

CHRISTUS lecture focuses on understanding among religions

By Perilla A. Wilson

"To be religious today is to be inter-religious in the sense that a positive relationship with believers of other faiths is a requirement in a world of religious pluralism," is a statement from the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in 1995 that sums up the presentation by Dr. John Switzer at the opening Christus Theological Institute and Jewish-Christian Dialogue programs for the 2007-08 year.

The event in Byrne Hall by the assistant professor of Theology at Spring Hill College was titled, "Strangers No

More: The Pedagogy of Interreligious Hospitality."

Switzer began by pointing out that we, as humans, interpret our experiences and are all involved in interpersonal relationships, so it is necessary to examine how we should respond as religious people who want to share our faith. He said that there has been a cultural shift in the west and we should try to perceive this in a positive manner, recalling Augustine's admonition, "Christians should be open to the truth wherever it's found."

The French philosopher Jean-Francois

Lyotard, in the late 1970's, analyzing trends of thinking in the Western context, reported that we, as social beings, influence each other, and he did not believe that the patterns of thinking such as rationality, objectivity, and certainty that were associated with modernity applied any longer. He cited three characteristics of postmodernity: the demythologizing or rejection of master narratives as only relevant to a particular culture at a particular time; a socio-constructive understanding of truth in which it rejects

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objectivity and views truth as nothing but the best guess at any given time; a religious and cultural diversity unseen since Greco-Roman days and creating a global village without the homogeneity that characterizes villages so that religious and cultural differences are being argued and depreciated "at an astounding pace."

Switzer quoted Karl Rahner as saying that each of us has become the "spiritual neighbor of everyone else in the world" and each of our religious communities is "a question posed, and a possibility offered, to every person." He showed a slide of the large number of religious festivals or holidays in the United States alone just for the month of September. Just a few, as an example, include: Jews, 6 million—Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot; Muslims, 3-4 million—Ramadan; Buddhists, 2-4 million—Sept. Equinox, Rains Retreat; Hindus, 1.3 million—Krishna, Ganesha. Then there are celebrations, also, of Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Shintos, Wiccans, Jains, Baha'is, Native Americans, even Scientologists.

We should recognize that diversity itself is not a new development and that the different faiths have always influenced and challenged each other. Switzer mentioned one statistic on religious conversions saying that, of the 16% of Americans who had "switched" religious identity, the vast majority had simply dropped religion altogether.

The usual teaching model is intramural, a tendency to first carry out this calling as a monologue, insuring that the faithful are fully versed in their own beliefs as a bulwark against the influence of other religions. Only secondary, then, is dialogue. It is "to be engaged in only after one's particular identity is firmly established." It is no wonder that the relationship, therefore, among religions often is "one of competitiveness and hostility rather than cooperation and partnership."

Switzer proposed to religious leaders that they adopt a preemptive hospitality, encouraging them to seek opportunities to formulate sustained encounters, to foster growth in self-identity and understanding of otherness, to see every moment as a teaching opportunity by exploring one's own traditions as well as experiencing dialogue with others about their traditions, e.g. fasting, food traditions/restrictions, special feasts, sharing ecological concerns. By radically transforming the way we live in the world and seeking understanding of other cultures and faiths, we can return to our own tradition enriched.

"If we are most human when we interpret our experience and when we deal with the ultimate questions about life's value and human destiny," according to Switzer, "then religion (faith) is all about being human." In the Jesuit tradition, "let us welcome one another in our differences."



LECTURE AT SHC—Rickie Voit, Springhill Avenue Temple; Honey Dimitriadis, Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church; Mary Filben, co-founder of Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue are seen with speaker Dr. John Switzer, Spring Hill College Associate Professor of Theology, at the first joint Christus Theological Institute and Jewish-Christian Dialogue lecture for 2007-08 at Byrne Hall on the college campus. (Photo by Keith Necaize)