

Rebecca Chopp, Colgate University



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Mooney: You've taught a lot of graduate students over the years and have been a mentor to them. What do you say to them about the best things in a career, the best things in the profession?

Chopp: I've tried to write about and tell people about the love of the subject in both senses — the subject of theology and also the subject who learns, the student, and just as important, my learning and listening as a teacher. In a profound sense teaching is about bringing together how a human being interacts with theology and the incredible traditions of thought represented in theology. I think that is what I'd stress: that the teacher both teaches the subject, theology, but also is the subject, the human being, the one who needs to listen to set the occasion for that interaction. As a teacher I've always been fascinated by how one crafts the classroom or, to use the hostess metaphor, "sets the table" for people to learn. I know that some faculty members understand teaching as just a means of conveying information. I tend to be interested in a more interactive model of teaching/learning. I'm more interested in how a student brings his or her own questions to reading the text, and listens to how the text talks back to her, as well as to the other students.

Mooney: I suppose it's that "setting of the table" that allows the class to take off and transform the setting.

Chopp: Absolutely! You know, another metaphor that might describe the teacher's role is that the teacher orchestrates the class.

Mooney: If you were to isolate particularly memorable moments in your career, what would you say about mentoring PhDs, for example, or the classroom?

Chopp: There are times of mentoring my graduate students that are memorable and important times to me. And then there are times in the classroom when you get the whole class into a discussion and they kind of transcend themselves. David Tracy, my teacher, talks about how the conversation takes over, and I've seen that happen. I've seen it happen in lectures and I've seen it happen lots of times in seminars. It is really memorable when, in a sense, the conversation is a community that everyone is just fully into and the students are engaged in the discovery of the conversation itself. I find those memories rewarding, as well as very, very gratifying.

Mooney: You've taught at both the undergraduate and graduate level. What would you say about the rewards or trials connected with each?

Chopp: You know, I think the reward for me, of both, is seeing the individual develop intellectually. For undergraduates it's the tools of critical thinking and basic knowledge; for graduates the rewards and the trials have to do with mentoring students as they develop into peers.

Mooney: Did you find that the undergrad students you particularly connected with went on to do graduate work in religion?

Chopp: Many of them did. But I also connected with many who didn't.

Mooney: Have you seen any big change in students over the years, or just ripples and little things?

Chopp: I think that on the undergraduate level students are more anxious about what I would call the “résumé phenomenon” — and I guess I would say that phenomenon exists on the graduate school level as well. Early in my career, PhD students weren’t preparing papers for publication and weren’t giving lectures at the AAR. Ministry students weren’t so worried about getting a thousand and one things on their résumés. The unfortunate side of this phenomenon is that it’s harder to take the reflective space to really learn. And it has become more about the production of knowledge as a technical accomplishment than an engagement in an ongoing conversation. I think that’s the most serious thing that has changed.

Mooney: So the kinds of things that people worry about as they get ready for tenure have filtered down.

Chopp: Yes, I guess you’re right.

Mooney: How about the field itself?

Chopp: I think the field has been radically transformed. There is a robust pluralism of methods, topics, and approaches. This diversity has allowed, and I hope encouraged, Christian theology to take a look at itself as one topic among many. Different voices are coming from different cultural perspectives, races, places in the world. That has allowed theology to enjoy a much broader conversation. Michael Sandel calls for the public to be shaped as a “clamorous dialogue,” and I think that’s how theology might be shaped in the current situation. When I was trained, there was a foundationalist model in place for theological knowledge and claims of truth that has been radically questioned. The role of technology has transformed teaching and research, making resources more readily available than ever before. The final change I guess is that the study of religion used to be a discipline that fairly few wanted to study in the ’70s and ’80s. Then suddenly, in the ’90s, the study of religion became of much greater interest to more scholars and much more visibly present in the public.

Mooney: Perhaps the role of developing graduate students has changed similarly. If you have a foundationalist model, then it’s pretty clear that you begin with the foundations, and then build

up. You can chart the course that a model graduate student would take. But how do you orient a graduate student to a “clamorous dialogue?” Does a student have to take in all sides? How do you get through graduate school with so many different angles on your subject?

Chopp: You know, that’s such a great question, and I think we’re all in a process of trying to figure that out. It also is a question for how you teach a basic introduction to the study of religion. When I was at Emory teaching in the Graduate Division of Religion we experimented with a methods course to orient the graduate student to the various methods for thinking about or defining religion. It was an attempt to provide students with tools for the study of religion while letting them learn about the history of the study of religion.

Mooney: If religion connects more with the social sciences, you might find more set ways of doing things. On the other hand, if it connects with the humanities, you might expect a plurality of ways of doing things.

Chopp: Yes, I think that’s true. I think the study of religion is at a very interesting place right now. Disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and the social sciences are becoming integrated into the very nature of the study of religion, even theology. For many years, theologians thought of themselves as being closely related to philosophers. The integration of social science perspectives is a dramatic transformation in the field, and one you can see in other disciplines as well.

Mooney: Do you think the prominence of religion on the national scene, from concerns about the religious right to concerns about Islam, as well as any number of other concerns, creates new challenges for teaching in religion?

Chopp: I think the prominence of religion on the national scene provides possibilities and responsibilities for religion scholars. Religion is a force in the world, and we are understanding it in a far more complex and interesting way than ever before. We question if the term “religion” really makes sense in our contemporary reality. We ought to insist that no person could have a liberal arts education in this country without understanding something about the nature of religion and its role in everything from politics to economics to family life. I think it’s very important to seize the moment and educate people to think critically and imaginatively about religion. The danger of the moment is that a lot of the discourse out there in the public isn’t critical or creative. The subject of religion is popular and receives a great deal of attention, but a lot of the discussion doesn’t have any rigorous underpinnings in theory.

Mooney: And a lot of it freezes into ideological positions where all you can do is battle.

Chopp: A very good example is national debates about creationism. It is amazing to think that we are here in 2005 and see people talk of evolution as just one kind of theological perspective. To me that speaks to a lack of critical understanding of religious thought.

Mooney: Have you ever hesitated to open up a particularly hot issue for fear that things might get out of hand?

Chopp: No, I don't think I have. Long ago I learned to open up class with a discussion about the ethics of conversation, and to initiate with every class a kind of contract, if you will, or a kind of ethical statement. I think of teaching and learning as a kind of ethical activity, and if things ever got out of hand then class members could just go back to the statement. Most classes would come up with similar statements, things like: "All ideas are worth exploring," "No attacks on another person," etc. I tried to develop a structure whereby hot topics were safe to talk about. And I taught many times in areas, such as feminist theology and liberation theology, that were fairly contentious.

Mooney: So as a teacher you can create a kind of safe atmosphere to think those things through that, in a more public square, might get overheated. You get to the heart of what a student might be nervous or anxious about and can avoid an ideological shouting match.

Chopp: Yes, I think you're right. And as teachers we all learn from our students, as they learn from us. And I've found it delightful how often students can take the most sophisticated or profound argument and just get it. I'll never forget discussing works of feminist theology about the metaphorical language of God, discussing feminist theologians and then thinkers such as Tracy and Ricoeur, and I'll never forget this one woman who was clearly moved by the discussion. Then she pointed out that her grandmother would say, quite forcefully, that God is not a metaphor. And here she was, realizing that it was a wonderful insight that, yes, God is a metaphor. But she also realized that new insight had to be balanced out by this living reality her grandmother stood for.

Mooney: Do you see any radical changes ahead in the way we teach?

Chopp: I think there will be more and more opportunities with technology to provide information, engage in conversations around the world, and things like that. But at the end of the day I still think it's going to be about conversations with real life experiences. I think the tools will change, but I think the nature of teaching will retain continuity with the past.

Mooney: If you had a niece or granddaughter back from her first year of college who asked you for a summer reading list, what would you recommend for nourishment?

Chopp: I have a couple. Augustine's *Confessions*; Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* ;
Cornell West,
Prophecy Deliverance!
And something on critical theory.

Mooney: At some schools there's a tradition of giving a last lecture as one retires, a kind of wise summation. If you had a chance of that kind, is there a theme you'd foreground?

Chopp: Well, a friend once gave a presidential address — I believe it was when she was president of the MLA — a speech I only read and never heard her give. She talked about the importance of teaching what one loves and letting the students see the passion you have for the subject matter. That has always struck me. And I think I would play off that to make a related point. Hannah Arendt says that teaching is the act of loving the future enough to give the students — she calls them children because she's thinking about primary education — the ability to ask and answer their own questions. You're teaching what you love to show the passion of living with ideas and truth, but you're also doing it so they will find theirs, not yours.