

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SERVICE

By Dr. Rebecca Blair '80



Dr. Herbert Cassel

Many people tend to think that “belief” and “faith” are synonymous. The following story provides a way to distinguish these two aspects of the Christian life. In the 1890s a French tightrope walker performed on a three-inch cable that was suspended over Niagara Falls. He accomplished this feat in various ways: forward and backward, etc. He then announced to the spectators that the finale of his act would be to walk on that tight rope above Niagara Falls with someone on his shoulders. The spectators discussed whether or not they believed that he could do it. But—when he taps you on the shoulder and says ‘Climb on,’—that’s when you find whether or not you have faith. Christian faith includes assent to propositions (or belief), but it requires commitment of one’s life.

This story, related by Dr. Herb Cassel, Raines-Mueller Professor of Philosophy and Religion Emeritus at the University of Indianapolis, succinctly sums up his approach to faith. Faith must be lived out, or it is not genuine. Mere profession, even if such profession is quite sincere, is not enough. In this way, service outwardly expresses faith, what we believe. Faith and service, in this context, function to mark a way of life, an expression of gratitude to God for what we have received, an expression of concern for those around us in need whose lives



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we can enrich because we have been given talents, opportunities, and education. Such essential endeavors, Cassel asserts, result in a better world, bettering the lives of people around us.

During his years at the institution, this credo formed the center of what Dr. Cassel hoped to instill in his students by example. He rooted his teaching in the definition of the Christian life offered to him by the Dean of the Seminary at Temple University: “the Christian life is the eternal proximation towards an unrealizable ideal.” In other words, though we, being human, cannot live completely perfect lives, we do have the ability to live lives which strive to meet a Christian ideal. Therefore, humans should work constantly toward the Christian ideal, knowing that it is ultimately unreachable. The point, of course, notes Cassel, is not in the reaching, but rather in the striving, an idea in keeping with the Wesleyan concept of Christian perfection, the striving for perfect love. Moreover, one’s claim to have attained such an ideal is, in reality, a denial of its true attainment, like being proud of being humble. Cassel punctuates his thought by noting that “faith has to be our belief in action, and if it isn’t lived out, then it is, in some sense, false.” He believes that we are all hypocrites to the extent that our ideals are

often focused higher than our accomplishments. Always a philosopher by nature, Cassel cites William James, the 19th century American philosopher, to support his own belief, noting James’ view that “our ideals always *ought* to be ahead of our accomplishments. Otherwise, we cannot achieve much.” Such hypocrisy, Cassel concludes, is “OK as long as our ideals are good ones.”

The chief application of these beliefs comes in the intersection of education and service. Testing and distilling one’s ideals into “good ones,” Cassel notes, forms the core of a liberal arts education. In Cassel’s view, the crucial value of a liberal arts education emerges when it goes beyond skills training to develop multiple facets within the individual by his or her participation in a broad range of course study. “For example,” he asserts, “one may not be a musician or an athlete, yet one can learn to appreciate the skill and value involved in the making of music or the execution of a play in football.” In fact, Cassel draws an overt distinction between an education and the earning of a degree, declaring that both are available to students, while only an education involves “mining professors’ intellects for their knowledge and wisdom,” so that one transforms oneself into “a person who has learned to think, has come to believe something worthwhile, has tested that belief through living and the opinions of other respected people.”

For Cassel, the college years can be both formative and transformative. He recalls that as a youth he feared that to experience doubt was to lose one’s faith. Instead, doubt—an uneasy state of mind—spurs learning, precipitates growth in maturity, leading to a more adequate belief. As the apostle Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 13:11, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” Moving from childish beliefs then, makes doubt a means to learning, greater understanding, a more mature person, and a more mature faith.

Students come to college with ideas and beliefs that frequently have not been validated by experience, sound reasoning, and a broader perspective on relevant aspects of such ideas and beliefs. Cassel argues that instructors at the University of Indianapolis should inform students of the issues and problems that arise when one studies various disciplines. Such study may generate uneasiness about the adequacy of the student’s prior beliefs or beliefs in relation to any of the academic disciplines, including matters religious. Inquiry can then proceed as an avenue to a more adequate belief.



An incisive focus on such intellectual and spiritual growth marks Herb Cassel's career in teaching and ministry as well as his personal vocational journey. Born and raised in eastern Pennsylvania, Cassel grew up in a household of faith. His father, a soldier in WW I, returned home to start a laundry business, but, after a time, experienced a call to ministry, serving in the Evangelical Congregational Church, a branch of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the founding denomination of Indiana Central College. After graduation from Sunbury High School, Herb Cassel came to Huntington College in Huntington, Indiana, intending to follow his call to a ministerial vocation. During his senior year in college, on the Sunday prior to final exam week, his father died of a heart attack in the pulpit. The need to fulfill his vocation intensified as he returned to Allentown, Pennsylvania at the conclusion of the semester to accept a one-year ministerial appointment.

Realizing that his preparation for ministry required further study, Cassel enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at Temple University, attaining, as he notes, "both the education and the degree" before moving to serve a larger church in a suburb of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. During this period

of study and reflection, Cassel realized that preaching, for him, really constituted teaching others not only about God's word, but about the larger workings of faith and theology. Now married, he and his wife decided that he should pursue further education in graduate school with the aim of his teaching at the university level. His graduate educational experience accumulated as he followed his interests and thinking to several institutions. He first accepted an appointment to a small church in New Jersey to be close to Princeton Theological Seminary, where he studied for two years, earning a Th.M., or Master's Degree in Theological Study. Cassel then journeyed to the University of Michigan for a year of philosophy study, followed by a return to Temple University to conclude study and research for the Ph.D. in religion.

As frequently occurred at this period in the College's history, Dr. I. Lynd Esch, then President of Indiana Central, learned of a young minister and scholar, working in the Evangelical Association tradition, who appeared to possess the right qualifications, credentials which matched Esch's notion of a suitable successor to Dr. Robert McBride, who became dean of academic affairs at Albright College. Esch interviewed Cassel, who started his career at Indiana Central in August, 1966 as Chair of the Philosophy and Psychology Department, later reconfigured as the Department of Philosophy and

Religion in 1971. Cassel relates that he was thrilled to accept the position because the College offered an opportunity to "teach theological material in a larger liberal arts ethos, all of which was housed within a church-related college," though he does note that sorting through the implications of such a configuration have frequently proved to be problematic for the institution itself.

One primary issue related to this complex institutional identity concerned the number of faculty members, hired principally for their ministerial credentials, whose preparation in disciplinary fields was criticized as less than adequate. More specifically, this issue impacted the Department of Philosophy and Religion as critics charged that some of its courses were "too pietistic" and not intellectually rigorous. Dr. Cassel sought to address this issue by working with his faculty colleagues to recast the departmental curriculum to reflect a more scholarly bent with direct resonances to the idea of the liberal arts. Secondly, with Dr. David Anderson, Cassel led the Promotion and Tenure Committee to adopt new, more consistent procedures for promotion and tenure of faculty, a system intended to move the focus toward scholarly activities in specific disciplinary areas. Over the years, the role of department chairs in the hiring process for new faculty increased, moving the professional culture beyond a private denominational focus to a broader academic focus.

In addition to improving the educational experience for students, these changes also created a professional climate in which Herb Cassel could more completely fulfill his sense of vocation. He muses that throughout his career he viewed himself "as a clergyperson who teaches. One of my dreams," he continues, "before I came to Indiana Central was to teach in a seminary so that I might be able to educate persons preparing for ministry. Though I thought at some point I might leave to pursue this calling, I realized that I had the opportunity to pursue such an initiative right here with pre-theology students." Moreover, he found that he could teach not only future min-

isters, but Christian laypersons and others who had experienced callings to vocations besides formal ministry, a conception that he hopes came to fruition for students as he modeled intellectual and personal acceptance of individuals of various cultures and faith traditions. These practical expressions of Christian faith fit in well with the stated values of the College.

The 1951 Indiana Central College Bulletin, entitled “The Essential Difference: Education for Service,” outlines in some detail the elements identified as crucial components of the educational experience at a college of the church. This publication proclaims that “Christianity makes an essential difference in life. The practice of the principles which Jesus taught and lived stands today as the only alternative to world chaos. These principles must be inculcated into the life of each new generation.” The publication then details how the threat of educational secularization can be resisted by church-related colleges who uphold Christian ideals by regarding “true faith” as embodied in service. This last statement identifies the essential issue at a college of the church: how can the institution best balance faith and liberal learning?

Dr. Cassel embodies this conundrum in his work and life. In conjunction with his intellectual practice inside the liberal arts tradition, Cassel unabashedly claims an ongoing commitment to the pietistic tradition: “What I believe is that it is extremely important for us to make sense of our faith. I do not believe that our faith should be mere emotion or completely non-rational. Yet, faith must be expressed in a form that demands that what we believe is what we express in our lives.” For Cassel, one who comes from a pietistic approach doesn’t have to sacrifice one’s faith or vocation to be an intellectual Christian. Doing so, however, requires one to move beyond the self to what he or she sees as the essential message of Christianity: service to others. To focus on self-interest, for Cassel, is sin.

Mulling over the University motto, “Education for Service,” Cassel responds that “there are ways in which the word ‘service’ doesn’t inspire me.” He prefers to think in terms of vocation, which points to commit-



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ting oneself to a worthwhile, ongoing mission, rather than in terms of service, which connotes less involvement with or commitment to a larger vision of one’s work in the world. “Vocation comes from one’s own determination. The ideal of service must have some kind of internal motivation or sense of engagement,” he observes. In fact, Cassel highlights the Jewish tradition’s emphasis upon practice over belief, positing that what one practices is what one comes to believe and to live. This belief-practice dichotomy, in his view, works both ways. If one is invited to serve, he or she may catch a vision of the deeper meaning embedded in the service itself, or a vision of what might be accomplished, so that a richer commitment results as service transforms into vocation.

Dr. Herb Cassel has certainly caught such a vision himself. During his long career at the University of Indianapolis, he served in many capacities [see following list]. In retirement he has continued to serve the United Methodist Church (UMC) in various ways. These include his service as chair of the Commission on Archives and History for the South Indiana Conference UMC for eight years, and he has served for the past six years as the dean of the Indiana Area Extension Course of Study School for part-time local pastors in the UMC. In this latter role, he has recruited faculty, handled the paperwork for over 140 students each semester, and served as liaison to the Board of Ministry for the South Indiana Conference. Over a lifetime committed to teaching, scholarship, and ministry, Dr. Herb Cassel has exemplified the philosophy of service by simply living it.

Dr. Herbert Cassel’s Service to the University and Beyond:

- Chair, Sutphin Lectures Committee, 1970-81
 - Director of Indiana Committee for the Humanities projects: “The Right to Live, The Right to Die.” Spring, 1974
“Alienation and Reconciliation” Fall, 1974
 - Founded and directed Faculty Forum at University of Indianapolis, 1976-96
 - Served on Educational Policies and Curriculum Committee, 1971-83
 - Chair, Showers Lecture Committee, 1983-93
 - Chair, Promotion and Tenure Committee, 1988-90
 - President, U of I American Association of University Professors (AAUP) chapter, 1983-85
 - Founding Faculty Sponsor, ALPHA CHI, senior honor society, 1984-95
 - ALPHA CHI Vice President, Region Five, 1984-86
 - ALPHA CHI President, Region Five, 1986-88
 - Raines–Mueller Professor of Philosophy & Religion, 1986–96
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INDEX OF PHOTOGRAPHS: IDENTIFICATIONS & PERMISSIONS

1. Dr. Herbert Cassel with a young couple – in his role as ordained clergyman performing a wedding ceremony; personal photograph used with Herb Cassel's permission.
2. Formal shot of Dr. Herb Cassel from 2000; professional photograph by Olin Mills Studios, used with permission.
3. Cassel with a fellow seminarian, Suk Koo Lee from Seoul, South Korea at Princeton Theological Seminary in early 1960s.
4. Cassel making presentation to Paul Coats at Philosophy & Religion Department Banquet (1985); personal photograph used with Herb Cassel's permission.
5. Cassel with a group of faculty and students – Alpha Chi initiation event (1985); used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives of the University of Indianapolis.