

Visitor Tradition Reflection  
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For my visiting tradition I will review and reflect on classrooms in higher education through the lens of ecclesiology. When I applied to the Iliff MTS program I intended to study the interface between theology and education. As such, I frequently take an educational eye to everything I read and analyze for my Iliff classes. The process of walking the interstitial space between theology and pedagogy has been a worthwhile experience for me as a teacher and for my spiritual life as an active member in my home church, Lakewood United Church of Christ. It is increasingly difficult, in a good sort of way, to resist the temptation to view the higher education classroom through the lens of theology. In fact, I recently presented a workshop for DU's Office of Teaching and Learning titled "Classrooms as Sacred Space" and I'm writing an article with the same title that I intend to publish in a teaching journal in higher education.

I welcome the chance, provided by this assignment, to pursue the question as to whether or not it is fruitful to analyze the classroom through the lens of ecclesiology; what are the rules for deciding who is a member of the in-group and who is excluded as the out-group from the classroom. Conradie (2015) offers this parallelism between the divided focus of church and the divided focus of higher education: "...in its simplest terms, the tension between ecclesiology and ethics is between what the church is and what it does... In secularized form, this is the tension between movement and institutionalization, between the vision of an institution and what it actually accomplishes" (p. 514). I'm particularly interested in the ways that the tension between the vision of individual faculty to introduce students to the discipline they love and the structural demands of teaching that can push the spirit of teaching into the margins. In rough theological terms this means the deep meaning of learning (ecclesiology) takes back seat to covering the curriculum (institutional imperatives). It seems that definitions of in group and out group status is driven more by level of achievement as measured by external forms of accountability in contrast to outcomes associated with transcendence and identity formation.

One place to look for ecclesiological statements, or their academic equivalents, is in the mission/vision states of the University of Denver as well as my academic home, the Morgridge College of Education. The University aspires to be, "... a great private university dedicated to the public good" and one of its goals for student learning is to "...create a diverse, ethical and intellectually vibrant campus community to provide a challenging and liberating learning environment." From these statements, although understandably vague on the ecclesiological front, it is possible to argue that what the university "is" corresponds to virtues of, service to others in need (the "*public good*"), a place that welcomes everyone ("*diversity*"), and it seeks to create classroom spaces that encourage the fullness of human development ("*liberating*"). With respect to the College of Education, the values are a little more transparent and ecclesiological in tone and purpose, "*Transcending traditional ideas about education and schooling, we will embrace a new, comprehensive vision of learning as a lifelong activity that involves the whole person and can occur through a variety of methods, anywhere and at any time.*" Central to the

ecclesiological norms of the College of Education is transcendence, learning, the whole person and instructional diversity.

It appears that in as much as ecclesiology speaks to values/beliefs that reach beyond day-to-day moral and ethical positions, stances that define the boundaries of a community through connection to something greater than mere human constructs, the ecclesiology of DU and MCE can be articulated. This includes elements such as: *service, diversity-inclusiveness, social justice, and liberation of human potential*. The College of education adds the following items to the list of community norms: *transcendence, wholeness and instructional diversity*. Taken as a whole the combined values suggest that anyone considered a full member of the DU community should exhibit the traits of *care for the other, social justice, transcendent human potential, and diverse forms of teaching*.

Iozzio (2000) makes the claim that, “The university as church gathers a people to bear and to witness truth.” This is certainly one way to describe the purpose of a typical course, a place where people gathering together to learn the truth of a text or discipline as articulated by a professor. In ecclesiological terms, the *classroom as church* (community) is a coming together of people for the sacred purpose of uncovering and encountering truth, bound together in community by norms that go beyond the institutional roles of professor/student.

In the university as church metaphor the question of leadership emerges as well as questions about who monitors and articulates the rituals, truths and traditions of the communal body of truth seekers. Iozzio (2000) provides a partial answer by arguing that “bishops present revelation as the founding truths of salvation; theologians examine revelation to consider what is revealed and to mediate its mysteries to contemporary culture” (p. 225). It is not directly evident to me that an equivalent bishop exists in higher education, someone who is singularly positioned to receive and articulate revelation, except perhaps in the pure business sense of monitoring the changing winds of fortune and misfortune. However, at the course level it is possible to argue that a textbook or articles become statements of truth, the spirit breaking through into the classroom space. With respect to the role of theologian in academia the most likely counterpart is a professor who examines truth (revelation in text) to see what is evident about the mystery of the discipline (the traditions) so as to educate others (students).

The sacraments play an important role in understanding the ecclesiology of church, “...the purpose of the Church, in the nature of sacrament, is to be a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity with all people. The purpose of the university-church as sacrament then similarly sanctifies, strengthens, honors, and unites” (Iozzio, 2000, p. 222). A university doesn’t typically support the sacraments but there are equivalents in the sense of uniting and binding together a community. For instance the ritual of graduation and diplomas are a sacramental right conferring an extra-ordinary affiliation to something greater than self-achievement. A diploma is a concrete symbol of belonging to a community of scholars, an academic discipline. This sense of belonging is strikingly evident in the ritual of “hooding” doctoral candidates and the sacrament results in a renaming of the individual to Dr. as well as the right to wear distinctive garb decorated in the colors of the new Dr.’s academic tribe the new Dr.

The religious historian and scholar Karen Armstrong (2010) makes the astute claim that spiritual communities and their changing history can best be analyzed through their rights, rituals and traditions. Paying attention to the manifestation of these three terms in higher education classrooms seems like a good starting point for articulating the ecclesiology of the university-church.

### References

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