A LEARNED MINISTRY AND A MINISTRY OF LEARNING

Jane I. Smith

My first days at Iliff are somewhat of a blur now--in fact I think they were rather blurry at the time--but several things do stand out. One is the warmth of the welcome I received, a warmth that sustained me during what was not an easy move and relocation. I am very grateful for that.

Another thing I recall from those early days, and also from more recent days, is the frequency with which one issue was identified for me as Iliff's basic problem. This problem was described in terminology that seems to reflect our interest in the psychoanalytic endeavor (Bellah calls ours "a therapeutic society"). Iliff, I was told, has an identity crisis, a split personality, perhaps even a case of schizophrenia. In plain words, the trouble seems to be that Iliff cannot decide if it is a graduate school dedicated to the academic study of religion or a seminary whose *raison d'etre* is to provide an education for ministry. Clearly my informants felt that until this basic choice is made the school will proceed on a zig-zag course that will drain the energies of its students and its faculty. And, I am sure, of its administrators.

Having now had a few months to reflect on this situation I must report to you that indeed I do think Iliff has a problem. But I would like to argue that it is not that the school is either unable or unwilling to make the choice, or even that some have made it one way and others another. I believe the problem lies in assuming that such a choice between training for the academic study of religion and training for ministry should be made. (If pressed I might even say *could* be made.)

Let me sketch the issue in a slightly different way. When I met with a group of Iliff alumnae at the Methodist Women's Conference this summer it came as no surprise to discover that one of their first concerns is that the school has become too academic, is not enough oriented toward "the spiritual." It is not necessary to belabor the fact that the press for more offerings in "spirituality" is a common phenomenon in theological

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education today. The Association of Theological Schools has clearly recognized that in its current basic issues programming. I would like to suggest that just as the academic study of religion must not be polarized in opposition to, or even in tension with, education for ministry so must it not necessarily be perceived as an endeavor unrelated to the quest for spiritual awareness. That is to say that to understand spiritual formation as somehow apart from the theological disciplines rather than a natural outgrowth of those disciplines is, in my opinion, to perpetuate an unnecessary and perhaps even unnatural bifurcation between the intellectual and the spiritual, the head and the heart.

It seems to me that one way to conceptualize what I perceive to be our common endeavor at Iliff is to talk about it in terms of ministry. In its broadest sense this is a ministry to ourselves and to each other in the process of our education at this institution, and at the same time it is the preparation for a ministry to others whether that is to be in an academic community, a parish, or with some other constituency. Insofar as the term ministry can serve at least in part to describe the common task of our preparation--and all of us are constantly in preparation--let me suggest what I see as three components of that task. The first has to do with learning, with the mastery of certain bodies of material. It is, with some degree of accuracy, what we call the academic enterprise. The second has to do with personal appropriation and growth--integrally related to learning. This is what might be called--and has been--spiritual development or formation. The third has to do with an attitude that both facilitates learning and appropriation and ultimately engages them as two dimensions of one process. That is the attitude of openness or inclusiveness--perhaps better simply called openmindedness.

George Rupp, former Dean of Harvard Divinity School, used to talk much of his vision of a "learned ministry," a somewhat old-fashioned term (although coming back into fashion) that he saw as the only valid goal toward which the educational program of a divinity school should be aimed. In its broadest definition I agree fully with George. As the trustees, so to speak, of an educational institution our deepest commitment must be to the preparation of women and men to be learned in the respective theological and related disciplines. But I would press for a broad definition of what learned really means.

That we need to have certain information at hand (and in head) is obvious. But it may not be quite as obvious--though it sounds so--that we *must* move beyond the accumulation of data to an apppropriation of materials such that they actually make a difference in the way we think and lead our lives. To be learned means that we have actually learned something, that we in fact *know* something.

During one of my early visits to Iliff a student (no longer here) commented to me that the members of his congregation simply weren't interested in theology so he had given up trying to talk to them about it. What I wanted to say to that student (but did not), aside from suggesting that talking *with* them would probably be more profitable than talking *to* them, was this: Somehow you must have failed to make that link between the words and concepts of the theological formulations and the place where your parishoners are trying to deal with their own probably difficult circumstances. And I suspect that may be because you yourself have somehow failed to grapple with the notions expressed through the classical doctrines and contemporary reinterpretations to the point where they deeply engage you.

The grappling is essential to learning. But its result, I think, will often need to assume the form of a kind of balancing act between taking seriously and holding gently. The very openness to follow where new ideas, new pieces of information may lead can well mean that one needs to let go of something very dear. Several years ago when I was asked to give a parting word to men and women graduating from Harvard Divinity School I spoke about holding truth gently. My point was simply that often the images one nourishes so carefully in the course of theological study outlive their usefulness, and that in the process of letting go one can be freed to encounter and engage new visions, insights and understandings. I continue to think that may be very important as we seek to analyze, interpret and appropriate the materials of our theological study. The content of revelation--of the many revelations that have come through the ages as ways in which truth becomes manifest and comprehensible--of necessity is mediated in such a way as to be recognizable and capable of assimilation by the human mind and spirit. But that capability differs and changes as we mature and thus is both comprehended and expressed in different ways.

It is also the case, and some in this community may lament the fact, that the more we learn of the various perceptions of and constructions about reality that different peoples in different ages have had, the harder it is to say that we hold something to be unqualifiedly true. The result is that we either find it difficult to express or even think anything at all about matters of conviction, or we say something with so many qualifications that it becomes virtually meaningless. An alternative, I propose, may be to affirm something but in doing so to hold it lightly. There is a difference between lightly and tentatively. The latter means that we understand it may or may not be right. The former, holding gently, means that we are willing to say that what we know to be right or true for the moment may in fact at a subsequent moment need to be amended, or possibly even abandoned. To be learned, I believe, is to be open to the

understanding that new studies reveal new information which absolutely must prepare us to come to new understandings.

An important part of that process is attempting to sort out what in the outlook and practices of a tradition--one's own or another--may be seen to be or have been misconceived to the extent to which it has been exclusive of, or harmful to, the best interests of certain of its members. This concern can be seen in better perspective when one is able to distinguish between the forms (theologies, rites, etc.) that are the paraphernalia of a religious system and the verities that these forms are intended to illumine and communicate. The process whereby one begins to loosen one's hold on the forms as such and see them as symbols, guides to a more pervasive reality, in my mind is integral both to learning and to spiritual formation.

Having ventured onto somewhat shaky ground in attempting a kind of tri-partite understanding of the task of ministerial preparation, which discussion I will continue in a moment, let me digress slightly to an even more controversial arena. That is an understanding of truth. It seems to me that there are various ways in which we can stretch out for the truth, and that those ways are not unrelated to the goal of a learned ministry. (Again let me insist that by ministry I am not describing only the task of the ordained clergy but of all of us who are about the business of trying to comprehend and communicate the particulars of human religiousness.) As to truth, let me be venturesome.

First, truth is what *is*. That is to say, it is what different peoples in different places and times have perceived it to be. The task of the scholar is thus to investigate and communicate these perspectives, and that scholarly endeavor is a primary ingredient of a learned ministry. Second, truth is what *ought to be*. It is what different peoples in different places have understood as the good, the right, and thus the real. Here, perhaps, there is an overlap in the functions of scholar and prophet, and another ingredient of a learned ministry becomes the appropriation of tools to assist in the understanding of what we sense to be right and how to act on that understanding. And third, truth is what *might be*, what is not yet actualized for us because we do not yet fully perceive it. Here is where I would describe the open-endedness of the scholarly pursuit as the envisioning through the mists that cloud our own dull perceptions of the possibility of what, in fact, might be. This impinges on what I see as the arena of personal appropriation, of spiritual growth and formation. It is, I believe, an integral part of the business of the learned ministry and of the scholarly endeavor that accompanies and undergirds that.

The point here is that whatever one calls the inner response to questions of religious truth--appropriation, under-

standing in the literal sense of the word--it can develop as the natural result of the academic study of theological disciplines if that study is undertaken with openness and receptivity. That is to say that many if not most of the courses in our curriculum, while "academic" in orientation, have the potential of opening doors to what might be called, to borrow a phrase from Sayyid Hossein Nasr, "the sapential dimension."

But I believe that the success of bringing together these potential--and often perceived--polarities between the academic and the personal or spiritual depends on an openness and receptivity to new modes of understanding. Much has been made of the importance of inclusivity in the Iliff community, to the point where some may find themselves in sympathy with what James Wall describes as "the citizen weary of the chaos of pluralism." The term inclusive in a slightly different context may, however, be useful to describe an attitude necessary, in my opinion, for growth to occur in the context of academic study. Inclusivity here suggests the reverse of the tendency to exclude by assuming that the bastion of one's own religious tradition or position is tight and cannot be aided by the insights and experiences of others. In this sense inclusiveness is a potential--a process of opening the heart that allows for the possibility of new elements contributing to one's own spiritual formation. It is what I have suggested earlier might simply be described as openmindedness.

Essential to this attitude, I believe, is a constant rethinking and reconsideration of what it means that God's acting in the world creatively and redemptively must be seen in a global context. The words global and pluralistic are as popular these days as the term inclusive, but in neither case does the use guarantee the result. For many of us in theological education it is one thing to say that we must understand the Christian gospel in relation to the non-Christian world, and quite another to begin to work out the ramifications of that in terms of a reformulation of Christian theology and a reappropriation of the Christian message in our own personal understanding. I think it is not an exaggeration to say that the Judeo-Christian community is still on the threshhold of what it means to think theologically about the gospel in the context of the non-Christian world. (As an aside I would argue, however, that some of us may be farther along than others. You may have noted in a recent issue of the *Christian Century* that a panel of the Church of England has declared that Freemasons are blasphemers because of "the Masonic notion of a supreme being, capable of being worshipped by followers of all monotheistic religions." It should have been put in their "no comment" department.)

It is a popular position among historians of religion that the only way to learn is to suspend one's own personal responses

to materials studied. One must be unencumbered by "beliefs" or articles of faith in order to leave an open mind for the accumulation of knowledge, and one must not assume a position of judgment on or evaluation of the material studied. The issue has often been engaged on the question of whether or not it is *possible* to understand the beliefs and articles of faith of another person or tradition without accepting them. Frederick Streng, among a number of others, strongly affirms that it is not only possible to do so, but that a clear distinction must be drawn between "understanding" and "believing." "'To understand,'" says Streng, "means to appreciate how it is possible for a person to believe what he does, given the presuppositions that he holds; 'to believe' means to accept the presuppositions about life and to live according to them" (*Understanding Religious Man*, pp. 6-7).

My own position is somewhat different. I am persuaded that it is when one internalizes what one is learning, really comes to grips with it, that it is possible more fully to understand. That is to say that I accept entirely what Streng says about belief (some of us would prefer the term faith), but want to argue that to some fair extent that is also true of understanding. To appreciate something, I think, is one matter; to *understand* it may be quite another. This, obviously, can have some serious ramifications. To understand may involve some risk taking, the very real possibility that one's horizons may be enlarged and one's faith enhanced.

This should be not a threatening but an exciting and a challenging possibility. Education is and must be a quest for wholeness. The ramifications of the appropriation of knowledge, as Thomas Merton observes, necessitate a broadening vision of how to define oneself in relation to the world. To study theology in the context of the history of human religiousness is to study, to learn about, and thus in some sense to appropriate an understanding of the relationship of human and divine, and by implication of human to human, of all of us to each other.

This, I believe, is the context in which we should engage our theological study. It is both an orientation and a process, to which I as Dean am committed, and to an investigation of which I enjoin you as student and faculty colleagues in this community of learning to address your attention and your critical response.