

Advocacy in the Pulpit and in the Classroom

Keynote remarks by Franklin I. Gamwell

The University of Chicago Divinity School initiated its project, “Border Crossing: Collaborative Theological Reflection for Ministry,” with a conference on September 19, 2007. The conference brought together students preparing for ministry, students preparing to teach in theological education, and practicing clergy to reflect on similarities and differences in the vocations of ministry and teaching.

The conference began with these remarks from Franklin I. Gamwell, Shailer Mathews Distinguished Service Professor of Religious Ethics, the Philosophy of Religion, and Theology in the Divinity School.

For more information on the project, please see <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/events/lilly/>

Joseph Sittler, a theology professor at this divinity school in the later 20th century, once told of a private lunch with Paul Tillich, at which Tillich was obviously preoccupied. “What’s bothering you, Paul?” Sittler asked. He was, Tillich replied, scheduled to preach that Sunday. “Gracious, Paul,” Sittler said, “that should not be troubling. You’ve given your life to thought about the Christian faith and written three volumes of systematic theology!” Tillich shook his head. “All plumbing; theology is all plumbing. On Sunday morning the water has to flow.”

Just as that exchange concerned Christian theology and preaching, I will, given our present context, focus on Christianity in discussing scholarship and religious leadership—even while the main point is also meant, *mutatis mutandis*, for a focus on religions generally. As *logos* about *theos*, then, theology has more than one meaning. In a common and quite proper sense, any Christian thinking and speaking about God is included—and, in that sense, preaching itself is theological. In another and strict sense of the term, however, “theology” designates a specific kind of thinking and speaking about God, and in this sense Tillich’s metaphor is apt. Like plumbing to the flow of water, theology is not preaching but, rather, performs a service to it or, more generally, to the church and its witness.

Still, the metaphor may also be misleading. It could suggest a *direct* service, wherein theology is properly governed or directed by the church. The design of one’s plumbing is determined by what water is meant to flow where, and likewise theology may seem to be better or worse exactly insofar as it aids the faithfulness of Christian witness. To the contrary, I believe, theology is governed by another purpose. So understood, theology is properly an academic enterprise, although I don’t mean that its practice occurs only in the university. Nor do I challenge that theology in this strict sense, which is the meaning I will henceforth intend, performs an *indirect* service to Christian witness. I will try to explain what I have in mind and, in doing so, speak about advocacy in the pulpit and in the classroom.

Religious and academic communities are two differing kinds of human association, and the relevant contrast involves the differing ways they address the religious question—summarily stated, the question of what makes human life as such ultimately worth living. A religious community is constituted by an *answer* to this question. What defines the Christian church, for instance, is its confession of Jesus as the Christ, which means, summarily stated, that in or through Jesus the ultimate source and end of human life has been revealed. The Christian community’s defining purpose, then, is witness to this faith, both within the church, in order that Christians may effectively entertain the answer in all they do, and beyond the church, in order that the God they worship may be embraced in the wider world. In contrast, the relevant activities in the academy are not constituted by an answer to the religious question but, rather, by the *question* itself. Thereby, the defining purpose of these activities is not witness to an answer but, rather, critical reflection on proposed answers in order to assess whether they are true.

Behind this difference lies a general distinction between two forms of human practice, where “human” marks existence in what some call the emphatic sense. We not only live, as many creatures do, but also live with understanding and, thereby, lead our lives. Conscious of ourselves as part of the surrounding reality, we choose our activities by deciding for a self-understanding, that is, deciding with understanding what we will be or become. Naturally, we are always circumscribed in greater or lesser measure by the given situation or particular circumstances, but self-conscious life includes a choice among open alternatives about how we will add ourselves to the encompassing march of events. What we understand when we decide for a self-understanding is the difference we will make.

Every human activity, then, acts on beliefs. In choosing this instead of that, we assert understandings of our situation and evaluate some purpose as good. A person votes for a candidate opposed to the war in Iraq. She or he thereby expresses a complex set of beliefs about the war, the workings of United States politics, and future probabilities, and further asserts that her or his chosen purpose is good. This person need not explicitly attend to all such beliefs. Although many were the center of attention sometime in her or his past, these and others may now be implicit, not readily apparent, as she or he acts on them. Still, every moment of human life, because we live with understanding, makes or implies certain claims to truth, and we typically coordinate our purposes with those of other people by agreeing, again often without explicit attention, on the validity of relevant beliefs.

But if humans live and live together by way of beliefs, it is always possible that one or another of these becomes problematic. Some understanding previously informing our decisions is now doubted. Typically, although not necessarily, this occurs because someone else contests its validity. “You’re planning to vote for that candidate? Let me tell you about the horrendous consequences of pulling our troops from Iraq.” If we then find our belief suspect and do not simply suppress the doubt, self-conscious life can take another form. We suspend assent to the understanding in question and think critically, that is, assess whether or not what we affirmed is true. Jürgen Habermas captures the point by differentiating *life practice*, in which we live and live together through making or implying and commonly accepting certain claims to truth, and the *practice of discourse*, in which we suspend belief in certain understandings in order to validate or invalidate them.

Naturally, this difference is relative. If, for instance, a certain political belief is called into question, we may seek to assess it by assuming the truth of some more general political belief. An association of free market enthusiasts may include disagreement about a proposed federal tax bill and may promote discourse about its merits even while they commonly believe that

government policy should pursue maximal free market growth, and arguments for or against the tax bill seek to show its consistency or inconsistency with the more general affirmation. In that sense, they act on the more general belief, even while they assess the truth of others. Still, we may also speak, at least in principle, of *full discourse* or *full critical reflection*, the kind of discourse in which nothing can be assumed. Every understanding to which one might appeal is itself presented for assessment and has no force insofar as convincing reasons are not found.

Henceforth, I will use “discourse” or “critical reflection” in this full sense, and, on my accounting, the academy is properly defined solely as a community of such discourse. Since no beliefs can be taken for granted and all are open to question, a community of scholars is defined solely by its critical address to whatever questions its members consider important, always including the question: *What* questions should be addressed in our discourse? The singular belief university participation acts on, even while it, too, is open to contestation within the university, is this: The human adventure itself, as least in the longer run, will be served through a special community defined solely by critical reflection, because it is one important way in which to pursue our abiding interest in life informed by true understandings.

Having the contrast between life practice and discourse in view, we can revisit the differing ways church and academy address the religious question—and preface the proposal with a further word about this distinctive question. If we live with self-understanding and thus by consciously deciding the difference we make, we do so aware of the encompassing reality to which we belong. Deciding what to be or become, therefore, always involves, whatever else it includes, the difference we make to the entirety. We cannot elect this course of action or that without choosing some understanding of ourselves in relation to the ultimate context. Humans live, we might say, by giving some answer to the question of faith—or, if that term is too associated with certain religions, to the original question of one’s authenticity. At bedrock, then, there are but two ways to be human: Either we decide for the true answer and, thereby, live with integrity or we decide for a false answer and, thereby, live with duplicity. Tillich called it the question “we ourselves” are, because decision about one’s ultimate difference cannot be absent wherever human life is present.

Tillich did not mean that every moment of human life takes this decision in a clear or deliberate way—and, so far as I can see, each in fact gives her or his answer only at the innermost and dimmest level of consciousness. No original belief is, at least when chosen, readily apparent, and thus every human activity *implies* but does not explicitly make a claim to be authentic. Indeed, precisely because self-understandings in this sense occur implicitly, religion and religious activity becomes vital in the human adventure. A religion, on this account, is a cultural formation of concepts, symbols, and associated practices with which an *explicit* answer to our original question is given and said to be a decisive re-presentation of authentic humanity as such. Here, “decisive” means that this explicit presentation re-presents the true answer to the question we ourselves are, such that activities defined by that religion will cultivate authenticity or persuade adherents to take original decisions accordingly. Hence, the religious question is the original question raised explicitly: What makes human life as such ultimately worth living and, thereby, defines the decision of faith we ought to take in every moment of our lives.

The church, on my proposal, is constituted by its answer to this religious question: Jesus is the Christ; that is, in or through Jesus, human authenticity and thus its ultimate context have been decisively re-presented, so that Christians may cultivate authenticity by participating in the

activities of the Christian community. These activities, then, are a kind of life practice, in which Christians act on their belief in Jesus as the Christ, and for this reason, the purpose of the church is witness. In contrast, relevant academic activities are a kind of discourse, defined by the religious question itself, and this practice suspends belief in any given answer in order critically to assess what religions and religious practices, if any, do truly re-present our deepest integrity. Christian theology is, on my view, a part of that discourse. As *Christian* theology, its reflection is indeed circumscribed by the Christian confession, and thus it necessarily includes a critical interpretation of what Christian faith means. What answer to the religious question is given in the Christian experience of Jesus? Nonetheless, theology is not merely another church activity, because this question of meaning is asked and answered critically in order then to assess whether the Christian claim to truth is indeed true.

II

Now, with gratitude for your patience, I am poised to speak about advocacy in the pulpit and in the classroom. In its most general sense, I will assume, advocacy means speaking for a belief or a commitment. Given that proclaiming something is indeed speaking for it, advocacy is not only permitted but also required in the pulpit. “All that we who communicate the Gospel can do,” Tillich wrote, “is to make possible a genuine decision.” Proclaiming the Christian faith in a manner through which Christians may cultivate their innermost beliefs or persuade their own original decisions in all they do is the task of preaching. The preacher, in other words, represents the church in its distinctive vital function and thus is called to advocate the answer by which the Christian community is constituted. I fully affirm that someone who preaches may and should, as a part of her or his full round of activity, also do theology. But preaching is not an occasion for discourse about the Christian faith, however important the preacher’s participation in such critical reflection on other occasions may be.

At the same time, I judge, we should reckon with *what* preaching advocates, namely, the confession of Jesus as the Christ and, thereby, the Christian belief about what makes human life ultimately worth living. Preaching speaks for the conviction or commitment by which the church is defined, and so far as I can see, this means that some other things should *not* be advocated in the pulpit. I have especially in mind speaking for answers to specific political or larger social questions that are, for Christians, credibly controversial—although I here assume a political context that is tolerably democratic and thus gives members of the church other associational access to public participation. As that assumption implies, I mean to no way to deny that politics is a Christian vocation. If our ultimate context is the God of all-embracing love Jesus re-presents it as being, the abiding purpose to which all humans are called is love for all the world God loves, and thus we make our difference within a human community whose social and political structures are especially consequential. Accordingly, individual Christians are called to assess as best they can the issues of our common life with a view to applying their religious commitment in public advocacy, and there is every reason for the church to facilitate learning about those issues and deliberation about a fitting Christian witness.

With respect to preaching, however, the general point is this: Belief about our abiding purpose does not apply itself to specific social and political issues, since their resolutions require not only that belief but also readings of the facts specific to the situation or issue in question. When the relevant facts are complicated or, in any event, not transparent, the application is credibly controversial. For instance, a Christian who advocates for or against the current United

States policy toward Iraq (or some measure of each) asserts a vast array of beliefs about particular conditions and the probable results of one course or another, through which beliefs her or his commitment to love all that God loves is applied. Hence, Christians who share a clear and appropriate understanding of their faith may nonetheless disagree about the given political issue because application of their common belief is credibly controversial.

I do not imply that those Christians are equally right or equally fitting in their political witness. To the contrary, one party may well be more accurate in reading the specific situation and more accomplished in the kind of deliberation through which principles are applied. Still, findings on the relevant circumstances are *not* included in the meaning of Christian faith, since it answers our abiding question about the ultimate worth of human life. Because the preacher represents the church in its distinctive vital function, she or he properly advocates the confession by which participation in this community is defined and typically should not advocate conclusions on which Christians may legitimately disagree notwithstanding their common commitment. This matter is complicated, and surely qualifications must be introduced in any full accounting, the most important of which is the democratic condition previously mentioned. Nonetheless, I am persuaded, recognition of the church's defining purpose entails a distinction between ministry that represents the church and the general ministry of individual Christians in their political and other secular vocations, and Christians should heed this difference when they deliberate about the task of preaching.

But however a full accounting turns out, it remains that preaching is advocacy because a distinctively religious kind of life practice in which one acts on a religious answer by proclaiming it. In contrast, we are often told, advocating religious answers has no proper place in the academy. When religion becomes a scholarly subject, many assert, the classroom should focus on historical and social scientific questions, asking about the place religions or religious activities *have occupied* or presently *do occupy* in diverse cultural and institutional settings. Teaching in which some religious conviction or religious activity is commended as expressing what *should be* believed or practiced is said to be improper because it is, in the relevant respect, the same as preaching, something whose rightful place is in the church or other religious association and which, therefore, violates the defining commitment of a university. One may, as many throughout the academy like to say, teach about religion, but one may not teach religion.

Sometimes religious studies are so understood because speaking for religion is set within a wider exclusion, namely, a ban on teaching *any* normative moral or political opinion. All such advocacy, some academics assert, replaces the objectivity of scholarship with the subjectivity of personal conviction and thus should be absent in the classroom. It will be instructive toward focus on religious studies to consider first this more sweeping ban, and we can readily see the premise on which it is based: All moral beliefs or beliefs about values are assumed to be solely personal opinions because they do not admit of validation and invalidation by common inquiry. Only beliefs about the facts—about what has happened or is happening or will, with greater or lesser probability, happen—are open to such assessment, and opinions about what ought to happen can be declared or exhorted but cannot be tested by reason. This assumption has a considerable history in modern thought, summarily indebted to the emergence and stunning success of modern science, persuading many that its methods exhaust the possibilities for pursuing truth—and the general view has been called the complementarity thesis of public facts and private values.

Those who expressly or tacitly affirm this view rarely argue for it, and it is, in fact, self-refuting because not itself a statement of fact open to scientific test. Since the earlier twentieth century, moreover, one of the very few agreements bridging the contentious plurality in Western philosophy finds the complementarity thesis incredible, even while its legacy continues to influence judgments outside philosophy about what scholarship requires. In any event, the previous comments marking the purpose of academic communities provide the better terms in which to determine what is and is not proper in the classroom. The sole obligation is commitment to discourse, whereby one affirms that nothing can be taken for granted and every claim should be assessed by argument. What is excluded is not making normative claims but, rather, advocacy of a certain kind, namely, the kind where claims or beliefs are simply announced or rendered immune to contestation and the need for argument—and this is improper whatever the subject of discussion.

It is, then, completely appropriate for academic teaching to advocate moral and political beliefs, just as it may advocate historical and scientific beliefs, *if* this is done in the spirit of discourse, and thus the teacher (or, for that matter, the student) is prepared to argue for her or his claims and to suspend their force insofar as convincing reasons are not found. But if this conclusion seems secure, the majority view still finds speaking for distinctively religious beliefs thoroughly unacceptable in the academy, and our attention to the more sweeping ban aids in seeing why. Conceding that moral and political claims, as well as scientific and historical ones, may be assessed by argument, a wide consensus still considers religious convictions beyond the reach of discourse. Beliefs about our ultimate nature and destiny are solely matters of personal or inherited affirmation and commitment or, what finally comes to the same thing, depend on submission to the authority of a religious community or its founding, and differing answers to the religious question cannot be assessed by the giving of reasons. Accordingly, religious studies as a university pursuit should be restricted to “teaching about religion” or to historical and social scientific discourse.

When we recur to focus on Christian faith, this majority view denies the contrast between Christian witness as a life practice and Christian theology as a practice of discourse. If not itself preaching, we are told, theology is nonetheless directly in service to Christian witness because governed by the church and thus its answer to the religious question. Why the academy so widely credits this view of Christian theology specifically and religious reflection generally must remain the subject of another talk—although I will express the judgment that Christian theologians themselves have aided and abetted the outcome. But the consensus is, so far as I can see, false. Answers to the religious question and thus the affirmations of Christian faith are, I hold, open to discourse. This follows because the religious question is our abiding human question raised explicitly and, therefore, asks about the self-understanding for or against which all humans in every moment of their lives exercise their original freedom. Accordingly, true religious beliefs can be validated through reasons authorized by our common human experience, and false religious beliefs can be invalidated in the same way—and it is completely appropriate in the academy to advocate answers to the religious question, although doing so is bound to the requirements of discourse and may not be the proclamation of life practice.

Nothing in this account denies that our controlling interest is whether the water flows. Just as the telos of academic communities, at least in the longer run, is service to the larger human community, so theology is service to religious activity in which the ultimate worth of human life is decisively re-presented. But, then, the vital force theology attends is not necessarily Christian witness but, rather, religious activity in which human authenticity as such is truly given

decisive expression. Whenever Christians or potential Christians, for whatever reasons, question or doubt whether Christianity is such an expression, the discourse of Christian theology is available. If in fact Christian faith is true, then theology will serve Christian witness, and if it is false, theology will serve Christians or potential Christians as human beings. While not directed by the church, theology thereby serves it indirectly because governed, as is all discourse, by the abiding human vocation to live in the truth.