

Global engagement

by [Max Stackhouse](#) in the [April 19, 2011](#) issue



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It is by living and dying that one becomes a theologian, Martin Luther said. With that comment in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939 and asked theologians to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, questions and hopes as people of faith and to consider how their work and life have been intertwined. This article is the thirteenth in the series.

My maternal grandfather, M. B. Graham, was an evangelical Methodist preacher who for a time was assigned to a congregation in northern Indiana. A leader in that congregation was James Stackhouse. His son, Dale—my father—won scholarships to DePauw University and Boston University School of Theology and ended up being a minister and marrying the preacher's youngest daughter. So my nurture into Methodist piety, conservative and liberal, was charted from the start.

It was a loving, pious environment in which to grow up. My preacher grandfather built me a pulpit when I was three and encouraged me to preach (from the Methodist Hymnal; I was not qualified to preach from the Bible). My grandfather and father would debate my message, while the whole family loved singing whatever hymns I chose.

In junior high a teacher asked us to write papers on possible vocations. My first pick was easy: minister. At summer church camp, along with playing sports, we had classes in Bible, missions and beliefs. The camp ended with decision night, where we had to decide what we were going to do with our lives. I gave my life to Christ on one such night, figuring that being a Supreme Court judge or a forest ranger could be considered a social ministry if church work didn't pan out. It was a very emotional time. It was also the week that I first kissed a girl.

As a "pre-theo" major at DePauw University I joined the Philosophy Club, which met in the home of Professor Warren Steinkraus. The group talked of Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, Locke and Marx—but also of Senator Joe McCarthy, who was accusing people of being un-American. Steinkraus was devoted to Personal Idealism and Methodism, which he took in a radical direction. As a pacifist, socialist and advocate of integration, he railed against McCarthy. After I saw McCarthy in action on TV, I soon became anti-McCarthy too.

Another Methodist philosopher at DePauw was Russell Compton, who was fascinated by phenomenology, process thought and existentialism as well as by social questions. Together these professors posed questions that have troubled me ever since.

I was a very uncomfortable Methodist in those days, but I still accepted an assignment by the bishop to be a student supply pastor at a tiny Methodist church in a played-out strip mining village nearby. I was reading books by the Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood as well as by Marx, Camus and Sartre. I was a pacifist, socialist, agnostic "radical." My sermons must have puzzled my little flock. But they adopted me anyway.

This period reflected my first conscious change of mind. On campus, I joined the left-leaning Jefferson-Jackson Club, led by Vernon Jordan (who later became an adviser to President Clinton). We had 14 members, whereas the Young Republicans had several hundred (this was Indiana, after all). I began writing a column for the

campus newspaper called "The Ax by Max."

What to do after college? Despite decision night, I had no clarity on this score. A professor told me about a scholarship being offered by the Netherlands for Americans to study at a new Institute for Foreign Service and International Trade (now Nijenrode Business University). The Netherlands was grateful for postwar support from the U.S., and it wanted to cement relations with the U.S. and acquaint future Dutch leaders with potential leaders from abroad. I filled out the form the professor conveniently presented. That's how in 1957 I found myself on a ship to Rotterdam, headed for Nijenrode.

Besides intensively studying Dutch, I was introduced at Nijenrode to economics and the "science of management," to European political history and the arts of diplomacy, and to what it means to live in a multicultural world. Three particular experiences there shaped my later thinking.

1) When the English instructor became ill and I was asked to fill in, I discovered that I loved teaching. I began to consider teaching as a vocation.

2) For my independent study project, I chose to work on Martin Heidegger, whom I understood to be the most radical thinker of the times. After reading chunks of his work I concluded that he had nothing to offer on the social questions that were troubling me and that he had no rock on which to stand to support what he did think. When I found out that he had been a Nazi during World War II, I completely lost interest in his thought and its existentialist and postmodern heirs.

My adviser told me about one thinker who was influenced by existentialism but took it in a different direction—Paul Tillich, then at Harvard. "Besides," he said, "you are not only interested in social issues, you are obsessed with religion. You should go there."

3) I was introduced to the thought of Abraham Kuyper, the Calvinist theologian who was also the founder of the Free University in Amsterdam and who served as prime minister of Holland earlier in the century.

Theology, higher education and public service. Was I being guided in some way?

I went to Harvard Divinity School to study with Tillich. I found many other intellectual stars in their own orbits there. Tillich and Erik Erikson were the best lecturers. Tillich

argued that faith included and comprehended doubt and that doubt was necessary, for it forced one to be honest about the faith—a message I was relieved to hear. Erikson pointed out that biography influenced faith, which I already knew, but also that faith influenced the stances that people and societies take, as he had documented in his books on Luther and Gandhi—a message I wanted to find out more about.

In spite of his turgid style, the sociologist Talcott Parsons convinced me that most social changes are made through the interactions of multiple social systems in which religion is a key factor. Reinhold Niebuhr was a visiting professor in those years, and both his break with pacifism and his understanding of human nature confirmed my critical evaluation of the easy conscience of contemporary Idealism.

Yet in this period Martin Luther King was leading the nonviolent boycotts and marches that were to change American life. It is hard to overestimate the impact that King had on theologians and seminarians of my generation. He opened the door to a new role for pastors: shaping society's awareness of justice issues. I became deeply involved in the civil rights movement. I marched at Selma, organized teach-ins and lectured at innumerable adult educational events in church basements. My wife and I joined a black United Church of Christ congregation in Boston.

Throughout this time, my primary mentor was James Luther Adams, a self-professed "Christian Unitarian-Universalist." His account of the Puritan legacy and of thinkers such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch convinced me that it is possible to be a believer, to be constructively pertinent to society and to be intellectually critical. He also helped me see the importance of voluntary associations (of which the church is the historical model) and of the right to freely organize them. His emphasis on forming a public ethos that could evoke responsible participation in covenanted relationships seemed to me both inspiring and practical. I became convinced that a Reformed theological framework was faithful to the biblical heritage and that it could support the social changes I thought needed to happen better than any other worldview I had encountered.

I was ordained in the UCC and served as assistant pastor in Lincoln, Massachusetts, before being appointed to teach social ethics at Andover Newton Theological School. I loved the work with seminarians. I challenged and nurtured them as best I could, continually drawing on lessons gleaned from my family, DePauw, Nijenrode and Harvard.

Two developments in these years further changed my perspectives. One was a cooperative arrangement that began between Andover Newton and the theology department of Boston College. Vatican II had occurred, and many had hopes that an ecumenical spirit would lead to new relations between Catholics and Protestants. The faculties of Andover Newton and Boston College formed a joint graduate program designed to foster dialogue and learning. We began fertile exchanges in all the major fields.

The Vietnam War was forcing Protestant ethicists to consider Catholic teachings about just and unjust wars. A modified version of just war doctrine became so convincing to me that I began to consider pacifism to be an immoral posture of self-righteousness, a way of saying: "I (or we) are faithful and good because we do no harm; but you (or they) are unfaithful and evil because of the use of coercive power to try to establish the relatively just peace possible in human affairs." This stance not only ignores the multiple kinds and levels of coercive force that exist (as Niebuhr had recognized) but fails to recognize that sometimes the only way to approximate a just peace is to control evil by force of arms, and that some people may have a genuine calling to serve in the military, police or security forces.

Though learning from Catholics about the just war tradition, I thought Catholics were mistaken on several aspects of sexual and family ethics. Nonetheless, I thought they were correct in principle when they argued that homosexuality is "objectively disordered" according to the best standards one could derive from scripture, tradition and reasoned reflection on God-given natural law. I have come to regret taking that view, though I do not think it can be dismissed as simply based in hate or homophobia. I do think that it must be modulated by the recognition that scripture, tradition and natural law also provide the strongest bases for affirming that all persons are created in the image of God and that we should affirm the dignity and civil rights of each person.

The second set of events that changed my outlook in these years was ecumenical contacts of another kind. The Mission Board of the United Church of Christ asked me to work as a consultant, and this led me first to work with sister churches in South Africa in fighting apartheid and then, in 1973, to teach at the United Theological College in Bangalore, India, a training ground for pastors in the United Church of South India.

My wife and I packed up our three children and boarded a plane bound for Bombay. We learned in time to cope with the routine complexities of living in India and grew to treasure that country and the people we met. India was and is a fascinatingly rich compound of clashing cultural and social dynamics. There is great wealth for some, crushing poverty for many, magnificent beauty and woeful ugliness, ancient tradition and rapid modernization—distributed among a variety of tribal, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Marxist, peasant and urbanite peoples and overlaid with a passion for the democratic socialist legacy that Gandhi, Nehru and the Congress Party had adapted from the British Laborites. Unfortunately, the nation had also borrowed from the Raj bureaucratic forms of administration, which were quickly fitted out with the indigenous and pervasive caste system. Caste dominated even in Christian communities, though they fought against it.

All in all, India was a veritable living museum of social arrangements and religiously sanctioned social ethics, the whole swimming in spirituality. As chaotic as it sometimes seemed, it also bore the deep marks of a long history and a great civilization stamped by the Hindu metaphysical vision—obviously one of the major options for forming a social order.

Many Indians tended to blame Western capitalism and colonialism for their poverty, but a few were asking how to create an ethos that could overcome poverty and make human rights real. That triggered questions which I began to research and discuss in the classroom: What forms an ethos in the first place? What can induce changes in a traditional ethos? Given the fact that biologically and in terms of material needs people are pretty much the same everywhere, what makes the difference between an ethos that fosters economic development, a democratic civil society and respect for human rights and one that inhibits these institutions? It is not only economic interests and forces at work, I argued. What then does the church have to offer in the name of Christ?

In the mid-1970s I found myself drawn into a debate about the relationship of Christianity to Western culture. In 1973, a group of evangelical leaders were called together by Richard Mouw and John Howard Yoder to issue the Chicago Declaration, a profession of their faith in Jesus and a confession of the complicity of evangelicals in the injustices and infidelities of American culture. This declaration was one of the earliest clarion calls for evangelicals to enter political debates—a movement that had enormous effect over the next several decades.

A year later, another group of theologians were called together by Lutheran pastor Richard John Neuhaus and sociologist Peter Berger. This group issued the Hartford Appeal, which lamented the way modern thought had lost a sense of transcendence. The cause of this loss was the heretical beliefs that modern thought is superior to past forms of understanding reality, that religious thought is independent of rational discourse and that religious language refers only to human experience, God being humanity's invention. The Hartford group attacked the idea that all religions are equal and a matter of personal preference and that being true to oneself is the meaning of salvation. The statement was a sharp polemic against Christian leaders who focus on social ills or contemporary social issues rather than on the doctrines and dogmas of the faith.

At the time, I was on the board of the Boston Industrial Mission. Norman Faramelli of BIM called together the BIM board and friends, including Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, to study these two documents. We debated over several evenings and found that there were aspects of both statements that we could affirm. But we thought neither of the documents offered a strong sense that the God of the Bible has much to do with social, cultural or intellectual matters except to condemn them—one in the name of loving and obeying Jesus, the other in defense of the creedal traditions. One document smacked of Billy Graham and the search for what could save us from the pending doom of a culture gone wrong, the other of Karl Barth and the call for a return to church dogmatics.

Our group had no doubt that there was injustice in the world that needed prophetic critique, but none of us believed that a blanket condemnation of modern civilization was warranted, or that believing Christians could or should live entirely outside of or against culture. The question was what resources the church had to confront the evils and superficial ideologies that obscured the faith's partial incarnation in modern society.

Our response to Chicago and Hartford, titled the Boston Affirmations, was intended to be a biblically based theological warrant for ecumenical Christians to selectively engage in and defend aspects of modern culture while participating in the critical examination of it in conversation with popular culture, philosophy, the social sciences and various struggles for justice. Although there was vigorous debate within our group on just about every point, we finally came to a general consensus. I was elected as scribe and wrote the final draft. These themes have shaped my work since, although now that I look back on these debates I realize that I and others from

Boston drew more on themes from evangelical and classical sources than we may have realized—and more than the Chicago or Hartford groups may have realized in the ferment of the "culture wars" that followed in the next decades.

Connections with the UCC's Mission Board led me in the late 1970s to a series of consultations in the German Democratic Republic on theological education in a socialist environment. UCC leaders wondered what the U.S. church could learn from and offer to GDR Christians. With the cold war at a peak, we sought to develop a *Kirchengemeinschaft* (church communion) with Christians behind the iron curtain. In fact, I was invited to be a visiting professor there for a term. By this time I had joined the religious caucus of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, which operated on the left wing of the Democratic Party. I was interested in the prospects for a Christian democratic socialism that could help reconcile East and West.

My East German theology students met me with a polite but solid wall of resistance. They agreed that Christianity could become democratic in principle—since the church as they knew it contained the promise of democratic practices, even if it was not democratic at the moment. But they insisted that socialism as they lived in it and had been taught it at school, in youth organizations and by the state-controlled media could become neither Christianized nor democratized (in the sense of having plural parties and voluntary groups with civil liberties under constitutional law); socialism was a totalizing system. They disagreed with church leaders who thought that Christianity could reform and humanize East-bloc socialism.

The students chided me for not understanding what "really existing socialism" meant in terms of restrictions on church life, family life, educational opportunity, employment, labor unions, ecology and the arts. You have to decide, they said in a fatherly tone: "If Christianity is your criterion for choosing, do you choose democracy or socialism? You can't sit on the wall!" (Some ten students in that seminar would later participate in the candlelight demonstrations at a church in Leipzig in 1989 that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and several were elected to a provisional governing body during the transition to a united Germany.)

When I returned home, I reported my experiences to the religious caucus of the DSOC. "Well," asked one fellow theologian, "what did you decide?" I replied: "If it comes to a choice, it would be democracy." He replied, "Wrong choice!"

My choice alienated me from some of my former teachers and most of the caucus members. That experience converted me away from socialism and plunged me deeper into the study of economics. I began to read more deeply about the history of Christian ethical teachings on business, the independent (non-state-run) corporation and the relation of religion to economic life—topics little understood in most seminaries.

Following a move from Andover Newton to a post on the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, another international horizon opened up. I was invited to join the board of the China Academic Consortium, which is dedicated to cultivating dialogue between Western Christian philosophers, theologians and ethicists and Chinese academics in related fields. It was at about this time that the Chinese Communist Party made the decision to shift to a "social market" economy and began its striking move toward allowing a limited form of capitalism.

Some Chinese intellectuals were beginning to turn from Karl Marx to Max Weber and to consider whether the West is wealthy and powerful because of the influence of Christianity. They wanted to know whether this was true and what the connection is between religion and social ethics. Many of them had lost confidence in Confucian and Maoist values. Over the next several years, I attended seven consultations in China and had a chance to visit many parts of the country—all of which were undergoing rapid social change. I attended both state-approved churches and independent ones.

But the core of my work had to do with scholars interested in the ways in which major Christian motifs shaped the ethos that generated democracy, human rights, corporate capitalism and modern technology and thereby the forces behind globalization—something they energetically favor. These thinkers are commonly called "cultural Christians" in the Chinese context, and their influence is growing among Chinese intellectuals and, some say, in the Communist Party. I was drawn into consultations with graduate students and their professors who were preparing theses (mostly in literature, the social sciences, history or philosophy) that treat religion as a basic, if sometimes indirect, sociocultural cause—a view of religion officially frowned upon by the government. A number were interested in the Kuyper Center for Public Theology founded at Princeton Seminary in these years.

On the basis of the exposures I have partially reviewed here, I was asked to organize two projects sponsored by the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton. One is a

series of volumes on Theological Ethics and the Spheres of Life under the general title God and Globalization, with contributions from leading Western thinkers and a few from Asia and Africa. The other is a pair of volumes published in India seeking to redefine missions in view of the concerns of social ethics and new global developments. It is titled *News of Boundless Riches*, with contributions mostly from Asian scholars and some from the West.

Now that I am retired from teaching, my involvement with these topics is less through direct engagement with students than through books and articles written over the years. I cannot end this excursion into how my mind has changed without offering a word of gratitude to my forebears, teachers, colleagues and leaders of the various institutions who drew me into successive opportunities that brought revisions of mind. They and my family have led this Indiana preacher's kid to hopes for an eventual inclusive, cosmopolitan, global civilization touched by Christ's Spirit.