

Project on Lived Theology Internship: Final Paper

This summer was a long theological journey for me. If I have learned anything from the experience, it is that this journey will be never ending. I interned at the ONE Campaign, an extraordinary organization that allowed me to see a very unique side of the non-profit world. As an advocacy organization that aims to raise awareness about extreme poverty and preventable diseases, particularly in Africa, it also strives to persuade policy makers to make choices to support smart and sustainable programs in the developing world. Clearly, ONE has a big job to undertake. It is through the many advocates, supporters, and followers of ONE that the campaign has garnered much respect since its conception. With more than 2 million members, the ONE Campaign is an organization to be lauded for its grassroots tactics as *well* as its “grass-tops” tactics, engaging national and global leaders alike for its cause. This summer I found that, above all, ONE has been successful because people *care*. Whether it is a Conservative Member of Congress who signed the pledge to give \$450 million over 3 years for life-saving vaccinations in developing countries, or a soccer mom who visited Kenya with other ONE moms to see what’s been done on the ground, or even a religious college student, all of these people care about the world’s poorest people. They *care* so much that they want to *do something*. For me, the common denominator to all of this is *lived theology*. At the start of this internship program, I was not quite sure how to describe lived theology. As my thoughts became reflections, which then became my blog posts, I found I was able to weave together common themes to discover just

how my experience was a “project on lived theology”. To begin, I will hone in on four key aspects of my experience this summer that will shed light on how I have developed a strong sense of how my faith can be used for a greater purpose in the world. The first is interfaith dialogue and action, which I encountered while reading an eye-opening book entitled *Allah: A Christian Response*. The second is an emphasis on living proof, a term used by the ONE Campaign to show that the work they do is really working. The third is the difference between one’s national religious view and one’s global religious view. I will then end with a personal examination of how I discovered my role as a Christian in the world after the experience as an intern for the Project on Lived Theology.

Interfaith dialogue is both valuable and necessary for the world that we live in today. Ten years ago, the September 11th attacks brought religious conflict to the forefront of the world’s problems. Religious intolerance has become pervasive in the United States and in other areas of the world. Dialogue between religions has the ability to address the misconceptions, stereotypes, and judgments held about diverse religions. Miroslav Volf’s book *Allah: A Christian Response* posits an interesting argument that could be the cornerstone in future Christian-Muslim dialogues. His argument is that Christians and Muslims worship a common God. Because they worship a common God, they have common ground to view the world’s problems and work together to solve them. Volf explains that because of the common love found in both Islam and Christianity, he believes that “there is no

reason why we should not join forces and care together” (213)¹. While working at ONE, I was exposed to this sort of thinking. ONE Sabbath rallies individuals and congregations of all faiths to raise awareness and advocate on behalf of the world’s poorest people. It attempts to harness this idea of religious cooperation. If various faiths can rally around a common cause, then the differences between them can seem to diminish. This is not to say that the differences between the faiths don’t matter. The point here is that differences between religions should not and don’t need to get in the way of a chance for faith communities to come together and use their power to effect change in the world. This is the kind of manpower that is needed to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. Faith communities hold so much potential for grassroots mobilization, and even more so if these faith communities enter into meaningful dialogue about how they can cooperate to help the world.

Human beings always want proof. Proof is an indication that something is valid and true. A bit part of the job at ONE is to prove to people that what we are campaigning for is working and will continue to work. ONE started the Living Proof campaign to highlight individuals and communities that are thriving because they have received sustainable aid from governments like the United States. I could talk here about the numbers, which are certainly important. Take, for instance, the fact that as of 2008 less than 9 million children were dying each year as opposed to 20 million in 1960. Or the fact that nearly 4,000,000 Africans are now on life-saving Aids medication, what we called Anti-retroviral medication. Or, most astounding of

¹ Volf, Miroslav. *Allah: A Christian Response*. HarperOne: 2011.

all, that over 1 billion people have been lifted out of the vicious cycle of poverty. These numbers and facts are crucial to convincing the American public and other wealthy, developed countries that foreign aid IS effective and sustainable. Amidst all of this demand for proof, I found myself wishing that we didn't need to constantly ask for proof that giving sustainable aid to the worlds poorest is working. But this constant demand for proof is not a new one. It is as ancient as any concept. Even Moses knew the people of Israel would need proof that the Lord appeared to him. He cries, "suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say 'The Lord did not appear to you'". In turn, the Lord grants Moses certain miracles to perform for the people to convince them of the truth. Even Jesus was not beyond giving proof of his message. In the Gospel of John, we find Jesus proclaiming, "I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father". The Bible shows that demand for proof and the presence of proof is as much a part of Christianity as it is a part of the secular world. I struggled with this idea that faith alone is not enough for Christians to believe that what is right, such as advocating for the worlds poorest around the globe, does not need proof. I realize that we are all human and Jesus also understood that humans need proof to believe. The best way to see proof is through human lives. I don't just mean lives that have been saved, but lives that have been transformed. Miroslav Volf says it best in his book, QUOTE"God loves human beings not because they are or strive to be godly, but in spite of the fact that they are ungodly; and God loves them so as to create godliness in them, transforming them into beings who reflect God's love in the world" END QUOTE. This is a powerful

comment on how God manifests his love in the world. It made me look at proof in a new light. I see proof now as something to rejoice in and be glad about, maybe even to shout from the rooftops. There IS good news happening every day, which I now understand is proof of God's love in the world.

A big challenge that ONE faces is why Americans should be helping out other countries when our country has so many of its own problems that need solving. This argument has been applied in many different areas. For instance, some American farmers are hesitant to support agricultural programs that are focused on developing countries when they are struggling to maintain their own farms right here in the U.S. The question of whether or not to help the world's poorest is what many Americans may see as something not worth caring about. But in a world so deeply connected, it *is* something worth caring about. Sandra Joireman makes an interesting case in her book *Church, State, and Citizen: Christian Approaches to Political Engagement*. She explains, QUOTE "Americans tend to view history and the place of Christians in it through the glasses of the history of the United States – the lead nation of freedom, prosperity, and democracy- rather than through the glasses of the coming of God's creation-wide kingdom in Jesus Christ" (66)² END QUOTE. As a Christian and an American, it can be easy to fall into thinking that God has a special place in his kingdom for Americans because of their achievements at home and abroad. It may sound obvious, but it is easy to forget that God's kingdom does not favor Americans. Something that I have become aware of as a result of this summer

² Joireman, Sandra. *Church, State, and Citizen: Christian Approaches to Political Engagement*. Oxford University Press: 2009.

is how much I have believed in the *exceptionalism* of America. I have been so proud to call myself an American, where going to school is a right, not a privilege, and where I can speak my mind without fear of punishment by my government. I realize that I need to change my thinking from America as an exceptional and superior nation to America as a nation that has the resources and capacity to help other nations. I have fallen into the trap of “idolizing” America. Since this summer, this is what I have begun to remind myself:: As an American, I will always be proud of America and grateful for the life I am fortunate to have because of its liberties. But as a Christian, I will continue to challenge myself to believe in the possibilities and future of every nation. I do care about the world’s poorest because God cares about them. It is not a pitying sort of care, or a pitying sort of love. It is an inclusive love for those suffering around the world because God himself does not see national borders.

Finally, this internship has allowed me to take a long, hard look at my own Christian faith and where I stand in the world as a religious young woman. For one, this experience has showed me that my religion can help me do many more things that I ever thought possible. For so long, my Christianity has been characterized by what one writer, Leah Sepannen, would describe as “an acceptance and even promotion of the political status quo” ³. Perhaps I was living in a state of naiveté, in which I simply didn’t see the correlation between my faith and how I could do good things for the world. I remember when I was about nine or ten selling hot chocolate

³ Sepannen, Leah. *Church, State, and Citizen: Christian Approaches to Political Engagement*. Oxford University Press: 2009.

with my friends on the corner by my house. After we wrapped up for the day, I proposed delivering our earnings to our church down the street. We did so, and while I was the one who proposed it, I don't think I understand the value of my actions. I am so proud of my ten-year-old self and would like to say that I saw it as a way of living out my faith but I can't be sure. What I know for sure is that this summer has been a true testament to the value of one's faith in action. At this moment in my life, I have never been more aware of how my religion can directly affect the role I play in making the world a better place. I had never thought long and hard about how being an Episcopalian would directly relate to being a citizen of the United States. I realize now that the feeling I get when I volunteer or help others is not a feeling of self-satisfaction or pride, but rather of God's love. There is no other feeling like it in the world. It is the love of a parent, a mother or father's love for a child. It is unconditional and eternal. As an Episcopalian, my potential lies in the love I have to give to the world. Because of this, I will always have the power to effect change and also engage in political action.

When I wrote my application for the Project on Lived Theology internship program, I mentioned the power I found in my mother's love. It is the same love that I have found this summer through Jesus Christ. I have had a glimpse into one of the greatest commandments, "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself". This type of love is groundbreaking and it has the potential to unite people of all faiths. As I say this, I still find it hard to explain in just one sentence what lived theology is all about, but I am certain that my experience this summer showed me, more than anything else in my life, how best to live my life through faith in God. I have learned to live and love

in richer and more diverse ways than I ever knew I could. This type of opportunity comes around so rarely that I will carry it with me forever. Wherever I go and whomever I meet, I will bring the reminder that my faith is lived out in everything that I do. For this, I want to thank Dr. Marsh, for guiding me to this blessed opportunity.