
From La Sierra to Cambridge: Growing Up Theologically

by Gary Chartier

A long time ago, I arrived at Loma Linda University intending to pursue a degree in political science, hoping to spend the rest of my life teaching at my *alma mater*, La Sierra Academy. Two years after my graduation, I have completed the first year of a doctoral program in theological ethics and the philosophy of religion at the University of Cambridge, in England, and wonder if someday I may spend the rest of my life teaching at my *alma mater*, Loma Linda University. What happened?

I had started, I realize now, to do theology long before I thought of theology as a vocation. I pored over the documents arising out of the Desmond Ford, Walter Rea, and Robert Brinsmead controversies, as I read an introductory philosophy of religion text, as I argued about the exegesis of Daniel and Revelation. But the realization that theology was for me came, in the end, from my interchange with five professors—whom I list in the chronological order of my studies with them: Charles Teel, Richard Rice, Fritz Guy, John Hick, and Brian Hebblethwaite.

Charles Teel: “Leave Home, Leave Home!”

A sandy moustache bristles over an expressive mouth framed by

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prominent dimples. An unruly shock of hair wanders across his barely wrinkled forehead. His hands—especially the broken finger—move wildly, expressively. And his voice—whether heard in the course of one of his perennial snorts, guffaws, or chuckles, or as, in the cadence of Martin Luther King, he proclaims The Word to a class that’s never before seen a teacher throw chalk or stand on a table—is always rich and resonant. It is probably pronouncing words—or *wanna-be* words—ending in “ness”: *humanness*, *churchness*. “Charles Teel can make a noun out of anything,” a friend once told me.

I cannot forget that I heard that voice intone an indictment against the freshman honors seminar of which I was a part, condemning our failure to peruse what we thought was an impossibly long reading assignment. I remember, too, hearing the voice monotonously repeat the words, “Leave home! Leave home!” as Charles tried to nudge me to consider educational and experiential possibilities beyond the pale of southern California. I wish I had heard it echo off the walls of Riverside City Parish—a pioneering, sadly now-defunct effort in urban ministry and Christian community that Charles spearheaded in the 1970s—or listened as Charles sang freedom songs through the bars of a Southern jail cell.

Responsibility is the word that comes to mind as I trace the common thread binding together these disparate experiences. From that first class through my discovery of Charles’s committed past to my dialogues with him about education and vocation, he has taught me responsibility by

precept and example. Theology, I have learned from him, must be both personally and socially responsible.

Charles tells me he is not a theologian. I can only attribute this to false modesty after an evening in Loma Linda when, having arranged for a cocky but naïve freshman to present his honors seminar paper at a meeting of the university ethics colloquium, his comments “from the floor” helped to save that freshman’s theological hide. But even if he were not a theologian, it would still be true that he has taught me about theology. His honors seminar presentation on Latin American liberation theology encouraged me to make that theological movement the topic of my research paper for the class. And his willingness to afford me more than one opportunity to publicly share the fruits of that research gave me a measure of confidence that I had something interesting to say about a theological topic, and thus an incentive to think theologically.

In particular, he has taught me that theology must take account of and respond to its social, cultural, and historical context, not only by encouraging me to read responsible theology but also by showing me how it might be done. He has helped me see that all of life is God’s, and that the distinction between sacred and secular is thus both artificial and unhelpful. And he has consequently enabled me to realize that talk of God and Creation, of justification and sanctification, of sin and atonement, is relevant not merely for academics and pastors, but for communities—cities, nations, universities—seeking to live as God would have them live.

If all of life is God’s, then the validity of another of Charles’s favorite themes is evident: the border between the personal and social is vague, indefinite, and inconsequential. Every social problem has a personal dimension, and vice versa. To reflect theologically about a social situation is to lay the groundwork for responsible personal action. And to remedy an interpersonal relationship may be the first step toward the broader social change theological reflection has led one to envision.

Here, especially, Charles has instructed by example as well as precept. When he not only

prayed, but marched with civil-rights protestors, he risked the possibility that not only his faith but also his body would be pummeled by police water hoses. In leading a group of mostly white, middle-class La Sierra academics to worship and serve amidst a seedy, primarily black downtown Riverside neighborhood, he inspired them to explore what their commitment to justice and community might mean for them personally. And by exposing me to the right books, he made it necessary for me to confront my duty to the world’s poor.

So Charles has taught me that theology must respond to context and that the theologian must be responsible both socially and personally. He has also, I stress, helped me learn responsibility in other areas of my life. And he has practiced a commendable responsibility as he has lived out his commitment to being my friend.

Richard Rice: “How Are We to Know God?”

Dark, boyishly handsome, with just enough gray in his once jet-black hair to give him an air of distinction, Richard Rice seems to live an enormously full life. Woodworker, swim-club president, French-horn player, father, husband, author of four books, he exhibits an enviable ability to keep the diverse elements of his personal and professional life in balance. He is well-versed in literature, history, and philosophy, as well as theology; my friend Nabil Abu-Assal once described him to me as the most broadly educated person on the La Sierra faculty.

That breadth was something I felt I was lacking when I enrolled in his undergraduate course in the philosophy of religion. My educational focus remained history and politics, but a university teaching post now seemed more attractive than employment at La Sierra Academy. Political philosophy, I had decided, would be the subject I taught and wrote about primarily. And I realized that, while I had taken two courses in political thought at Loma Linda University, I had little or no formal training in any other area of philosophy.

The philosophy of religion had interested me for some time; and Rice's course was, in any case, one of the very few offered at the university in which I could obtain exposure to philosophy. So I enrolled—and was hooked.

The question, How are we to know God? has preoccupied Richard Rice throughout his theological career. In particular, he has devoted his considerable powers to exploring the relationship of so-called "natural" knowledge of God—that gained through reason, experience, and analysis of the world—to that provided by revelation. The

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problems surveyed in *Religious Belief and the Modern World* were not, therefore, simply nuisances to be dealt with by the apologist for Christianity before the truly important work of theology could be gotten on with. Instead, I realized—especially in a subsequent directed study—that wrestling with such matters as the problem of evil and the argument for God's existence is itself part of the theological task.

Because rational reflection is a key portion of the theological enterprise, Richard Rice taught me, theology must take serious account of philosophy. The questions he asks, questions about knowledge, human freedom, and the nature of necessity, are in large measure philosophical ones. And concern with such questions is not merely an idiosyncrasy of his. The questions, though by their nature philosophical, are vital for any theological system. Rational reflection on fundamental issues is indispensable for good theology.

Theology cannot avoid such fundamental issues because it must take experience seriously. The vision of theology I have acquired from Richard Rice is of a discipline that meets people

where they are, building upon their self-understanding and their interpretation of their world to explicate the significance of basic theological convictions. In a different sort of way, Rice, like Charles Teel, taught me that reality is of a piece, that our theology must be true to the whole of our experience of God, world, others, and self. Because this is God's world, and because we are God's creations, good theology cannot fail to take human nature and experience into account.

Another closely related theme that runs through Rice's evolving theological symphony is the integrity and significance of the created order, a theme that comes to particular expression in his first book, *The Openness of God*. I first encountered Rice in the pages of that book, as he developed a position I and many others found strange and not a little frightening. The future is in principle unknowable, he affirmed, and since God can't do the logically impossible, God can no more know the future than we can. Or at least that is what most readers remember about the book. But Rice has something with far wider implications to say—namely, that creation is real. What Rice has helped me see about creation is that God respects the created order. God grants to creatures the power to choose, to initiate novelty, even to go against the divine will. And if the created order is granted real integrity, Rice argues, then God's experience of it must, in some sense, grow and change with it. That's perhaps a new, crazy-sounding idea, but I think it follows from the fact that creation is real, and not just a puppet show being played out to amuse God.

So, from Rick Rice I learned the importance of rational reflection on God, humanity, and the world, informed by the realization that—because God's world is one—philosophical and theological queries and approaches can never be appropriately separated. And as I have watched him continue to write, even under the time pressures a Loma Linda University faculty member must always confront, as I have observed the discipline and rigor with which he thinks, I have been set an example that shames my all-too-often slipshod approach to doing theology.

When I completed Rice's *Religious Belief and the Modern World* course, I was still a history and

political-science major. But I had grown progressively more interested in theological questions. I had met Rice's revered teacher, Fritz Guy, wandered in hero-worship through all 500-plus pages of his dissertation, and prepared to register for a course he was teaching that summer in feminist theology.

Fritz Guy: "Why Karl Marx Should Have Gone to Sabbath School"

When you meet Fritz Guy, your first impression is of fragility: he is small and slight. Much of his hair—like mine—has fled, and after one has (inappropriately) thought “egghead,” it's easy enough, free-associating, to think of eggshells and their vulnerability as well. But a second glance reveals a quiet, controlled intensity as he fixes you with his penetrating eyes. The low, baritone voice adds to his gravity. A third look undercuts any hasty judgments formed earlier, as one discovers a droll, almost earthy sense of humor, together with an authentic pastoral sensitivity and a curiosity incompatible with, respectively, the ivory-tower isolation and the self-satisfaction of the professional intellectual.

Pastoral sensitivity was not the characteristic I would have attributed to Fritz Guy the first time I met him. That was my own fault. He didn't have time to discuss university politics with two of us who had come from the associated student body of Loma Linda University with a proposal for a faculty-student strategy at the 1986 university constituency meeting—and he let us know that in no uncertain terms. But I began to detect, and respect, his pastoral inclinations a few months later, when he ended a discussion with me to attend to a poor, mentally disturbed old woman who had come in search of prayer to the University Church, where he now serves as a member of the staff. I began to develop a more nuanced picture of the man everyone agreed was the leading Adventist systematic theologian of his generation.

He continued to underline the importance of

pastoral concern, albeit of a different sort, in the course I took from him that summer. Feminist theology was new to me, but as the weeks went on I began to understand what it meant. Perhaps as important was my realization that the status of women in the Adventist church was something that mattered profoundly to Fritz Guy, and that he believed it important that theologians do something about it. The theologian, I saw, was one who cared deeply about the experience of the person in the pew. Fritz *had* been a pastor before he served as professor of theology at Loma Linda University and at the seminary; before he was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences; before he was assistant editor of *Insight* (but after he functioned as assistant editor of the *Criterion*). His theology has had the benefit of formation in the rough-and-tumble of real church life, in experiences with parishioners and counselees. I've discovered from observing him that such pastoral work is both useful fodder for the theological mill—and important in its own right.

I think I first encountered Fritz Guy's written

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work while a junior high school student, when an *Insight* article called “Why Karl Marx Should Have Gone to Sabbath School” caught my eye. That article brings to light the second important thing he's taught me: good theology is at the same time both constructive and synthetic on the one hand and in creative dialogue with its heritage on the other. In *Insight* and elsewhere Fritz has shown us ways to let new meanings emerge from old beliefs in a manner that fosters their renewed vitality. Take the article just referred to. In it he develops the idea that the dehumanization wrought by mass society, so powerfully diagnosed by Marx, finds at least part of its remedy in the Sabbath—which offers freedom for God and others from the demand to produce and perform. A basic belief—in the continuing validity of the

Sabbath command—achieves new significance in the light of contemporary reflection. And one could also point to interpretations of justification by faith, the atonement, Christ's high-priestly ministry, and the new earth, characterized by similar attentiveness to the past and openness to the present.

Theologians must take their subject matter seriously; they must take their pastoral responsibility seriously, but they must not take themselves seriously. And that's something else I've discovered as I've gotten to know Fritz Guy and watched him in action. I offer a story to make my point.

Theology would undoubtedly be better off if more theologians took occasion to remind themselves and their various audiences of their own genuine humanity.

Sometime in the 1950s, when the SDA Theological Seminary was still located in Washington, D.C., Fritz was studying there. He was enrolled in a class whose key feature was the impromptu translation and analysis of selected passages of the Greek New Testament. The teacher would select students at random to translate and comment upon a segment of the text assigned for the day, mentally noting who participated and who did not. If you were called on at random you had to know the whole passage under consideration reasonably well—a task that many no doubt found difficult. Fritz's response was simple and quite clever: as soon as the instructor got started, he would ask a question about the passage—and the instructor would place a mark in his mental register next to Fritz's name.

Fritz obviously learned exegesis: his contribution to a recent volume of papers on theology and the freedom of the will includes more Greek exegesis than any of the other essays by systematic theologians. But it seems important to me that he didn't feel guilt about not being an overachiever. More important, I think, is the fact that he felt free to tell the story on himself. Theology would undoubtedly be better off if more theologians took occasion to remind themselves and their various

audiences of their own genuine humanity.

That genuine humanity was also on display in Fritz's office as he graciously listened to a theologically illiterate political science major prattle about his doctoral dissertation. It was evident again when he took the time to read draft after draft of a feminist theology paper by that same political science major—a paper far less block-bustingly creative than its author then realized. And it has continued to be evident as he has shared afternoons and evenings of good conversation, allowing me to benefit from his wisdom as I attempt to understand the intricacies of theology and university politics—not to mention real life. By taking time to be a friend and academic mentor, Fritz has sharpened considerably my image of what a theologian ought to be.

I had more fun in Fritz Guy's feminist theology class than in any course I had taken up to that time. The questions asked, the nature of the reasoning involved, the breadth of vision encouraged, all captivated me. And though I was applying, even as the class came to an end, to a Ph.D. program in government at Claremont Graduate School, when I went to Claremont, I made it a point to look up the chairman of the religion department, an English philosopher of religion I'd first met on paper in Rick Rice's class, Religious Belief and the Modern World. His name was John Hick.

John Hick: "How Do We Know What We Say Religiously Is Credible?"

Given the choice, John Hick prefers to ask, rather than answer, questions. Perpetually interested in people and their habits, vices, virtues, surmises, and experiences, he enjoys biographies more than other kinds of books. Despite his fascination with people, he needs to devote substantial energy to learning and remembering the names of his students, in what one senses is a surprisingly difficult enterprise. He is congenial, gracious, quintessentially Eng-

lish, with a warm—if not always revealing—smile, and a welcoming handshake.

When I first met him, I assumed I would only be an occasional visitor to the Claremont religion department. How much linkage could there be, after all, between the work in that department and the one in which I intended to enroll? But sometime during the course of the year I decided to pursue my study of political philosophy from within the philosophy department. And as I read John Hick's classic work, *Evil and the God of Love*, I began to realize that the philosophy of religion, rather than political philosophy, might take up the balance of my time in graduate school. When I encountered difficulties with the philosophy department, I took the plunge, and asked the department of religion to consider my application file.

By the time the department announced its acceptance, I had read most of John's other major works, including *Faith and Knowledge* and *Death and Eternal Life*. I knew that at Loma Linda University I had encountered subtle and powerful minds. But I had not previously engaged with a mind that had benefited from the regular opportunities for study, research, and publication—and resulting public dialogue—that the major universities make available to their brighter lights. John Hick was exceedingly bright, and his work had enjoyed a circulation that had allowed him to set the agenda for at least an entire generation of Anglo-American philosophers of religion.

I was surprised, thus, to find him unpretentious and unassuming to a fault. I was particularly struck by something that happened on the first day of a class I took from him on the problem of religious knowledge. In front of a large seminar made up largely of greenhorn graduate students, he admitted his frustrating inability to make sense of a major work of contemporary German philosophy. This might, I grant, have been merely a device to elicit student comment. But the nature of his subsequent remarks discourages me from thinking so. I left class that day with a great deal of respect for a world-class scholar who could admit his fallibility.

Admitting fallibility has, in fact, been important for John throughout his career. And his

admissions of fallibility have been part and parcel of his work as the architect of an impressive—if ultimately unsatisfying—global philosophy of religion.

As for Richard Rice, experience is key for John Hick. Beginning with his own attraction to, and

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repulsion from, the overwhelming divine presence he could not help sensing—and finally finding himself compelled to acknowledge while a young law student in Edinburgh—and continuing with his interest in mysticism and psychic phenomena, he has stressed the crucial character of religious and paranormal experience for religious discourse. One need not accept his claim that such experience is the only valid basis for knowledge of or about God to recognize its relevance for the theologian.

I could not help but learn from John that theology must concern itself with foundational questions. From the beginning of his career, the problem of religious knowledge has captivated him. Unlike many theologians, he has never shied away from that most foundational of all theological queries, “How do we know that what we say religiously is true, or even credible?” As I listened to the questions he raised, I realized that such questions about the bases of our beliefs can never be avoided, as uncomfortable as that often is.

Because of his belief that experience is the only sure basis for religious knowledge, it is not surprising that in the mid-to-late 1960s John found himself asking whether such experience outside Christianity could be any less valid than that inside. When he assumed a teaching post in the English city of Birmingham he found himself immersed in a seething cauldron of ethnic and cultural tension. Drawn by what he believed was Christian duty of involvement in groups dedicated to ameliorating interreligious and interracial strife, he soon found himself confronted with

the problem of reconciling the apparent genuineness of the faith and practice of his Muslim and Hindu partners with his Christian belief in Jesus as the ultimate and final revelation of God. Rational considerations like those so important for Rick Rice have never been convincing to John, since experience is all-important for his system, and historical evidence about Jesus' actions and beliefs seem inconclusive to him. Thus, it was easy for him to admit his fallibility and make the leap to pluralism—the view that all the great major religious traditions derive from valid, but culturally conditioned, encounters with Ultimate Reality, and that, consequently, none is any better than any other.

One does not have to believe that no religion has special advantages to recognize the importance of religious diversity for theology. The fact that persons of good will are to be found within each major religious tradition and outside it—the fact that persons outside Christianity are morally

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and spiritually transformed within their various traditions—is a problem that will not go away. There are various options Christians can adopt for dealing with what seems to be the work of God—dare we say the revelation of God?—outside Christianity. What Christian theology cannot do is bury its head in the sand.

Theology must take account of religious and paranormal experience; theology must deal with foundational questions; theology must be global. These insights forced me to think anew about the beliefs I had inherited from my Adventist forebears. If Christianity, much less Adventism, was to remain a viable option, the exposition of the church's faith would have to proceed along lines other than those I had heretofore learned.

Such alternative approaches were not so alternative, I later realized, in England—John Hick's

home. The characteristic English way of doing theology, I discovered, was marked both by a commitment to Christian orthodoxy and by an appreciation for the critical questions John and others raised. The representative of that characteristic English theology I encountered first, the man who was to become my doctoral supervisor, was Brian Hebblethwaite, dean of chapel at Queens' College, Cambridge, and university lecturer in Divinity.

Brian Hebblethwaite: "You Must Really Think We're a Bunch of Reprobates"

Big, bluff, and hearty, Brian Hebblethwaite can be surprisingly more adolescent than his 50 years and receding hairline might suggest. When my friend Ian Markham, another one of his doctoral students, cockily challenged him to a boat race on the river Cam, Ian found himself bested in short order by a man who has spent his summers as a Cambridge and Oxford student on the river in years past. Like most Cambridge faculty, Brian believes Timothy would have been told to imbibe a *lot* of wine for his stomach's sake if he'd had to deal with Cambridge students, so imbibe he does. I recall the evening when, sitting next to him at dinner, he reminisced about how, in previous years, he and another faculty member had forsaken the usual table wine for huge tankards of beer. Then he pointedly told a story about buying poker chips in New York and—even though I didn't look offended, as he'd apparently hoped I would—he finally said, with a twinkle in his eye, "You must really think we're a bunch of reprobates."

When he's not joking with his students, though, he's often helping them. He's gone out of his way on more than one occasion to help me through the red tape that fouls up life at Cambridge as much as it does at any other university. But he's done more, I stress, than help me through bureaucratic rough spots and make me laugh. He's opened me to the world of English theology.

When I stuck out my hand and said, “Canon Hebblethwaite?” as I met him for the first time at Los Angeles International Airport, I had already discovered his work. He had been among the more thoughtful opponents of a book John Hick and others had written denying the continuing validity of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, a move John believes necessary to place all religion on equal footing. Brian had reflected especially on the theological, moral, and spiritual significance of the Incarnation, arguing that the doctrine helped explain not only the life of Jesus but also a variety of the aspects of God’s interaction with the world, that the Incarnation made sense, that it was just what we might expect.

What was especially important was the way he and those on his side of the debate argued. They defended the orthodox view. But they did not appeal to mystery. They were confident that the truth was reasonable, that it was rationally defensible. Painstakingly, they defended the coherence of the doctrine, its religious adequacy, its basis in the historical evidence. They were defenders of the faith, but they were no less willing to engage with foundational questions than their opponents.

Their engagement with these foundational questions evinced a willingness to avoid dogmatic assumptions. Whether the gospel records, for instance, could be trusted in their portrait of a Jesus who could rightly be called the Son of God was exactly the question at issue in the debate with John and his associates. Brian and others who defended the orthodox view couldn’t simply appeal to the authority of Scripture; that was what the argument was about. Instead, they had to engage in careful historical-critical study of the relevant documents, which they were perfectly willing to do.

Brian, and the English theology to which he introduced me, took basic questions with the utmost seriousness. Good theology was like that, I saw. But orthodox theology, I learned, had no need to use orthodox methods. And I also discovered that orthodoxy didn’t have to be constricting. The faith of the Christian church throughout the centuries, as expressed especially in the Apostle’s and Nicene creeds, is very important for English theology. But outside those borders, English

theologians have felt free to be creative. I was amused, for instance, to discover that Dr. Rice’s position on divine foreknowledge, so controversial among both Adventists and conservative Christians generally in America, was the dominant view among English theologians of unquestioned fidelity to the Christian faith. By differentiating between the central and the peripheral, English theology has helped me to see that theology must adopt a proper sense of perspective.

When I met Brian Hebblethwaite at Los Angeles International Airport, I was taking him to a dinner that preceded a conference he and some other English philosophers and theologians were attending at Claremont. During that conference, Brian and his colleague, Don Cupitt, interviewed me and decided it would be appropriate to admit me for doctoral study at Cambridge, as I had requested earlier in the year. Having discovered English theology, I knew I wanted more of it.

There was, however, a major slip between the cup and the lip. Though I first left for Cambridge

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in April of 1988, I had returned within three days homesick, lovesick, and culture-shocked. And it was not until, with Charles Teel’s damnations and assistances, I had crawled on my hands and knees, so to speak, and asked the divinity faculty of Cambridge University to accept me for the term beginning in September, that I really set out on my pilgrimage across the Atlantic in earnest. When I arrived and began my work, I found Brian as engaging as I had hoped he would be.

English theology has also taught me that theology is a literary activity. English writers of theology, perhaps because so many of their books first see the light of day as lectures, are expert at framing the most abstruse propositions with ele-

gance, finesse, and grace. I am still learning how to emulate them successfully.

That is the path that led me from political science to theology, and from California to Cambridge. In addition to the particular conclusions I have reached about the nature of the theological task in the course of my journey, I have been struck again and again by the signifi-

cance of personal relationships. Charles Teel, Richard Rice, and Fritz Guy at Loma Linda University have established a tradition of nurture and intellectual stimulation. Their example, and those of John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, have already motivated me to try to be the kind of theologian who is a teacher of his students because he is also their friend.