I’d like to tell a story of how this conference came to be.

Several years ago at the 2011 annual ACTC Conference in New Haven, Dan Cullen approached me to ask if his Project for Democracy might be able to support an ACTC conference. Dan, Rhodes College, and the Search Course had been generous in their support of our 2009 annual conference, here in the beautiful city of Memphis. Would we like to repeat something like that? I answered him that I was eager on behalf of ACTC to accept his generous offer but with his permission, I’d like to suggest a different direction. It seemed to me that this generous support could be directed toward a needed conference on the relationship between religious and secular cores. What texts were taught in these cores, and did institutional affiliation make a difference to the approaches or inclusion of texts; correlatively, did affiliation affect differences in the function or purpose of a core text programs? More largely, were there differences between religious or secular institutional approaches to liberal arts education using core texts? If so, what could institutions with different affiliations learn from each other? Dan was as generous in his reception of this idea as he had been in his offer of help; later, Jane Rodeheffer through Pepperdine University, the Apgar Foundation, through the help of Fred Fransen, and a steering committee composed of members of ACTC and its Liberal Arts Institute offered both guidance and additional material support. Jackie Baker and Suzanna Cullen, along with Dan, have put in hours of work to make this conference a reality.

The idea for the conference had been percolating for some time and, frankly, its origins owed something to personal experience.

To digress for a moment: in 1966, when I was a junior in high school in Minneapolis, my church’s youth program director asked a number of us whether we wanted to participate in an extended weekend ‘retreat’ at the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago. I said, “sure.” The Ecumenical Institute was a square block of buildings, with a center court yard, on Chicago’s west side, a truly terrible, poverty-stricken, and crime-ridden ghetto. As the story went, a number of Baptist and Methodist ministers had traveled from Texas with their entire families to Chicago to practice what they preached.

Whatever the current politics of cultural imperialism might say, in 1966 the Ecumenical Institute was good work. The Institute was crossing a color line nobody crossed going in either direction. It was helping the neighborhood with housing, food, employment and, at a guess, police relations. It was bringing the Word to the residents, and most importantly, at least from my point of view, it was inviting sheltered high school students into several worlds which they had no experience with.

One of those worlds was the world of real education. Upon arrival on Thursday evening, you entered into the “compound,” were shown your bunk bed, and then ushered into a convocation hall where you were given your reading materials for the weekend. These included selected passages from Barth, Buber, Bultmann, Bonhoffer, the Niebuhr brothers, and Tillich. At night, you read your homework and during the day between various sessions, you walked the neighborhood, helped in the kitchen, and did more reading.

The session leaders were grammarians. They had a kind of catechistical fervor for grammatical attention to the authors we were reading, not in the doctrinal sense, but in the sense that it was our responsibility to pay close attention to the construction of the sentences and the meaning of words within those syntactical constructions. Their questions were all about what each of our authors was actually saying. As grammarians, they performed their miracles, because by articulating what you thought was before your eyes in response to their persistent questioning, you gave birth to perceptions of the intelligible.

I simply had never experienced this before. Period. Or, to put this differently, this was my first experience with a liberal arts education. I went back to Minneapolis, to my home and to my high school, but I did not return as the same person who had left.

Later, in my teaching career, which with a one-semester exception was in secular institutions, I kept running up against reminders of that experience. My teaching experience kept confronting the plain facts of educating 18 year olds: they both wanted to explore ultimate questions that involved religious perceptions and they were woefully ignorant of the cultural resources in the West or East which would allow them to do this. Whether or not one accepts a Deity or more generally a call to ultimate concern or a religious practice of one sort or another, and whether or not an institution supports, discourages, is agnostic, or is antagonistic about the fingers of the heart that play upon cosmic strings, one finds in the academy an understandable but unfortunate dispositional tendency that approaches these problems but is, simultaneously, very leery of them. I was once in a core text course faculty development session devoted to Genesis 1. For an hour we spoke about the text before I finally mentioned that no one had said a word about God. A colleague laughed and said, “oh, you want to talk about God.” I remarked that I thought that since God was the chief actor in Genesis 1, it was not untoward to speak of the attributes of the Deity portrayed therein. More broadly, while I don’t think Tony Kronman’s belief is correct that “every religion…provide[s] us with the fundament we need to secure our answer to the question of the meaning of life against all criticism or doubt” (199) -- at least not in my re-readings of those Ecumenical Institute authors -- I think he is generally right when he notes that there is a “longing in the culture at large for an undogmatic rebirth of spiritual concern” (244). Whether that longing can be answered without dogma or in the secular realm is something worth thinking about, but it is certain that our students – particularly those of ACTC institutions -- want to ask questions that reveal passionate spiritual longing.

This summer, ACTC held a summer seminar at Columbia and Yale on “Tradition and Innovation.” As chance would have it I stopped in the Riverside Church, a Baptist institution, to look at its beautiful sanctuary and its even more extraordinary array of stained glass windows. Fortunately, the windows I could study were closer to earth, and what struck me was how many were concerned with the richness of the interaction between the sacred and the secular life, from ancient times to early modernity when the church was built – whether this interaction was seen from the point of view of printing and publishing, labor and occupations, inventions and architecture, or learning and education. In those windows, the life of the sacred and secular flows back and forth. Whether one’s gaze ascends the windows to the top tiers of heaven or one strolls around the sanctuary to see the constant flow of the sacred and secular is always a matter of personal choice, but in either case the windows are of a part of what liberal education can do. Today, the Ecumenical Institute reading list would be different, with names like Armstrong, Farley, or King, but, I think we can say that as with the windows, the ways of life that humans have created should be made apparent and shine through our programs’ readings. Welcome to the ACTC Liberal Arts Institute Conference on “The Intersection of Religious and Secular Cores in Undergraduate Liberal Arts Education” at Rhodes College.

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