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Theology from the Underside

In March 2011 I took my class "Theology from the Underside" on an immersion travel experience called Borderlinks©. The students were required to read and study prior to the trip, to become active participants while on the trip, and then to theologically reflect on their learning afterward. We traveled to the border region of Tucson, Arizona, and Nogales, Mexico, to experience the path that migrants take as they cross the hot desert into the United States in search of work to support their families. The students experienced some of the dangers of the crossing by examining the border wall, walking through the desert, and conversing with captured migrants who were being cared for in a women's shelter in Nogales. We heard first-hand accounts of how the migrants risk their lives by crossing the border through the desert. The American government criminalizes migrants by using terms such as alien, clutter,

and illegal, and categorizes them as the “Other.” When migrants are viewed as the Other, it is easier to treat them as subordinate and undesirable beings.

When my “Theology from the Underside” class returned from our trip, the students had to write reflection papers, engage in public awareness of the problems endured by the migrants, and take part in some local action aimed at eliminating the process of Othering. The students spoke at their local churches and social agencies to raise awareness of the legal problems surrounding the harsh and inhumane treatment of migrants caught by border patrols. They also preached and taught Bible studies highlighting how people migrated during biblical times and how we are all essentially migrants. As we recognize our own selves and migrant selves, we need to reexamine the laws that treat migrants as radically Other.

The process of Othering not only happens to migrants who come from south of the border, but also to those who come into the United States as legal immigrants. The issue of embracing/accepting the Other is significant to our present world context as there is rapid diversification of cultures, customs, and traditions. It is a “globalized” world and it is crucial for students of theology to acknowledge this reality and allow it to inform how they understand God, the gospel, and the Bible in our time. The problem of the Other has become an important issue in theological discourse as the community of faith interacts with many world communities. Postcolonial theory seeks to address the needs and aspirations of the exploited, and is concerned with the effects of unequal power relations between groups of people.

Many of the students enrolled in “Theology from the Underside” seek to engage in a lived-out theology rather than simply a philosophical exercise. As I reflect on my own teaching, I also strive to be a model learner, as learning is a lifelong journey. I realize that adults come with much life experience and this needs to be respected. I try to begin where the students are, and pay special attention to the connection between reason and experience. I also hope to make theological material exciting and relevant to the learner’s present time and place.

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