Faculty Development Grant Report -2006

In the summer of 2005 and in the course of the following school year as well as in the summer of 2007, I turned my attention to a very different subject, one that is manageable given both my location (on the West Coast of the United States) and my family situation.

Here is a brief context for my current work:

Between 1940 and 1945, in the midst of the Jewish Holocaust, the small village community of Le Chambon sur Lignon, in southern France, hosted and rescued several hundred Jewish children. Since the 1970's, and with increased intensity in the 1990’s, the courage of this community has been recognized by Jewish survivors, by the state of Israel and by the French state. At first glance, it seems like this story does not need retelling: numerous academic books, memoirs, one novel and several films have been devoted to the topic.

However, the light shed on Le Chambon has also led to important controversies over the exact scope of the rescue, the motivations of the rescuers, and the lessons, if any, that need to be drawn from this act of courage. Part of the difficulty of making sense of the events and of their interpretation is related to the number of voices, the diversity of their origin, and the kind of tribute they wish to pay to the rescuers.

My goal in this study is to consider the vast scope of these voices, to present the points of disagreement, as well as the questions they bring with them, and to foster greater dialogue between communities that have disregarded, misunderstood or ignored each other. My focus, then, is not so much on what exactly happened in Le Chambon, but rather on why it is that what happened has become so controversial. How could what some have called “a conspiracy of goodness” generate so many divisions?

My initial research led me to examine the points of contention: they revolve broadly around what happened and why it happened. I have identified some of the voices speaking on the topic, from voices divided by national allegiances (French and American historians do not say the same things), and voices divided by attitudes toward religion (it would involve a serious examination of the concept of “laïcité” to understand the complexity of French voices on those issues), to voices that differ according to disciplinary outlook (for instance between historians and psychologists engaged in the study of altruism).

To formulate the questions, I have read as much as I could put my hands on (see appendix 8, bibliography –the complete bibliography includes 42 titles). I have also gotten in touch with people in the field. Some of them are rather protective of their research, while others have been extremely open –for instance, the sociologist Serge Bernard has extended an offer of a joint study and is keeping me updated on the latest development in the local debates. Now that I have a clear sense of my own
trajectory, I will apply for funding this summer to visit the Peace Library at Swarthmore College, where the Trocmé papers are located. My hope is to present an initial result of my findings by next Fall, and to review the upcoming book by Patrick Henry (to be published this Fall) on the topic. I also would like to spend my sabbatical in France in the region of Lyon to do the local research that needs to be done—assuming that we can live on a salary paid in dollars in the Euro zone.

Beyond the debates generated by the events that occurred in Le Chambon, I am pursuing two larger issues in this project: “What might this reveal about the role and functioning of history, memory, and memorialization?” “Could a consensus emerge that would honor all parties?” Given the broader aims of this research, this “case study” manages to put together pieces of my worlds that have lived far apart: my interest in questions of memory and memorialization (how do we deal collectively with the dead and past events?); my training in French history, and Huguenot history in particular; my curiosity in a Franco-American dialogue (and misunderstandings); my conviction that historical events and human behaviors are multi-dimensional (rooted in history, culture, religion, as well as socio-economic conditions); my growing sense that inter-disciplinary dialogue is core to the pursuit of truth as opposed to the disciplinary isolationism many educational institutions encourage; my continued appreciation for the liberal arts (as an inter-disciplinary endeavor, but also as a place hospitable to disagreement and renewed dialogue).

This coming summer, I would like to visit the Peace Library at Swarthmore College so as to gain access to the Trocmé Papers donated to the library; I would prepare a paper to be delivered at the Western Society for French History in the Fall. During my sabbatical (in 2009-2010), I hope to be able to spend a semester in France, in the region of Le Chambon—probably around Lyon or in Ardèche, where I have identified some possible house exchanges. In the long run, I would envision that this work would be published either in a series of articles, or as a short book. I have already had conversations on this topic with colleagues in sociology, ethics, biology, communication studies, psychology and religious studies—what more could I ask for? It sounds to me like the Nouwen way of “being all things to all people”.

The following bibliography is yet incomplete—I have so far consulted 45 secondary sources and assembled the primary sources available online (related to commemorative events such as the January 2007 speeches for the “justes” entrance into the Pantheon).

Since then, Patrick Henry’s book has been published and I have started reading it.


