

Charles Marsh

on the “Project for Lived Theology”

Interview by Louis Weeks



Introduction

Charles Marsh serves as Professor of Religious and Theological Studies at the University of Virginia. Since coming to the university in 2000, he has directed the Project on Lived Theology, an initiative supported by the Lilly Endowment. The mission of the project is “to clarify the interconnection of theology and lived experience and by so doing, to offer academic resources to the pursuit of social justice and human flourishing.”

More than 400 scholars, practitioners, pastors, and theologians have participated in the events and programs of the Project. They work together in “familiar and unconventional spaces” where students and scholars can collaborate with practitioners. They seek to learn from one another and to construct a common vocabulary to “plumb the theological depth and detail of lived experience.” Marsh and his colleagues offer models of communicating concerning practices and patterns of Christian communities. Graduate students in the program related to the Project gain an apprenticeship in connecting theological ideas, congregational practices, public conversations, and civic responsibility.

Books by Charles Marsh include *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology* (1994); *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (1997); *The Last Days: A Son’s Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of a New South* (2001); *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (2005); and, *Wayward Christian Soldiers: Freeing the Gospel from Political Captivity* (2007). He received the Grawemeyer Prize in 1998 for *God’s Long Summer*, an annual award given by the Louisville

Presbyterian Theological Seminary and the University of Louisville to the author of a book that makes a highly significant contribution to religious and spiritual understanding.

Q. Tell us about the Project on Lived Theology. When did you start?

A. In some respects I started this project as a teenager in the Deep South, as a teenager trying to make sense of faith and social practices. But more formally I started in graduate school years, studying with a faculty heavily invested in theory, postmodern and deconstructionist, French critical theory, and all of that. I struggled to find a connection back to life.

It wasn't really until I got to the dissertation stage and began to read Dietrich Bonhoeffer in earnest that I saw he had been struggling with some of the same questions I struggled with. He had made a pathway—a compelling pathway—from systematic and philosophical theology back to congregational practices and lived faith in the world.

Bonhoeffer came for a year at Union Theological Seminary, New York, in 1930-31. He came as a real “straight arrow” German academic. He had all the right answers, proper theologically, “pure dogmatics,” out of his two doctoral dissertations by the time he was twenty-five. In New York City he became deeply engaged with American social theology, the African American Church, especially the Abyssinian Baptist Church congregation, and what I call the “American organizing tradition.” So, for example, Miles Horton, who later founded the Highlander Folk School, was one of his classmates. So was Jim Dombrowski, and others at that time—a real cadre of these radical Christians. It transformed Bonhoeffer's life. It was a transformative experience for him, a laboratory of lived theology.

When he went back to Germany after the year, he said something like, “It's now time to move from the ‘phraseological’ to the real.” He did several years later, found Finkenwalde, the dramatic and powerful experiment in the Evangelical Protestant monastic community. But even before that, when he was in Berlin, he was having to deal with this conflict between the highly theoretical German theology and his recent experience in the United States, where Reinhold Niebuhr had looked him straight in the eye and said, “Your doctrine of justification is way too transcendent—and has nothing to do with ethics.” He tried to find a way to bring the two together.

In a large sense, in a profound sense, that is what the Project on Lived Theology is trying to do—in some sense to follow Bonhoeffer's example of bringing those together. We have the space and the encouragement for these gifted young people, these minds and these colleagues to collaborate. We give graduate

students permission to work from their faith and their intellects freely, to make that journey back into life.

Q. So you couldn't have a Finkenwalde, but you could have a space in a regular institution, a university?

A. Yes, we are trying to create a space in a university, a research university, where graduate students are given the freedom to find a way back to life, to find ways to have theology make a difference in the life of the church and the world. And a band of fellow-travelers who are scholars and practitioners makes the pilgrimage with them.

We had a kind of “trial run” with a smaller grant from the Lilly Endowment when I was still in Baltimore, 1997-1999, with a workgroup of theologians and practitioners. We called it the “Project on Theology and Community.” After talking with Craig Dykstra, and after receiving a job offer from the University of Virginia [UVa], we decided to incarnate it in an institutional setting and in more detail. The Endowment gave us a grant in 2000 when I arrived, and we have been developing The Project ever since.

Q. Was that possibility attractive to the administration and faculty colleagues here at UVa, did you encounter resistance, or both?

A. Initially, the promise of a theological venture that was public, and was attempting to build bridges between the academy and the community seemed attractive to Jefferson's university, one that understands a part of its mission is to develop civic leaders. They were pleased to have students connecting academics and public life, public action. Ed Ayers was the Dean of Arts and Sciences at the time [Ayers since moved to become President at University of Richmond]. He loved interdisciplinary efforts. He was most encouraging, but so were most of the others involved.

At the same time, that welcome doesn't speak to some of the concerns of the religious studies faculty. Some were—and continue to be— entrenched in what we might call “an older paradigm” of approaching the work of teaching and scholarship by bracketing their faith commitment and trying to work in “value-free” contexts. Perhaps our work was perplexing at the start to a few scholars.

One of my most supportive colleagues is Peter Ochs, in Jewish Studies, who has been crucial in moving our program and the religious studies discipline more broadly across the country, to what he terms a “traditions-based approach.” You are encouraged to speak out from the richness of your tradition — Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim. So that affirmation of religious and faith traditions

helps this project enormously, as I am convinced it also invigorates the classroom, makes teaching more honest and vital.

Q. *And your Project on Lived Theology has been closely allied to that of Dorothy Bass and the Valparaiso Project?*

A. I only met Dorothy recently, at a conference at Vanderbilt, but those are wonderful resources she and others, including Craig Dykstra, have put together. We use them in helpful ways, especially the new book, *For Life Abundant*. That article by Serene Jones I find particularly insightful, the part about “the practical in systematic theology.” There really is a symbiosis between the focus on Christian practices and our focus on lived theology. And we examine and inculcate Christian practices and the study of practices in our project.

But it is not our mission to design a course of study in practical theology. We hope to meld theology and actions, faith’s lived expressions in the world. We seek to voice those relationships with the same rigor and analytical precision with which we engage theological texts and ideas. Another part of our mission is to establish spaces in which academics and practitioners can engage each other. That, at the end of the day, is for me the most exciting part of this.

Q. *Who do you attract into these spaces and these conversations?*

A. We have gradually grown into a community of more than 400. We have gatherings here, of course, but now there are also groups of contacts in Washington, Oakland, Atlanta, Richmond, Baltimore, New York, Mississippi, and elsewhere. We are intentional about who to invite, trying to help foster these spaces in various places.

That is a creative exercise, which for me utilizes similar creative skills to those used in writing and sketching, trying to convene a gathering of 40 people for one of our Spring Institutes for Lived Theology [SILT]. Say the subject is “urban design,” as was the focus of the 2006 SILT. How do we organize neighborhoods and communities architecturally and space with theological insight? Who do we bring? Let’s bring a theologian who has written about housing—Timothy Gorringer. Let’s bring people involved in housing and congregational life, so we ask Heidi Neumark from New York, who has written this wonderful book about housing in her congregation. Let’s bring in Habitat people, people at the cutting edge of theology and architecture. Let’s bring organizers who are working at community level around housing issues. Let’s make a visit to some place together—say, “Sunrise Park,” a Habitat for Humanity effort here in Charlottesville, and let’s listen to the folk who work and direct it. Then let’s think

together with the leaders of the Institute about what we’ve learned and what theology and action are appropriate to further explore and help in this area of living.

As you might imagine, some of our times together prove more fruitful than others, but as long as you know there is a willingness to listen to one another and engage the topic, exciting things happen. I like to say that a new theological vocabulary springs to expression. It did from that conference.

Since then, we have focused a SILT in 2008 on “Theology and the Language of Peace,” and just recently, in April, on the lived theology of John Perkins.

One of the things I really want to do in the next five years is be more helpful to the younger scholars and seminarians, to pastors and others in asking this, “What does this lived theology look like in writing?” “How do you communicate it?” We hope to develop, say, a textbook for seminarians about researching and writing lived theology, as we produce books that model this distinctive genre of theological writing.

Q. *What is an example of that new vocabulary?*

A. One example is a book from Mark Gornik, one of the founders of the Habitat in Baltimore. Now he and his wife, who does public health, based in Harlem, are founding a new seminary there, “City Seminary.” It’s specifically to educate new pastors, especially immigrant pastors there. It’s become a vibrant place, out of a church in Harlem.

Mark wrote a book called, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*. It’s a combination of theology, biblical studies, and autobiography. It’s a story of a community, but it’s not a historical account. It’s his deep theological engagement with an inner-city community over a ten-year period. He’s drawing on the Bible and history, but he’s also drawing on the most recent developments in academic theology. He’s testing some of Milbank’s theories, some of Hauerwas’s claims, at the ground level. He finds them wanting in some ways that only life can demonstrate.

Here is a book, hot off the press, by Susan Holman, *God Knows There’s Need: Christian Responses to Poverty*. She is a patristics scholar who also has a degree from Harvard in public health. Rather than pursuing an academic career, Susan chose to work at the community level in ministry and public health. She wanted to write theologically from that experience. Her dissertation was a study of the Cappadocian fathers and their response to poverty and hunger.

Q. *How was she attracted into your effort?*

A. Cynthia Reed at Oxford University Press, who has been helpful in many ways, suggested she would be perfect for our Virginia Seminar on Lived Theology. It gathers once a year with a mix of writers and those scholars and practitioners who should be writing about lived theology. So we asked her to teach us lessons from the wisdom of the ancient church pertinent for local congregations and community efforts. This work is informed by her study of patristics, but also by her day-to-day life and her work with the poor. She wrote this over a three-year period, and it’s very exciting.

Q. *What challenges do you see for The Project?*

A. What I would like to have, but frankly it’s harder to do, is to have more resources coming from pastors and practitioners who do not have the theological training. I would love to have them get their narratives fleshed out and crafted in such a way that they can be told and understood broadly.

One of our undergraduates, who is now finishing his doctorate in theology at Duke, is working with a community minister in the inner city on a co-authored book.

In another area, I wish we had room for more in the graduate program. This year we had fifty applicants, many of whom are extremely well-qualified, and could only admit two.

I teach an undergraduate course, called “The Kingdom of God.” We had 120 students sign up for it right away. We read King, Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and people like that. I find so many with a real hunger, passionately looking for ways to dig deeper into their vocations and to work for justice in the world.

In five or ten years, many of those from the graduate program will be teaching and working in various places. The efforts will be multiplied, I am sure—not in order to do “my thing,” but so that their own creative contributions will foster new ways of connecting the theological enterprise with lived faith.

And, since taking part in the Spring conference on theology and practice at Vanderbilt, which brought together many of us who work to help interface academic life and faith, Christian life at the local community, congregational level, I see my work even more a part of a national movement. I find that both encouraging and freeing.

Q. *Are there pastors and congregations you are particularly drawn to? Who provide resources for you and are susceptible to this project?*

A. It’s a mystery to me why some congregations and pastors are drawn to this and others are not. It would be interesting to explore that question more thoroughly. There are some involved deeply, and others you would think should be but are here only infrequently.

Our sustained institutes and conferences are by invitation. And we ask for a two and a half-day commitment in exchange for room and board and materials to be studied. We want them to be a part of that from beginning to end.

There are also students involved. Graduate students are helping in the planning and coordination, putting together the logistics for the institute. And others are involved—helping with panels, and sometimes presenting their own work. Then lots of students are also involved in the public part of an institute or a public lecture—both graduate and undergraduate.

For the public part of this most recent SILT, studying the work of John Perkins, we sent letters to pastors in our database, e-mails, and notices. The people who responded enthusiastically were evangelicals, like Trinity P.C.A., where three young pastors are engaged and energetic. There’s also an emerging church called The Portico, and the pastor there is interested in racial reconciliation. And then there are Protestant liberals—a UCC pastor, mainline folk such as PCUSA members with a social justice interest. There are several Catholic Worker, peace and justice folk kind of people involved. And then there are always Mennonites and Quakers.

If it were not for some of these Mennonite conversation partners, I do not think the project would have made the impact or the success it has. I had John Perkins tell me once that he didn’t know why African Americans in Mississippi didn’t all become Anabaptists and Quakers because they were the first ones caring.

The audiences differ according to the speaker and the event. Don Shriver, here recently drew more mainline Protestants. Moltmann drew everybody. For some reason we didn’t get as many African Americans when John Perkins came as I thought we would. When I first came to town, I began meeting with leaders of congregations and groups here. One thing I found was a profound distrust among the African American leaders of the university. It has taken a long time to work through that, and there’s still more to do.

Q. *You have been leading this project for almost a decade. I know you enjoy seeing now the “fruit of your work” in the “lived theology” of graduates and their scholarship. Tell us about them and something of their work.*

A. Obviously, seeing former students flourish as mature theologians and practitioners of lived theology is most gratifying. Our first graduate was Peter Slade. [[View video excerpt about Slade at the website.](#)]

Then, Jennifer McBride, who wrote a brilliant dissertation here and also coordinated SILT for a number of years. When she graduated, she accepted a Lilly-funded post-doctoral position in practical theology at Emery’s Candler School of Theology. She has skills that lend themselves to teaching, research, and creative participation in the church’s social witness.

It is encouraging to see how The Project on Lived Theology has tapped into a huge hunger on the part of many in the younger generation to connect academic work with responsible action in the world for the sake of others.

At the end of the day what keeps this project so engaging is seeing how both graduates and undergraduates flesh out the vision of lived theology. I don’t try to control or to script that. It’s the spirit out there working. In this new generation there is a kind of resurgence of moral energy. They are looking for ways to make a difference. They are hungering for richer theological understandings. They are compassionate. They know that after their first blush of moral enthusiasm wanes they will need something more enduring to sustain the work over the longer haul. They also have a renewed interest in the traditions. So they are drawing from the traditions in ways that certainly strengthen the work of the project.

Q. *And how about your own sense of vocation and fulfillment?*

A. This is my life’s calling. I have a sense of confidence that I am doing the work God has called me to do. I am deeply grateful for the resources to do the work. And I feel a deep sense of commitment to this calling, whether it keeps me at Virginia or moves us elsewhere.

I feel like those first several years did involve doing some really hard work. Occasionally I had to overcome resistance. It is good for me occasionally to remember that the Project on Lived Theology is an initiative that twenty years ago, when I was here as a student, seemed inconceivable.

Now because of the success of the graduate students, the support of the Lilly Endowment, and the intensity of engagement in the work, it feels like we’ve hit

our stride. I am confident that the next five years will be the most productive in terms of the research paying off in community engagement and developing resources for other institutions and initiatives interested in the work of lived theology.

Q. *What about the fruit of the Project on Lived Theology for people who cannot get to Charlottesville, or are not invited to participate in one of the small institutes?*

A. We think about that question all the time. It’s very disheartening to receive e-mails that say, “This is so exciting!” “How can I get involved?” It remains a dilemma for us, but we’re tied to a place.

We’ve tried to use the website to disseminate information and resources freely. There we name people and books and things related to our resources, so everyone can get in touch somehow.

[Interviewer Post Script: The Project on Lived Theology website, www.livedtheology.org is an accessible, substantial resource for pursuing further knowledge and insights from The Project. It freely provides videos and audio tapes from recent conferences and public lectures, including all of those cited in the interview text. It also provides elaboration on many of the references in this edited interview.]