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"When researching and teaching, where and with whom is my heart?"

Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

In general, I agree with Fr. Kolvenbach's Santa Clara reflections. Our hearts and minds must be attuned to the viewpoints of the least, marginalized members of our human community. Ideas and acts go together, and I do not believe in excusing a professor from facing the harsher realities of the world off campus. Fr. Kolvenbach and I, and most readers of *Conversations*, agree that we need to be mindful of the horrendous gap between rich and poor, asking where we and our educational institutions stand in relation to that gap. Are we diminishing it or benignly letting it grow?

It is hard for professors to be truly poor. Solidarity with the poor, and actually being poor, are hard to separate, while being a professor requires time, quiet, and space the poor can only dream of. Most of us cannot manage to be professors and also to live among the poor, sharing their plight. It would be very inconvenient and, for most of us, it would also make scholarship nearly impossible. Nor can we ever see the world precisely as do the poor, if only because most of us are not poor and have never been poor in an extreme way. We are educated, healthy, well-fed, have good health insurance plans, etc. But at least we can try to live as if the poor are always with us, remembering that their needs take precedence over our comforts. We can remind ourselves of their hardships by keeping our distance from the extraneous and enticing comforts that come with academe. We can make a personal choice to reject the high life style, the vacations, the array of entertainments, the overabundance of food and alcohol -- and all the other comforts accompanying academe. We can

try to travel lightly, to unburden ourselves of the protections of an old boys' network, and try to live as if we really have nothing to fall back on but an honest voice and a stubborn intent to uncover the truth.

I wish to make this more specific and difficult by an example drawn from what I actually do. For several years now I have been dividing my academic year, spending the fall in Boston College's theology Department (my home base since 1984) and the spring at the University of Oxford, where I am a member of the Theology Faculty and serving (for a three year period) as Academic Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. This spring, as part of a series, I gave a lecture on the *Laws of Manu*. I also offered a long-distance reading course in comparative ethics for a Boston College Ph.D. student. I have also taught *Manu* in other courses over the years. There are good reasons to do so. Composed about 2000 years ago, *Manu* is a vastly influential legal classic, a synthesis of major law codes and central to the Hindu intellectual tradition. It is a thoughtful and well-ordered presentation of the rules and regulations of orthodoxy arranged by an idealized portrait of the life of the Brahmin from youth to old age and death, and (less amply) of members of other castes as well. As jurisprudence, *Manu* also undergirds norm and practice by a theory of the origins and nature of the world as such, and a moral analysis of human nature and

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action.

Both the students who heard my lecture, and the student reading *Manu* on his own in Boston, gained great respect for *Manu*, its intelligence, order, values. There is, however, a problem with this academic exercise in the study of a religious classic. *Manu* is also a controversial and hated book. Numerous Indians, some Hindu, many Dalits (including outcaste, untouchable, some tribal communities) and some Christian intellectuals, despise *Manu* as a dangerous and oppressive book. It is taken as the quintessence of Brahminical oppression, an eloquent and forceful legitimation of elitism and oppression.

It is certainly true that *Manu* sanctions hierarchy and privilege, though binding Brahmins by more rules than anyone else. Its author appeals to rulers to enforce humiliation and deprivation on unruly inferiors, for the sake of right religious order. *Manu* can easily offend us as egalitarians, Christians, allies of the oppressed. But *Manu* is also a complex text more easily vilified by those who have either never read it or read only its most villainous verses. Of course, I do point out the infamy of *Manu* for my students, and I do read some of the more unpleasant parts of the text. To know it well brings out its problematic features, but also its admirable ones, and the complex context in which both the good and the bad occur. In teaching *Manu*, I have gained for it more fans than enemies, since it is harder to despise absolutely something one understands.

Is it good to understand and then to begin empathizing with a classic, hierarchical, hegemonic text that is today symbolic of oppression? Teaching *Manu* seems hardly the kind of thing Fr. Kolvenbach had in mind in his Santa Clara address, particularly if students end up appreciating *Manu* more than they did before reading it. Should one help students understand *Manu*, or simply mark it off as an icon of oppression? If I understand *Manu* and help my students to understand it, whose side am I on?

I'd like to think I am on the side of clear

thinking, truth-knowing and truth-telling, and that being so is actually to be on the side of the poor. The point of being a professor is to uncover the truth, to see and show how things are. It is necessary to reject wicked but also well-intentioned ideologies that sacrifice clarity for simplicity, as if replacing complexity with moral rectitude. We need to examine ideas and images, texts and practices, as they are, and thus usually as a mix of good and bad. *Manu*, properly understood, offers an impressive integral view of the world, undergirded by determined views about who should have power in that world. It reminds us that there are few totally good or bad religious texts -- or ideas or persons -- in this world.

Analyzing *Manu* soberly, noticing its intent (mostly good, I judge), and its limitations (some quite large, at least to those of us who are not Brahmins), reminds us of some basic realities that cut across the spectrum. Any religious group that claims for itself divine authority and has maintained this authority and the concomitant power over the centuries, is likely to have many good points in its favor. But it will also possess some very bad features leading to abuse, impoverishing and imprisoning some while yet giving great privilege to others. Jesuits and Catholics can hardly afford to throw many stones at *Manu*. Teaching *Manu* honestly can remind me of the duties and perils of being a clergyman in the Roman Catholic Church.

All of this matters close to home. The poor are not to be imagined as living only somewhere else, distant from the campus. We might want to leave the ivory tower, but more to the point is to realize that there is no such thing as a secure ivory tower. The poor are always with us. Severe hunger, lack of health care, and the denial of basic human rights are urgent concerns demanding the most attention. But other poverties lurk closer to home: wages insufficient to a university neighborhood's cost of living; being a junior or part-time teacher or grad student working too

many hours for too little pay; expecting staff to do too much with too little in the way of resources; marginalization due to race or sexual orientation; denial of advancement due to gender; ignoring diverse voices on campus, for the sake of some institutional good; conservatives ignored on a liberal campus, reformers ignored for the sake of a comfortable status quo. Etc. If we do not face up to our complicity in powerlessness, poverty, vulnerability and exclusion where we live, we will be unlikely to live heroically with respect to poor people living on the other side of the globe or a thousand miles to the south.

To read *Manu* with my students is to encounter a literary classic, and to impart skill in reading, understanding, complexifying, and coming to terms with a religious classic. It is about discovering and struggling with religious power. This is the kind of thing professors should be doing for their students. It is also an act of self-improvement, practice in removing the shroud that obscures our ability to see and think honestly. If even on campus I cultivate and impart the skill (and gift) of a critical eye, the truth-telling tongue, the fearless pen, then boundaries will begin to break down. I will observe more clearly the ties interconnecting the richest and the poorest, the powerful and the weak, the detached professor, the passionate activist, the victim near despair. Teaching *Manu* fairly does not feed the hungry nor liberate the oppressed. But people who can read *Manu* fairly, with a cool and steady sense of what is good and bad in the text, the reading, and the reader, are those who will become able to read aloud all the other smaller and larger systems of iniquity in which we live.

Does this honesty let me off the hook, so I can file away Fr. Kolvenbach's lecture? Probably not. But if "being a scholar" and "having hearts with the poor" are both necessary, then teaching books like *Manu* remains one of the exercises we will need to undertake.

Student Spotlight



Photo Courtesy of Georgetown University

A rising junior, Ben Cote is Grand Knight of the Georgetown University Knights of Columbus Council, which was named the 2002 Outstanding College Council, the order's highest honor for a college-based council. As a member of the Knights, Ben has participated in raising money for a local institute for the developmentally disabled, helped with diaper drives for a local pregnancy center, and has contributed to various service projects with local Catholic schools.

As a graduate of Cheverus High School in Portland, Maine, Ben served in Key Club during his senior year. He says he felt especially drawn to service in college after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which took place at the beginning of his freshman year. On September 12, he prayed with a group of Baptist students on campus: "I grew a lot that day in terms of friendships ... and I also learned a lot about another person's religion." A double major in political economy and math in Georgetown College, he is considering pursuing a teaching career after graduation, or possibly attending graduate school.

As the son of a single mom, Ben knows his situation is not unique: "I'd like to be someone who supports single moms and encourages other men to be supportive, too," he says. He also plays saxophone in the Georgetown Jazz Band and serves on the College Academic Council.