

New Landscapes of the Heart: Faith as the Courage to Live with Ambiguity and Uncertainty

Notes by Kenton Machina on a public talk by Prof. Thomas Troeger, Lanz Professor of Christian Communication, Yale University. September 26, 2005, First United Methodist Church, Normal, Illinois.

Religious commitments create “landscapes of the heart” – ways of perceiving and thinking about life’s deepest issues. Every person with religious commitments – Christian or non-Christian – possesses such a landscape.

Having a religious landscape of the heart provides some important benefits, but for each beneficial aspect of a landscape, there is a corresponding distortion that is negative in its effects. John Calvin, the church reformer, made essentially this same point centuries ago: for every good thing we are capable of, there is always a way it can be distorted and made to go wrong (or as Calvin would have said, “sinful”).

Here is a list of four good things about possessing a religious “landscape of the heart”, along with a corresponding distortion for each:

1. **Benefit:** A religious landscape provides a home territory, where one knows one’s way around – a ready way to understand life.

Distortion: One may well come to think that all other landscapes are automatically inferior or wrong, simply because they are not the same as one’s own.

2. **Benefit:** A landscape that includes God creates a familiar pathway for opening up to the presence of God in life, without which one may lack a sensitivity to God’s presence.

Distortion: The only God that can be recognized is one that fits the landscape we have adopted. God gets cramped by our concepts. We miss out on the ways in which God may be present when those ways don’t fit our landscape.

3. **Benefit:** Traditionally-based landscapes protect us from the “hubris of the present”– i.e., the idea that because it’s contemporary or new it must be good. We are reminded that we follow in the footsteps of those who went before us, and who struggled in their own ways with life’s questions, and from whom we may learn.

Distortion: We are not open to the spirit of God, urging us into new ways and depths that make God meaningful to us today, for we have become so bound to the traditional ways of thinking.

4. **Benefit:** The familiar landscape provides a way to deal with the terrors of life, placing them into a meaningful context.

Distortion: We are thereby prevented from the very real spiritual growth that the tensions and honest questions created by trouble can elicit.

Comment on what this means for Christianity today:

We live in a society that seems to have lost its coherence. So, the challenge facing Christian communities today is how to create an atmosphere that welcomes a diversity of landscapes of the heart and that promotes meaningful discussion in which the spirit of God for today may be discerned. Christians need to be open to hearing the spirit of God leading in new ways today. In this situation it is a distortion (i.e., negative, wrong-headed) to construct a community in which definiteness and clarity about the answers is expected or assumed.