

Martin E. Marty, University of Chicago



Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, where from 1963–1998 he taught religious history. He also co-directed the Fundamentalism Project for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Among Marty's recent publications are Education, Religion, and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation about Religion's Role in our Shared Life with Jonathan Moore (2000), Martin Luther (2004), and The Protestant Voice in American Pluralism (2004).

Mooney: How is teaching different from pastoring?

Marty: When I retired somebody asked me how I'd like to be remembered and I said that my dream would be to be remembered as a good teacher. My father was a teacher, my brother and my sister were teachers; it never occurred to me not to have a teaching dimension. And I would also say that I never quite got out of being a pastor. Cardinal Bernardin used to say to me, "My priests ask me to be pastoral to them — they just want me to be mushy and soft." And then he added, "A shepherd has a crook, and you've got to hold the sheep back by their necks on the edge of the cliff." Jerald C. Brauer, the teacher who brought me to the University, both as faculty and student, said, "Marty, remember, pastors can't flunk anybody and teachers have to," and I think I've always kept that in mind.

Mooney: How does pastoring fit in with the aims of education?

Marty: Good teacher-pastors have an instinct to pick out a person in a room who's overlooked, whose ego's been battered. In my own career, placing so many PhD graduates, one of the things I've discerned is that disappointment can be almost as devastating as depression and maybe even despair. Coming in second on a good job, or having your book turned down when you invest these years of scholarship, ego, and family can really kill people. I've been in some PhD exams where I've felt that someone was being unjustly flunked, and the faculty sort of walked away and abandoned them. I've stayed behind and run them through the most rigorous thing they could have, and then when they come up for review a second time with different faculty, they did very well. So, you can relate to people with empathy, understanding their circumstance — which is really, really crucial — whether you're dealing with parishioners or post-doc's.

Mooney: You have to consider religious texts both in a parish and in a university setting. What's the difference?

Marty: Paul Ricoeur made a distinction between three things you can do with a classic text. First, you can study the world behind the text — that's really been my life because I'm a historian. "How did it get to be?" Second is what Ricoeur calls the study of the world of the text. You have students take a text and relate it to their world, but you still stay within the text in a way. You can do that either in adult education, or in an Episcopal church, without being preachy. Third is, as Ricoeur says, when you have to confront the world in front of the text. You use the text, in your teaching or your preaching, to entertain the possibility of a different way of living than your audience would otherwise consider. When people show up in a believing community, in a synagogue, in a church, they know they are looking at a text that their community has paid attention to for 2,500 years, and that people have built an institution surrounding the text. You don't have to apologize for looking at that text, you can get right into it. In the classroom, there's a different covenant, even if it's the same text.

Mooney: What's the difference between teaching undergraduates and graduate students?

Marty: At the University of Chicago graduate faculties teach a lot of undergraduate classes. The biggest difference is that in graduate school, virtually everybody is there because they have credentials in the topic. They have a baccalaureate or master's degree, they're reading the books you've been reading. They're hanging out and sharpening their skills. With the undergrads, you have people who know exactly what they want out of college and others who don't. So sometimes interesting things happen in the undergraduate classroom. I had this student once in a course on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. She talked much about suffering, and the guy next to her said, "What are you talking about? You are well off, you

go to a privileged school, you have high tuition but it's paid for, you've got it made, how can you talk about suffering?" She said, "Mr. Marty, should I tell him?" Well, she had fibromyalgia, and was always on medication. When she was done, the guy next to her said, "Well at least you didn't take refuge in some nut religion like Christian Science." Sitting next to him was a big football player who said, "I'm a Christian Scientist, I resent that!" And we were off and running for a whole quarter.

Mooney: Do you think your approach to teaching has changed over the years?

Marty: I was thirty-five before I stepped into a classroom to teach, so I was scared, and I think that led me to lecture. I thought I had to really load up and unload. But I came to like courses which allowed us to concentrate on six to ten books a quarter. We sat around a table and talked them out. A huge difference that came about in my teaching between 1962 and 1998 was the presence of women.

When I was a graduate student at Chicago, '54-'56, the only women in any of my courses would be the occasional daring nun from one of the Catholic colleges who had a scholarship to get a degree in history. There was an all-male ethos, a dispensing of knowledge that took for granted what was important in a subject, and so on. Then, very suddenly, about half of the students in most of my courses were women. What this meant was that as they read all those texts they found different things in them. When I started teaching, you'd teach history as it's recorded only in bishop's successions and monastery reforms and church conventions, but that's not what most people think religion is about. Our historical approach changed greatly. You could call it social history, history from the ground up, material culture history, whatever. Suddenly the topics came to be childcare, adolescence, all the things that we are writing about now.

I also teach a much more religiously diverse history. I started out at an all-white male, mainline Protestant world. If you took a list of my recent dissertation advisees you'd see Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, blacks, Hispanics, with mainline Protestants a minority. In 1950, '54, '56, mainline Protestants ran the country, ran the state department, were in "Who's Who," or in "The Making of the American Mind." Later, we have Maya Angelou, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, Flannery O'Connor. I didn't spend one minute, in those early years, teaching what went on in African-American churches. Well, by the end of my teaching, I would have any number of students who would do dissertations on worship in black churches.

Mooney: How do you characterize the issues facing the study of religion now?

Marty: Well the biggest change is the switch to a global scale. I'm looking out my window and seeing kids coming home from school. A lot of them could draw a map of Iraq, Iran, or Saudi Arabia or Jordan, more easily than they could one of Iowa or Illinois. Who, other than Muslims and specialists, cared twenty years ago about Islam? Also, the Christian world is shifting dramatically, with fewer Christians in the northern world and many, many more in the south. One estimate is 18,000 more believers in sub-Saharan Africa alone in the last 24 hours. So we better talk about HIV-AIDS, etc. and their role in Christian history and prospects. Asia is closer to us than ever. I wrote a short history of Christianity in 1958, it's still in print, and I don't think it mentions Africa after Augustine. It says nothing about the Church in Korea.

Domestically, I would say that there are two or three big things facing religious studies. The role of women continues to develop as a topic. Then there's religious pluralism. The curiosity about what a Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, or maybe even a Catholic is doesn't match the curiosity about what a Muslim or a Jew is, what the boat people are, or the Mexicans. We're trying to figure it all out. Will Herberg wrote *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* in 1955 and he only devoted a few lines to evangelicalism or pentecostalism. The next big change would be the rise of spirituality. Many students will say, "Yeah, I'm not a member of a religious institution, I'm not sure I'm religious, but I'm very spiritual." The shelf in Borders bookstores that used to say "Religion" has expanded to four or five shelves that read "Christianity," "Hinduism," "Buddhism," "Asian Religions," "Ancient Religions," "Spirituality," "Astrology," "Occult," "Metaphysical." They readers are trying to make sense of their inner life and the world around them. It's protean, it's hard to grab, but it is where the students are.

Mooney: Do you see any radical changes ahead for the professional study of religion?

Marty: Well, by the '50s there was a strong sense of self-consciousness about religion in the university, as though it really didn't belong here. University people are supposed to be atheistic and skeptical. And, it is assumed, it would be embarrassing for someone to admit she is a Catholic or a Protestant or whatever. The style was "More secular than thou." Looking at religion was like looking at specimens in a locust museum. Now that spirituality is so hot, and evangelicals make so much noise about their faith, there's a license to everybody to be more overt, open, and explicit, to be less embarrassed. How that affects the study of religion is still an open question.

Also there's the continuous debate about what religious studies is. When I see how indefinable English and Comp Lit are today, after critical theory and all that, lacking a definition doesn't bother me much. There are four or five ways to go at things in religious studies, and the first one is scientific, as in social scientific. I get the *Scientific Study of Religion* and the *Review of Religious Research*, and half the pages are statistics, regressive analysis. They measure, measure, measure. The historian goes at religion differently, looking at the past. There is an approach through poetry, the imagination. Literature is textually analytic. Ethics and theology feature practice, the will, and moral structures, through which you try to change the world. So a theological seminary will take a text with a desire to change the world. An archaeological center will take a text and see whether or not it matches up with what they dig up in a grave, which will be scientifically measured. Religious studies does more than measure, and it shouldn't be reductionist as in "religion is nothing but..." — nothing but what Freud thought it was, or what Marx thought it was, or whatever. There are many legitimate modes of the study of religion, none of which is exhaustive.

An awful lot of the roots of religion and ritual are bound up with theater and dance and so on. Let's go to Black Elk, the noted Sioux holy man who was delivered to the public by poet John G. Neihardt. We find out later that for years he was a Catholic catechist. One can undertake the social scientific study of how many Lakota Sioux converted to Christianity and how many didn't? How many became priests after 150 years or so of missions? The answer is zero — all I need is a statistic like that and I've made a big point. Now history. Why is a Jew adopted in the tribe of the Dakota Sioux? Friend Harvey Markowitz was also Harvey Horse Looking.

Mooney: If you were talking to a grandchild interested in what you do, what books would you recommend?

Marty: My granddaughter is quite likely going to be a religious studies major in her final two years in college. She found her way toward it on her own. Anybody who goes into this line shouldn't miss reading Augustine's *Confessions*. It's so rich, its discourse on memory is just enthralling. There's Pascal's *Pensées* and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. I'd have them read books in which you get engagement with the great minds, Kierkegaard, etc. — very short books that they can fit in their knapsack and take along, and that will rock them to the bottom of their souls. Have those who would do religious history read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Mooney: You light fires.

Marty: If they read Simone Weil's *Waiting for God*, if they read Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers From Prison*, or Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" — probably the best such document we have since Lincoln's "Second Inaugural" — then they know what it's about. The key is to get them inspired first, and then let the analytic side come through.