebrate the world’s virtues as well as analyze causes of the world’s woes (or often make our own social analysis of others) and propose solutions in the light of God’s purposes with the world (or often take over and consecrate the solutions of others). As “church theologians” we serve ecclesiastical communities; as “public theologians” we serve political communities—and God gets left out of the picture, more or less. Of course, we make references to God; we even claim that we are guided by God’s designs for the church and the world. But often, it does not take even a mind trained in the school of the great masters of suspicion taught—Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—to notice that we use God to achieve our own ecclesiastical or political ends rather than aligning these ends with God’s purposes.

Especially today when the world is awirl with globalization processes, our greatest challenge as theologians and theological educators, is to keep God at the center of what we do. If we succeed here, we’ll succeed, even if that success gets stifled by lack of funds, obstructed by inadequate pedagogy or lack of sensitivity to context, and marred by faulty institutions and warped institutional cultures. If we fail here, we’ll fail utterly, no matter how brilliantly we do as fund-raisers, institution-builders, cultural analysts, and teachers. Why? Some 10 years ago, my own theological teacher, Juergen Moltmann, gave as good a reason as one can give in the opening lines of his key-note address before American Academy of Religion: “It is simple, but true, to say that theology has only one, single problem: *God*. We are theologians for the sake of God. God is our dignity. God is our agony. God is our hope.”³ We theologians are either like Moses, ascending the mount Horeb to meet with God, or we are no theologians at all.

But what does it mean to keep God at the center of our efforts as theologians? Let me explore one possible answer by looking at the central theological categories of “trust” and “love” and linking them with God. Before I start, two explanatory remarks are in order. First, I will start my analysis “with a piece of earth”—*human* trust and *human* love. My purpose, however, is to use them to focus our attention to God. Second, I will start with failure of trust and love. This may suggest that we can know what proper objects of trust and love are by examining the breakdown of trust and love. But that is not the case. Though negatives can prepare us, under certain conditions, for the positive, in and of themselves they do not lead to it. Instead, we understand failures of trust and love properly only in light of their proper object—which takes us back to the centrality of God in our lives and theology.

III

What do we trust? In what do we believe? My question is not, “What do we *say* that we trust?” Most Christians will blurt out the right answer without much thinking: we trust God. My question is rather, “What do we *actually* trust?” The answer to this question seems to be the same today as it was centuries ago in the time of the church father Augustine. We trust in power. Individually and collectively we seek to amass power, because power seems to open all doors. In the *City of God*, Augustine called this *libido dominandi*—lust to dominate, and noted that the city of this world, which “aims at dominion” and “holds nations in enslavement,” is itself “dominated by that very lust of dominion.”⁴

When one is captive to power, one manipulates and exploits. And of course, the victims are the powerless—the poor, the old, and the very young, especially the unborn. Augustine believed that the lust to dominate is the main characteristic not only of the earthly city but of also of its ruler, Satan. In his great book on the Trinity he wrote,

The essential flaw of devil’s perversion made him a lover of power and a deserter and assailant of justice, which means that men imitate him all the more thoroughly the more they neglect or even detest justice and studiously devote themselves to power, rejoicing at the possession of it or inflamed with the desire for it.”⁵

What do we desire? What do we love? Again, my question is not, “What do we *say* that we love?” If asked, we’d recite the great commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27), implying that this is, more or less, what we do or at least strive to do. My question rather is “What do we *actually* love?” We live in a culture that above all desires to possess. Possessions offer power and promise happiness. And yet by pursuing this desire for possessions we find ourselves caught in a squirrel wheel: the faster we run to acquire more, the faster the wheel is turning and the desired end—happiness—remains out of our reach. We do amass more and more possessions. But possessions, no matter how many we have, never give happiness; they are like children’s toys—interesting only while they are new.

Or we desire to give ourselves to others without holding back. We find fulfillment in loving other human beings—a child, a lover, a community. Like Margarete in Kierkegaard’s retelling of the story of Faust, we feel that we love adequately only when we achieve that state of selflessness of which religious thinkers, philosophers, and poets so eloquently speak, and “completely disappear” in the beloved.⁶ And yet, in our sober moments we hesitate, knowing well that disappointment is inevitable. So we oscillate between calculating and holding back and abandoning all measure to give ourselves completely. In the first case we remain with a gaping hole of unfulfillment; in the second, we risk an unbearable contradiction in our very identity.

Most of the problems in our society—from economy and politics to academy, from religion and family to friendship—are traceable to *misplaced faith* and *misplaced love*. From the corporate executive who seeks her own wealth at the expense of employees or clients, to the professor who fabricates findings in pursuit of the influence and prestige that come with academic acclaim, to the church leader who chooses the security of silence over the risk of calling a colleague to account for his offenses, to a lover pained by the loss of what was to her dearer than the self—so many of the problems that trouble us as persons, communities, and nations stem from our trusting power and desiring either to acquire or to give ourselves to finite things.

IV

At the very heart of what Christian faith is all about are two revolutions: a revolution of trust and a revolution of love. The core content of the Christian calling is to make *God* the object of our faith and love—not just to *say* that God is the object, as the correct “Sunday School” answer, but to order our lives around trusting and loving God.

When *God*, rather than power, is object of our *trust*, we will place the exercise of power in proper relation to justice, so that power serves justice rather than justice being sacrificed to power. We will find the motivation and strength to prefer losing power by doing what is right to possessing power by doing wrong. To trust simply in power, I have suggested earlier by quoting Augustine, is satanic. This does not mean that power as such is evil, but that it must be subordinated to the will of the God of justice, in whom we ultimately place our trust. Will we ourselves be objects of injustice if we give precedence to justice over power? We might, but *God* will ultimately guarantee that justice will be done to those who do right. *God* will guarantee that the powerful perpetrator will not eternally triumph over the victim who would rather be wronged than do wrong.

When *God*, rather than possessions, is the *object of our love*, we place possession of goods in proper relation to love of neighbor. To love possession, I have suggested, is futile and melancholy. But that does not mean that possessions as such are evil, so that we should simply give up all possessions. Instead, we are called to share with our neighbors, because we are created by and worship God who is love. God has created us to love and to find happiness when we love. And God will reward with happiness our sacrifice on behalf of another.

What the love of neighbor—the love of any human being—ought not to be is a love that excludes God. For then it will either cancel itself by turning into selfishness (if we are calculating) or it will destroy us (if we deliver ourselves to the mercy of the finite and therefore inherently unreliable objects of our love). The only way to guarantee that we will not lose our very selves if we love sacrificially is if our love for the other passes through God, if we, as Augustine put it, love the other in God. Listen to what Kierkegaard, a deeply Christian 19th century philosopher, has to say about the matter:

No, the one who in love forgets himself, forgets his suffering, in order to think of someone else’s, [the one who] forgets all his misery in order to think of someone else’s, [the one who] forgets what he

himself loses in order lovingly to bear in mind someone else's loss, forgets his advantage in order lovingly to think of someone else's—truly, such a person is not forgotten. There is one who is thinking about him: God in heaven. Or love is thinking about him. God is Love, and when a person out of love forgets himself, how then would God forget him! No, while the one who loves forgets himself and thinks of the other person, God is thinking of the one who loves. The self-lover is busy; he shouts and makes a big noise and stands on his rights in order to make sure he is not forgotten—and yet he is forgotten. But the one who loves, who forgets himself, is recollected by love. There is One who is thinking of him, and that is why the one who loves receives what he gives.”⁷

From one angle, the main goal of theology is to be a guardian of human trust and desire. First, theology needs to make plausible that God is the proper object of human trust and love. It needs to show how and why it is that if we trust and desire God we will find both personal fulfillment and be a source of blessing to communities, institutions, and eco-systems around us. Second, theology must undertake a critique of misplaced trust and desire. It needs to show how and why it is that if we trust in power and desire either simply to acquire finite things or lose ourselves in them, we and the communities, institutions, and eco-systems around us will be the losers.

V

Our failure as theologians to keep God in the center of theological work may itself be a result of a failure to trust and love God. Though we readily affirm that God is the source of all our good and therefore that trust in God and love of God are alone wholly salutary stances of human beings, we don't quite believe that.

As theologians we find it hard to *trust* God. At the experiential level, God has a habit of not showing up when we need God the most. We place trust in God, and God lets us down—our child is killed by the negligence of persons who befriended him (as my brother, Daniel, was killed at the tender age of 5), we are mistreated by our employer when we are most vulnerable, our small community, poised at the edge of clashing interests of great powers, gets run over, all the while those who don't believe in God, let alone trust in God, prosper. God, as Moltmann put it, is not only a theologian's dignity and hope; God is also a theologian's “agony.”

Pressures not to trust God come from the academic culture in which we work as well. The cultural elite—especially in the modern West—has, on the whole, not been friendly toward religion. In a recent text about theology as a discipline, philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has noted four prevalent attitudes, not always consistent with each other, toward religion in the contemporary culture. “Religion is withering away, religion is causally inert, religion is coercive, religious belief is irrational: those have been dominant themes in how the cultural elite in the modern West has thought about religion.”⁸ As it happens, these attitudes toward religion are increasingly being called into question, even in the academic high culture of the West. And yet their detrimental impact on theology continues unabated.

Both the experiences of theologians with God and the attitudes toward religion of their non-Christian academic colleagues have made some of us hesitate to place God in the center of our efforts. More conservative ones among us have retreated into the fortresses built with the hard stone of rigid orthodoxy. Fundamentalist parrots that we sometimes are, we act as if just repeating old formulas will make them true and somehow alive. More liberal ones among us have tied their fortunes to what is fashionable in academic circles. We have become ersatz philosophers, cultural critics, ersatz sociologists, ersatz psychologists, ersatz whatever, hoping that giving a bit of religious garnish to the dishes prepared perfectly well with secular ingredients will somehow make our work relevant. As fundamentalist parrots or ersatz intellectuals, we have kept the unpredictable and sometimes terrifying living God who alone is the source of all good at arms length—and made ourselves pretty much inconsequential. For the result of these strategies is nothing but self-destructive self-banalization of faith (in the case of dogmatic parrots) and self-secularization of faith (in the case of ersatz intellectuals).

VI

As theologians, we find it hard to *love* God. You can tell whom a person loves by examining whom he seeks to please and with whom he hangs around.

Whom do we theologians seek to please? You may think that theologians of all people would seek to please God. After all, theology's main object of study is the living God, creator, redeemer, and consummator of the world. It should matter to us more than anything else what God might think of our work. And yet, more often than not as we speak or write we think to ourselves: "What will our colleagues say? How will this or that interest group react? How spirited or how long will the applause be? How will our book do on amazon.com rankings list? Will it get this or that award (preferably the cash-loaded Grawemeyer award!)" We speak and write to get approval from an audience, to impress reviewers, to satisfy "customers." As it says in the Good Book of false teachers, we are tickling the ears of our hearers (2 Timothy 4:3). Popularity and its rewards take precedence over God's delight. If we continue down this road, we'll soon be theologizing the way some elected officials govern in western democracies: by polling religious preferences of our constituencies.

With whom do we as theologians spend our time? Do we take time to extricate ourselves from the hustle and bustle of everyday life—academic and otherwise—and meditate on God, aided by Scripture and the great spiritual masters of our tradition? To be personal, I find it hard to create a space untouched by the demands of my theological career and attend to the One in whom I "live and move and have my being" (Acts 17:28) and for whose sake I say that I am a theologian. Surely this must be foolishness, on par with any other we could imagine!

In *The View from the Tower* Theodore Ziolkowski has explored the significance of towers in the life and work of Yates, Jeffers, Rilke and Jung. All four built or retreated shortly after World War I into towers "that were conspicuously spiritual refuges."⁹ For them "tower" was both an antimodernist image and a micro-ecology in which to pursue "the opposition to urban technological world of modernism."¹⁰ As theologians, we need not follow their antimodernist stance, as if modernity were a particularly odious epoch in the history of humanity. But we should follow them into towers.

Every theologian should have a "tower," a space slightly above the world (or, if one prefers to think in temporal terms, a time to pursue non-contemporaneity). Towers have their own dangers and temptations, of course. But a long religious tradition has associated spatial elevation with the presence of God and with visions of unity of heaven and earth, destroyed by the Fall to the detriment of the earth. Jesus wasn't only taken to the high mountain by the Tempter; he went also to the mountain top to hear the divine voice and be transfigured. In our still very modern age some might see such withdrawals from the world in order to encounter God as a sign of religious lunacy. For, as Peter Sloterdijk has put it, "modernity is an age in which nothing but the world may be the case."¹¹ But theology will lose its soul if theologians neither get transfigured in God's presence nor gain a glimpse of some future unity of heaven and earth.

VII

In an interview about her movie *Frida*—a movie about indomitability, courage, and sadness in the life of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo—its director, Julie Taymor, told a story about her visit to Bali many years ago, as a young artist. One day she was alone in a secluded wooded area at the edge of a clearing, quietly listening to the distant music of native celebrations. Suddenly there stepped onto the clearing 30-40 old men dressed in the full splendor of warrior costumes with spears in their hands, and started to dance. Nobody else was around, and, hidden by the deep shadows of trees, she could observe them dance for what seemed an eternity. Suddenly she had an epiphany of sorts. She puts it this way:

... they danced to—nobody. They were performing for God ... They did not care if someone was paying for tickets, writing reviews, they did not care if an audience was watching, they did it from the inside to the outside and from the outside in, and that profoundly moved me...

To Taymor, these dancing warriors became symbols of non-commercialized art, art guided primarily by the artist's inner vision rather than being captive to the sensibilities of its potential audiences. To her, they stood for authenticity, unspoiled by the desire for popularity. To me, they became a symbol of theology undertaken above all for the sake of God and an indictment against theologians who play for an audience rather than primarily dancing for God.

But doesn't "dancing for God" sound too pious, even for theologians? And doesn't it bespeak a basic mistake about the nature of theology? Presumably theology is done to the benefit of the world, not of God. God

doesn't need theology; if anybody needs it, it is our fellow human beings. How can one communicate effectively without taking into account the needs and sensibilities, linguistic habits and cultural preferences, of the people for whom one is theologizing? With theology it is not like with prayer. Hypocrites love to stand and pray in public places so that they may be seen by others; true Christians, Jesus taught, go to their rooms, shut their doors, and pray in secret. You should pray the way Balinese old men danced—with no human eye watching. But you should not do theology like that. When you pray, you speak to God; when you theologize, you speak to fellow human beings.

There is a major difference between Taymor's dancers and theologians. Unlike those dancers, theologians essentially address people. We interpret the world for them in the light of God's designs; we reflect on how to align our lives and our world with God's purposes; we seek to motivate them to find fulfillment and be a blessing to the world by trusting and loving God. What we say and how we put it cannot be just a matter of movement "from the inside to the outside," to use Taymor's phrase. We are "pastors," and must be sensitive to specific needs and situations of our "parish," whether that be the church or the world. Neither in the way nor in the content of our speaking and writing can we abstract from all audiences and just have God on our minds.

Yet the analogy to Balinese dancers applies. As we are speaking and writing for our fellow human beings, we *are* dancing for God. From a Christian perspective, a god for whom you can dance only when you are not dancing for people, must be a false god—a god shut up in his own sphere and pursuing his own interests unrelated to the wellbeing of creation. This is not who the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is. God is the creator and a lover of creation; human beings and their world *are* God's sphere and interests. It is impossible to dance for this God to the detriment of creation. A dance pleasing to God will confer blessing upon creation. Indeed, *only* a dance that pleases God will make creation flourish.

A few months ago I was on a spiritual retreat in the hills of Vermont, New England. At the end of the retreat we prayed for one another, each for each. I will never forget the prayer a musician offered for me. He asked God that as a theologian I would "play to the audience of One." Now that's a challenge—to play as theologians to God and give it the best we have, our most rigorous thoughts, our best creativity, our most sustained discipline, and our undivided attention. As I heard the prayer uttered over me, I was deeply attracted to the notion and frightened at the same time. Do I have the courage, I wondered, really to play as if God, the lover of creation, were the only one listening? I soon discovered that a different name for my timidity was a failure to trust and love the One in whom alone all that is loved can be loved properly.

¹ Lewis Smedes, *My God and I. A Spiritual Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 56.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, transl. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 3. 9. 1.

³ Juergen Moltmann, *Theology and the Future of the Modern World* (Pittsburgh: ATS, 1995), 1.

⁴ Augustine, *de civitate*, 1.P.

⁵ Augustine, *de trinitate*, 13.17

⁶ See, for instance, Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. and transl. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 1,167-215 and Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1973), 192-136.

⁷ Soeren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and transl. Howard Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 281.

⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "To Theologians: From One Who Cares About Theology but is not One of You," 5.

⁹ Theodore Ziolkowski, *The View from the Tower. Origins of an Antimodernist Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 155.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Weltfremdheit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), 106.