

## Rotheiser: Dual citizenship

I live on both sides of a border. Not a geographical one, but one which is often a dividing line between two groups.

I was raised a conservative Roman Catholic, and conservative in most other things as well. Although my dad worked politically for the Liberal party, most everything about my upbringing was conservative, particularly religiously. I was a staunch Roman Catholic in every way. I grew up under the papacy of Pius XII (the fact that my youngest brother is named Pius, will tell you how loyal our family was to that Pope's version of things). We believed that Roman Catholicism was the one true religion and that Protestants needed to convert and return to the true faith. I memorized the Roman Catholic catechism and defended its every word. Moreover, beyond being faithful church-goers, my family was given over to piety and devotions: we prayed the rosary together as a family every day; had statues and holy pictures everywhere in our house; wore blessed medals around our necks; prayed litanies to Mary, Joseph, and the Sacred Heart; and practiced a warm devotion to the saints. And it was wonderful. I will forever be grateful for that religious foundation.

I went from my family home to the seminary at the tender age of seventeen and my early seminary years solidly reinforced what my family had given me. The academics were good and we were encouraged to read great thinkers in every discipline. But this higher learning was still solidly set within a Roman Catholic ethos that valued all the things religiously and devotionally I'd been raised on. My studies were still friends with my piety. My mind was expanding, but my piety remained intact.

But home is where we start from. Gradually though through the years my world changed. Studying at different graduate schools, teaching on different graduate faculties, being in daily contact with other expressions of the faith, reading contemporary novelists and thinkers, and having academic colleagues as cherished friends has, I confess, put some strain on the piety of my youth. It's no secret; we don't often pray the rosary or litanies to Mary or the Sacred Heart in graduate classrooms or at faculty gatherings.

However academic classrooms and faculty gatherings bring something else, something vitally needed in church pews and in circles of piety, namely, wider theological vision and critical principles to keep unbridled piety, naïve fundamentalism, and misguided religious fervor within proper boundaries. What I've learned in the academic circles is also wonderful and I am forever grateful for the privilege of higher education.

But, of course, that's a formula for tension, albeit a healthy one. Let me use someone else's voice to articulate this. In a recent book, *Silence and Beauty*, a Japanese-American artist, Makoto Fujimura, shares this incident from

his own life. Coming out of church one Sunday, he was asked by his pastor to add his name to a list of people who had agreed to boycott the film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. He liked his pastor and wanted to please him by signing the petition, but felt hesitant to sign for reasons that, at that time, he couldn't articulate. But his wife could. Before he could sign, she stepped in and said: "Artists may have other roles to play than to boycott this film." He understood what she meant. He didn't sign the petition.

But his decision left him pondering the tension between boycotting such a movie and his role as an artist and critic. Here's how he puts it: "An artist is often pulled in two directions. Religiously conservative people tend to see culture as suspect at best, and when cultural statements are made to transgress the normative reality they hold dear, their default reaction is to oppose and boycott. People in the more liberal artistic community see these transgressive steps as necessary for their 'freedom of expression'. An artist like me, who values both religion and art, will be exiled from both. I try to hold together both of these commitments, but it is a struggle."

That's also my struggle. The piety of my youth, of my parents, and of that rich branch of Catholicism is real and life-giving; but so too is the critical (sometimes unsettling) iconoclastic, theology of the academy. The two desperately need each other; yet someone who is trying to be loyal to both can, like Fujimura, end up feeling exiled from both. Theologians also have other roles to play than boycotting movies.

The people whom I take as mentors in this area are men and women who, in my eyes, can do both: Like Dorothy Day, who could be equally comfortable, leading the rosary or the peace march; like Jim Wallis, who can advocate just as passionately for radical social engagement as he can for personal intimacy with Jesus, and like Thomas Aquinas, whose intellect could intimidate intellectuals, even as he could pray with the piety of a child.

Circles of piety and the academy of theology are not enemies; they need to embrace.