CHAPTER 4

Introduction

Up to this point in my career, I’ve been lucky enough to be involved with producing several different collections of essays in honor of senior faculty members who have had an important impact on my thinking and my career. The first that I edited was self-published and I had a small number of copies bound and distributed to the contributors and the recipient only; it was in honor of the now-late Douglas Crichton, a professor at Queen’s Theological College, upon his retirement in the late 1980s. The others—a special issue of Method & Theory in the Study of Religion (MTSR) in memory of the late Gary Lease (21/2 [2009]), a multi-authored book (co-edited with William Arnal and Willi Braun [2012]) in honor of Donald Wiebe, and also the Festschrift in honor of Jonathan Z. Smith, for which the following essay served as the introduction—came later and reflect a rather different set of interests than I had much earlier in my career when conceiving of that volume in honor of Doug. (It was entitled In Celebration of Faith [1989]; although I guess I removed that self-published volume from my c.v. many years ago [if it was every there], my Master of Divinity and Master of Theology degrees [M.Div. 1986 and Th.M. 1987, respectively, and both earned at Queen’s University, in Canada] have always remained there, evidence of the path that I happen to have taken to arrive at the questions that I now find compelling.) For after deciding that a fourth year in my undergraduate degree was not a priority to me (I hadn’t done very well on the Medical College Admissions Test [MCAT], so an M.D. was no longer much of an option, if it ever really had been), I graduated with a B.A. in Life Sciences (rather than the B.Sc. Honors that completing the fourth year would have earned for me), enrolled in the Master of Divinity degree, and realized shortly thereafter that although I found the object of study fascinating—just why do people believe in God? (as I surely defined religion back then)—I was rather less motivated to be credentialed as a ritual specialist who led a flock of his own. It was for that reason that I never completed the pastoral training/practicum side of the degree and was never ordained (the college I attended was affiliated with the United Church of Canada, the country’s largest Protestant denomination; most of my peers went on to become ministers, and one of them [my good friend then, David Giuliano] eventually went on to become the moderator of the church [i.e., its elected, national leader]). Because my wife, Marcia, then had another year remaining in her own education (earning her B.A. in Social Psychology and then her Master’s degree in Education,
also at Queen’s University—where we met, in fact), and because the M.Div. was hardly an academically rigorous degree (and I skipped far too many classes, as I recall—in fact, I so infrequently attended some classes that my Biblical Greek professor didn’t even award me a grade, giving me instead merely a “Pass”), I remained at Queen’s for an additional one-year Master’s degree (the Th.M.), thereby tackling my first thesis (under the direction of Pamela Dickey [later Pamela Dickey Young]), hoping it would be good preparation for the eventual doctoral dissertation that I was then wanting to write one day.

In terms of approach and data it wasn’t, however, but in terms of learning how to make an extended argument across several chapters it was—thus, an early lesson in form versus content.

For my work back then was on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, and, by extension, its Christian theological use (e.g., by such authors as John Cobb and David Ray Griffin). My 1987 Th.M. thesis was entitled, *Process Thought and the Problem of Evil: A Study of the Contemporary Process Theodicy of David Griffin in the Light of Charles Hartshorne*. I even wrote abstracts for their journal, *Process Studies*; in fact, three of the first four reviews I published in various journals, between 1989 and 1993, were on books in this area. My interest then was the problem of evil or, in process thought, the lack of such a problem (i.e., there was no longer any such problem inasmuch as these writers did not posit agency in quite the same way as others, ensuring that all actual entities or actual occasions, as they named their building blocks of reality, had a role to play in outcomes—hearkening somewhat back to that memorable line from Dr. Seuss’s *Horton Hears a Who*: “a person’s a person no matter how small”). My next degree, an M.A. at the University of Toronto (1988), was also on process philosophy, directed by the late Ernie Best—a degree that I had not planned on earning since I had applied directly to their Ph.D. degree instead, but as liberal (or progressive or whatever you might call it) as I might have seemed to myself back in Kingston, where I was surrounded by people training to be ministers, my two theology degrees and interest in theodicy (rightly, I eventually came to think) signalled mixed messages to the acceptance committee, prompting them to accept me into a one-year M.A., despite my own wishes. In hindsight, I’d say that it took me two or three years to make the shift in my thinking, to move from taking courses in Plato’s dialogues, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, and Kant’s first *Critique* to find faculty like Donald Wiebe (with whom I eventually took a variety of classes) and Neil McMullin (who eventually became my dissertation supervisor), as well as to make good friends (as it turns out, career-long friends) like Willi Braun, Bill Arnal, Darlene Juschka, Bruce MacKay, and Herb Berg, all of whom helped me to come to understand that a whole new set of questions and tools were now