



THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME 33

NEW SERIES 2016

ISSN 1937-8386

MENU ▼

The Princeton Seminary Bulletin is published annually by Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

Contents

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS: FAREWELL TO THE GRADUATES

The Blessing of Limitations

M. Craig Barnes

OPENING CONVOCATION

Gather Wisdom While You May

Ellen T. Charry

FALL OPENING COMMUNION

Yearning Theologically

M. Craig Barnes

SPRING OPENING COMMUNION

Deliverance

Sally A. Brown

LECTURES

The Ideal, the Real, and the Good: A Personal Reflection

Garry J. Dorrien

500 Years After the Protestant Reformation:

A Critical Assessment from an Ecumenical African Perspective

Setri Nyomi

Mapping African Christianities within

Religious Maps of the Universe

Afeosemime Adogame

© Princeton Theological Seminary P.O. Box 821, 64 Mercer Street, Princeton, NJ 08542-0803, 609.921.8300

An Institution related to the Presbyterian Church (USA).

[PTS Calendars](#) | [A to Z Index](#) | [Information Technology](#) | [Trustees Website](#)

[Terms & Conditions](#) | [Web Privacy](#)



THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME 33

NEW SERIES 2016

ISSN 1937-8386

The Ideal, the Real, and the Good: A Personal Reflection

Gary J. Dorrien

Dr. J. Gary Dorrien is the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in the city of New York and Professor of Religion at Columbia University. Dr. Dorrien delivered the Stone Lectures, entitled "The Black Social Gospel and the Just Society," on October 5-8, 2015. The following lecture was Dr. Dorrien's last in the series.

We have come to the end of this series and I have held off on being nostalgic about Princeton Theological Seminary, until today. I have feelings overflowing for this institution. I studied here at the crossroad of my life. I hung on for an extra degree because an extraordinary teacher at this seminary befriended me, and in his office I met my beloved partner. It is so unlike me to risk what I am about to do, but with trepidation I am going to go personal in this last Stone lecture, because I cannot seem to do otherwise at this place of ineffable resonance for me.

I was an aspiring athlete in a semirural area of mid-Michigan when the civil rights movement soared into its climactic phase in the early 1960s. Then I was a high-profile athlete in a very large, sports-obsessed high school when the civil rights movement peaked in the late 1960s. All my life I have been a jock with a mystical streak and autodidactic intellectual tendencies. School never caught my attention before college, except school sports. Two things, however, broke through my everyday horizon of working class culture and the next game. I got to Catholic Mass just enough to be caught by the image of the suffering God on a cross. Then the stunning witness of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement similarly broke through, eventually melding in my thought and feeling with the cross of Christ.

King was the formative figure for me long before I understood much about politics or religion. When he was assassinated, he became not merely the leader of a justice movement, even a martyred leader. He was a Jesus-

figure who died for us, the exemplar of the peacemaking and justice-making way of Jesus. That was the extent of my religious worldview when I squeaked into college, mostly to play sports. Forty-five years later it is still my bedrock.

Entering Alma College, I realized I was lucky to be there and vowed not to waste it. It helped that I had a shattering experience of romantic heartbreak shortly after college began. Deeply in love with my high school girlfriend, I told her I hoped to be with her forever, which set off her psychic alarm. The pain of losing her devoured me emotionally for my entire college experience. Meanwhile a freshman year course in History of Philosophy was a godsend, delivering a weekly cascade of fascinating ideas.

I got my intellectual bearings in that class. If the gods of philosophy were Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Kant, and maybe Wittgenstein, as my teacher said, I would spend as much time as possible reading those seven philosophers. By the end of my freshman year I also read theologians, especially Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. Tillich sent me to Hegel, who was much greater than my teacher and W. T. Jones had said.

My philosophy professor, Wesley Dykstra, and my physics professor, Louis Toller, said things to me about my intellectual ability that I still do not believe; they could not have imagined the impact they had on me. My teacher in religious studies, Ronald Massanari, was fresh out of graduate school and taking leave of Christianity. He would say, "I don't care what you believe, and I don't care about your feelings either. I'm just here to mess with your head." I would hand him a term paper and he would say, "I'm going to tear hell out of this one." He was a great thrasher of papers, and a treasured friend, and he knew what he meant to me.

With one or two exceptions the only religious students I knew in college were conservative, so I had trouble hanging out with them, although I tried. Ron was the only person on campus who could talk with me about theology, and he was running from it. So my college experience accentuated my autodidactic loner tendencies. I might have gotten stuck there, except that merely reading about racism, social justice, and stopping the war would have been absurd, and I co-founded two campus groups that worked on these issues.

In my sophomore year I read a book that spoke to my heart like no other, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, by Walter Rauschenbusch. It thrilled and amazed me. Rauschenbusch described the teaching of Jesus as a message of radical social transformation. He argued that Christianity usually obscured the revolutionary spirit of the gospel. And he urged it was not too late for the church to adopt the way and spirit of Jesus. The church is supposed to be a new kind of community that transforms the world by the power of Christ's kingdom-bringing Spirit. The idea of the indwelling and growing commonwealth of God is not merely part of Christianity; it is the central thing holding everything else together. Christianity is a kingdom movement that carries God into everything you do. In a chapter titled, "What to Do," Rauschenbusch made a scintillating case for radical democratic Socialism.

His liberal theology and radical politics were equally compelling to me. I turned the pages exclaiming that this was what Christianity should sound like. For years I had felt that King laid hold of something in Christianity that the rest of the church somehow missed, something inspiring movement idealism and a real surge for social change. Rauschenbusch explained what was missing, and he expressed brilliantly the vision of a socially regenerative Christianity.

Most of what I had read about the social gospel described it as an idealistic understanding of Christianity that briefly influenced liberal Protestantism before it was discredited by the neo-orthodox reaction, especially Karl

Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr. Reading Rauschenbusch, I could see various problems. He loved idealistic rhetoric, he said almost nothing about racism, and he was proudly, stridently anti-Catholic. But for grasping and expressing the prophetic core of the gospel, Rauschenbusch soared above everyone except King.

Rauschenbusch helped me decide what to do with my life, although I waited nine years to join a church.

I studied at Harvard Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary while pondering the church question and writing over-long theses on Kant and Hegel. I joined Michael Harrington's new organization, the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, and devoted many years to building it up at the national and various local levels. Mike influenced me more than anyone except King. He was the first person I knew that worked closely with King; he was the successor to Norman Thomas, one of my heroes; and I took a lot of teasing for trying to reestablish Christian Socialism in a mostly secular and Jewish organization. I probably caught only half the jokes, although a fair amount of the pertinent lore that I did not know eventually got into my books about American Old Left politics.

Princeton Seminary came late in my academic tour. I came here to study Leibniz and Kant with Professor Diogenes Allen, which went very well, and I had never heard of James Loder. But upon taking a class with him, I doubled down on Princeton Seminary, taking a degree in his field too. Jim was a deeply spiritual teacher, minister, and theorist. He had a tremendous impact on many students, and I luxuriated in his stew of psychoanalytic theory, theology, Kierkegaard, and philosophy of social science. Many students who loved Loder's teaching did not really understand what he was talking about, which sometimes got to him. I figured that was why he befriended me, although he never quite said it. He became the special teacher in my life, notwithstanding that I had to tell him, several times, that I was not going to enter his field. Talking about Freud and Jung for the rest of my life was not going to happen, even though Loder made it fascinating. At the time he was working on a bulky manuscript that had sprawled out of control, titled "Transformations of the Human Spirit." I helped him whittle it down to what became his book *The Transforming Moment*. And in his office I met Brenda Biggs.

Brenda hung out with the rough-talking, hard-partying group at the seminary, and she told me with typical bluntness that the issue in her life, as Loder said to her, was to get her "lion and lamb" to lie down together. We took one class together, on Barth's *Dogmatics*, luxuriating in Dan Migliore's wonderfully lucid and detailed lectures.

Brenda found it hilarious that I had read all twelve volumes. She was a pistol—irreverent, voluble, wisecracking, loving-spirited, and opinionated, with a ready laugh, erupting in delight at good jokes and bad ones. Brenda was skilled at getting people to open up about personal things and perceptive in analyzing what came out. Her sermons were jewels of expository preaching, always drawing from her deep well of emotional struggle. All her life Brenda fought off terrible depression, and she was a special friend to people that struggled with depression.

We had known each other only a few months when we got married, and for eight years Brenda and I lived in Albany, New York. We followed her call to a Presbyterian congregation; meanwhile I still had not faced up to joining a church. I was reading a lot of William Temple at the time, and Brenda was emphatic that she didn't want me in her church, so I joined an Episcopal congregation down the street. The Temple factor was decisive. Temple was spiritually deep and eloquent, he cared about social justice, he was a theorist of economic democracy, and he blended Hegel and Whitehead like nobody else, eventually as Archbishop of Canterbury. To this day I love Temple for all these reasons.

I taught at a school for emotionally disturbed adolescents and worked as a community organizer and solidarity activist. Then the Episcopal diocese of Albany ordained me to the priesthood. This was a borderline miracu-

lous occurrence, as Albany was one of the most vehemently conservative dioceses in the nation. Routinely the diocese rejected qualified candidates, and I was decidedly unqualified, except for my seminary degrees, which were from the wrong places. But my saintly bishop, Wilbur Hogg, liked me, which opened a door. The chair of the Commission on Ministry welcomed me as a fellow intellectual, and it helped that Albany's brand of hyper-conservatism was Anglo-Catholic, not fundamentalist or political. So I became an associate pastor at a lonely liberal congregation, St. Andrew's Church, and taught at an ecumenical prep school, now as the awkward half of a clergy couple.

We were different kinds of ministers, because Brenda was an outstanding minister. When the phone rang at 3 a.m. she hoped it was for her, and so did I. When I made hospital visits to strangers, I had to walk past the room three or four times to work up the nerve to go in. Finally I would enter, obviously nervous and shy, thus making everyone uncomfortable. To my surprise, things usually went pretty well, inspiring me to stay too long. Then, to justify leaving, I would say, "Well, I'll see you tomorrow," thus requiring a repeat performance the next day.

Brenda would plead, "Gary, what is wrong with you?" She tried to help, but shyness was something she could not fathom, and this was my first exposure to middle-class culture outside an academic environment. I had to learn how to converse politely about nothing, and it astonished me that middle-class people had their own doctors and apparently consulted them regularly. Brenda had grown up middle-class and was perfectly at home in Mainline Protestantism. She breezed into hospital rooms, charmed friends and strangers alike, never had to apologize for leaving, and collected new friends.

Yet Brenda got beaten up in ministry while I sailed along unscathed. I became a speaker for two solidarity organizations, CISPES and Witness for Peace; I worked on South African divestment and founded a chapter of the Episcopal Peace Fellowship; and I dragged my good-spirited, middle-class Episcopal congregation into all of it. Brenda, meanwhile, had two nervous breakdowns, one of which was caused directly by criticism she took over her activism. Finally, mercifully, one evening she announced: "I've had it with social activism. I can't take the criticism and conflict that come with it. It's not my calling. It's your calling. I have to concentrate on being a better pastor to people who don't like my politics."

She grew in wisdom upon doing so, experiencing her ministry as an opportunity to witness to God's grace and glory. She got a spiritual director, and later became one, helping others discern the presence of God in their lives. And she told me that my practice of writing books instead of sleeping probably indicated I was kidding myself about wanting to be a pastor. Obviously I had an academic calling, so why persist in denying it?

I had come into ministry through the door of social justice activism, and I believed that ministry was an ideal vehicle for social justice work. But I wrote my first two books and most of my doctoral dissertation during my six years of church ministry. These books put me on the two disciplinary tracks that I have been on ever since. One side of my work consists of books on theology and philosophy of religion, and the other side deals with politics and social ethics. I had eighteen wonderful years at Kalamazoo College where nobody told me to decide between these fields.

Kalamazoo College and the Kalamazoo community were wonderful places to teach, to be involved in social justice work, to raise a daughter, and when time came, to grieve, as Brenda fought cancer for ten years before dying. Afterwards Sara and I were more deeply bonded to Kalamazoo and our friends than ever. I gratefully declined job offers until Sara went to college. Then came an unforgettable call: "Gary Dorrien, this is Joe Hough.

Gary, you need to come to Union Theological Seminary! The Reinhold Niebuhr chair has your name on it! We all agree! And we never agree about anything! Think about it, Gary. You need to come to Union! We could help get you appointed at Columbia too.” And he hung up. What was that? Was I just offered a job? Surely Union has a committee for the Niebuhr chair? Surely, someone would call me—but no one did. Three and a half weeks went by. Finally there were calls and a letter, and I moved to the seminary that already had my heart and that loomed large in several of my books. Union had a miracle presidency under Joe Hough that saved the seminary, and today Union is flourishing under the strong and creative presidency of Serene Jones. The best thing about Union is that our students are so passionate, contentious, and challenging. I have fifteen of them in the doctoral program alone, and I am grateful every day that I did not miss this part of academic life.

This week I have argued that the black social gospel tradition is wrongly neglected; its legacy is unsurpassed in American religious history. It espoused a social ethic of social justice with daring and prophetic fire; and it remains important as a wellspring of progressive Christianity, liberation theology, and every form of religious progressivism that appeals to the witness of the civil rights movement. Reinhold Niebuhr shredded the idealism and optimism of the white social gospel, and Niebuhr said things about power and social evil that rang true to Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King. But no black social gospeler agreed that the social gospel dreamed too wildly. It could not be that the social gospel fatally erred by projecting its ethical idealism into the public realm because the social gospel had barely begun. It began by asking what it meant to pray “Thy Kingdom come,” and it had barely made a beginning. Surely the social gospel could not have been wrong to press the question, or at least begin to do so.

From Reverdy Ransom and Adam Clayton Powell Sr. to Mordecai Johnson and Benjamin Mays to Martin Luther King Jr. and Pauli Murray, every black social gospel thinker held fast to gospel idealism in the face of despair, exclusion, and brutal oppression. They stuck to the language of gospel idealism long after the Barthian and Niebuhrian movements dismissed it as quaint and sentimental. Realistic theologies are keyed to what is said to be actual. Idealistic theologies are keyed to claims about truths transcending actuality. I believe that Christian theology is inherently idealistic, where the greater danger lies.

The object of theology is the being, mind, spirit, and will of God, who dwells in light unapproachable. All theologies rely on metaphors to signify or illuminate things beyond our grasp. Some theologies rely on poetic metaphors, creating new meanings by saying one thing to mean something else. Some theologies are radically metaphoric in the Kantian sense of constructing worlds, whether or not they acknowledge it. Some are radically Kantian in the sense of claiming to reflect the very method and powers of mind. In every case, all discovery is by metaphor, a primary source of insight by which human subjects relate to their world and formulate concepts. I take for granted, with Augustine, that anything I understand is not God. But I do not spurn metaphysical audacity on that account, for faith is a form of daring. A religion that lacks religious daring, a sense of the Spirit of the whole, and the struggle for social justice does not interest me.

The great “I AM” of Exodus 3:14, God telling Moses, “I AM WHO I AM...tell the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me,’” is a sign of the identity of thought and being. All knowledge participates in divine self-knowledge. On the level of Spirit, subject and object are identical, each involving the other. A subject becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself. But a subject is not an object except for itself. I remember vividly the day I first puzzled over this mystery, walking home from school at the age of nine. Why is my self so elusive? The only thing I know directly is my own subjectivity, which requires a self I cannot prove.

Idealistic theologies theorize the self-reflection of Spirit overcoming the dualism of subject and object—Spirit realizing itself as a perpetual self-duplication of one power of life as subject and object, each presupposing the other. Objective idealism is the idea that all reality conforms to the archetypes of an intelligible structure. Here, everything is a manifestation of the ideal, an unfolding of reason. Subjective idealism is the idea that there is no reality without self-conscious subjectivity. Here, the ideal refers to spiritual or mental ideality. Space is made up of relations, a meaningless notion without a mind that relates one thing to another and for which things are related—holding together both terms of a relation.

Immanuel Kant renewed the idealistic tradition in theology by theorizing that powers of mind produce experience, but Kant only dared to go so far in reconstructing the principle of subject-object identity. He had a concept of intellectual intuition; his tortuous discussion of the Transcendental Deduction in the first Critique makes no sense without it and he featured intellectual intuition more explicitly in the third Critique. But Kant did not follow through on it, so nearly every textbook tells you that Kant was a subjective idealist. To follow through takes a bit of daring, which defines post-Kantian idealism: Ultimately the principle of subject-object identity is not about the self-knowledge of a finite subject. It is about the self-knowing of the divine within a finite subject.

If God is the absolute “I AM” and ground of truth, reality is the self-thinking of Spirit. In that case, we do not know the divine; rather, the divine knows itself through us. The idealistic tradition in theology—Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Calvin, Schelling, Hegel, Temple, Tillich—is a series of variations on this theme. God’s infinite subjectivity is an infinite inter-subjectivity of holding differences together in a play of creative relationships not dissolving into sameness. God is the inter-subjective whole of wholes, irreducibly dynamic and relational. Spirit becomes self-conscious in religion. Religions select the shapes that fit their Spirit, and Christianity is a picture story about Spirit abandoning its absolute being to embrace the suffering of the world and return to itself.

Yes, that is Hegel, not Calvin. Hegel put dynamic panentheism into play in modern theology. His rationale for a universal religion of Spirit unified the ambitions of eighteenth and nineteenth century thought, and he inspired nearly every great philosophical movement of the past two centuries. But Hegel, the most powerful of all idealistic thinkers, was also the most problematic, because he threw away the two greatest strengths of the idealistic tradition—its emphasis on ethical subjectivity and its insistence that all thinking about God is inadequate, a mere pointer to transcendent mystery. Hegel sublimated God and selves into a logical concept, and he ridiculed Schleiermacher for theologizing about mere feeling. He treated notions as ultimate reality and real things as exemplifications of notions. The world process, for Hegel, was always about the realization of Spirit as self-conscious reason. He notoriously lacked humility in tracking it. His intellectualism spurned the emphasis on feeling, willing, and ethical struggles for justice that define and fuel religious idealism at its best.

Every theology, to some degree, seeks deliverance from normal actuality and harm. A theology that merely accommodated existing circumstances, mediocrity, and injustice, would be grotesque. Yet every realistic theology is an antidote to the dangers of idealistic hubris and illusion. Realistic theologies read off knowledge of God from that which is given, as in the Whiteheadian doctrine that God is an actual entity, an order in the process of creativity, or the Deweyan notion that God is a social convention. But that reduces God to fate or an aspect of the world.

The God of grace and glory dwells in light unapproachable. God comes as light into darkness, revealing something new. God is no-thing, radically indistinct, “God beyond God,” as Meister Eckhart put it; thus, for Eckhart “nothingness” was virtually a God-term and “Abstractedness” (*Abgescheidenheit*) was the highest virtue.

Idealistic theologies are geared to reject idolatry and mediocrity, emphasizing God's non-objectivity. The refusal to identify God with anything, however, makes idealism prone to destructive pride. Barth said it better than anyone: "God is truth" is a more dangerous idea than "God is reality." Idealists, by witnessing to a truth that shines within and beyond the real, tend to brush aside the merely particular and historical. Barth and Tillich, coming from very different standpoints, rightly cautioned about the temptation to pride that lurks in theologies of this sort. Any theology that trusts in its rationality or goodness is monstrous.

Good theology does not reduce the divine mystery to something we understand, and if it is Christian, it holds fast to the subversive memory of Jesus and the radical message of the gospel. Orlando Espín, in his beautiful book *Idol and Grace*, describes this message as the claim that God has begun to transform the world according to God's will, which is compassionate towards all without conditions or exceptions. The anchoring question for Christian theology, Espín says, is whether this message of Jesus is right. Is God actually transforming the world, and is God compassionate towards all without exceptions? We cannot know the answer is yes. To be Christian is to dare to hope as Jesus did.

Post-Kantian idealism ensured its fall by starting with its own ideas about mind and denigrating the external world of existing things. It took a mighty fall after the natural sciences took over the academy, philosophy turned positivistic, and Barth steered theology away from the puzzles of idealistic subjectivity. Today, however, the debate that cuts across the sciences and humanities is an echo of the very arguments that post-Kantian idealists pressed in the late nineteenth century. In the language of today, it is the debate between dead matter materialists and proponents of relationality, holism and emergence.

The school of Whitehead, to its immense credit, has played the leading role among theologians in battling against a powerful reductionist tide in the academy and popular culture. In the Whiteheadian scheme, events are the fundamental things, the immanent movement of creativity itself; minds are real but thoroughly natural; and God is the lure of love divine for creative transformation and the flourishing of life. Whiteheadian creative complexity has a very serious problem with the second law of thermodynamics, and Bob Neville rightly protested long ago that Whitehead's God can only be nice, unlike Yahweh, who was free to be terrible. A reliably nice God is a projection of human altruism.

But no cosmology fits with everything we know, which is vastly exceeded by everything we do not know. The Whiteheadian school deserves credit for grappling creatively with big questions, providing models of eco-feminist theology and interfaith dialogue, and having the sheer audacity to be a school and keep one going.

The Whiteheadian picture of the world giving rise to minds that apprehend the world suggests a deep kinship between mind and the world—one that deepens the idealistic emphasis on will, purpose, and feeling.

Theology has much at stake in how this argument turns out, and I am planning to give more time to it. But this argument, for me, pales by comparison to the social gospel and liberationist question: how does this religious community aid the struggles of oppressed and excluded people? In my forty years of solidarity activism and community organizing I've seen a lot of organizations come and go. I have shed tears over some that flamed out and others that never took off. My career spans exactly the period when trade unions were decimated and the political Left fell apart, so I am deeply conditioned not to be hopeful.

But there are some very hopeful developments today. Today we are witnessing a new social movement against racism, in the wake of Ferguson. It is perfectly named, conveying immediately what must be said, that black

lives have never mattered in much of white America. For a long time we had hundreds of local organizations that work on economic democracy issues and none that coordinate the organizations. Now we have the New Economy Coalition, which is devoted to building networks among the many groups working on structural alternatives to corporate capitalism. There is more interfaith community organizing going on today than ever. PICO is thriving, it has a structural critique of white supremacy, and PICO has improved upon the old Alinsky model of organizing.

Community organizing is inherently limited, it has trouble scaling up, and it burns people out. But it builds personal relationships across racial, ethnic, religious and class lines. It empowers marginalized communities. And it does these things better than any kind of social justice activism I know. Religious activists are big on faithfulness and hanging in there. We are stubborn in holding out for face-to-face meetings and building relationships. We usually recognize that giving voice to grievances is a major part of social justice work and that grievances mobilize individuals to join movements. Progressive religious activists have long practiced what is now ubiquitously called “framing.” But the success of PICO shows that activism focused on cultivating social justice values creates healthier and longer lasting communities than activism based on confrontation.

Progressive theology, to have a future, must not give up on the academy, or religious communities, or the general public. I reject every version of the “double bind” contention that we have no future in the academy and that religious communities are hopelessly provincial. But I do believe that progressive theology, to have a future, must speak to postcolonial liberationists, post-Occupy occupiers, queer activists, feminist and environmental activists, post-everything seekers, and old-fashioned social justice organizers who still believe that a better world is possible.