Remembering Manfred Hoffmann | Emory University | Atlanta, GA

Professor Manfred Hoffmann, age 86, died, peacefully, at home. And so it is time to remember, time to recall.

Manfred came to Emory in 1960 after being awarded his doctorate at Heidelberg. He joined a company of young scholars including Ted Runyon, Ted Weber and Hendrikus Boers, who would help transform Candler from a regional, denominational seminary into an international, ecumenical school of theology and eventually establish Emory’s Graduate Division of Religion as one of the leading programs in the nation.

I met Manfred when I arrived at Emory to pursue a PhD in 1966. He was my teacher, the director of my dissertation, and then for twenty-five years my faculty colleague. He did many things before and after his tenure at Emory, but it is Manfred at Emory that I remember.

Manfred was an Elder in the Methodist Church and had been a local pastor in Germany, but it was clear that he thought his “mission” at Emory was as an academician. In the sixties and seventies, during the years of theological foment symbolized by Emory Professor Thomas J. J. Althizer, Manfred seemed to have little use for the “Catholic-Arminianism” of Methodist theology. Instead he approached things by way of a very existentialist vision of Luther. It was a “Theology of the Cross” and it operated in a stark dialectic of personal human mortality and unmerited grace. The human condition was unalterably ambiguous; there was to be no romancing of “progress” or “perfection.” This was hard-edged stuff, and I often thought Manfred’s aura must have been like Luther’s at Worms: “Here I stand, I can do no other!”

He was an active participant in the “Core Seminar” which occupied a central place in the PhD program. Students and faculty all joined in giving and critiquing faculty papers. Manfred was always patient and gentle with students. With faculty colleagues, however, he could be acerbic and dismissive when he thought their scholarship inept or their thinking “fuzzy.” Most students felt intimidated, fearing his criticism might fall on us if our scholarship failed. But his lesson stuck. We tried hard not to confuse historical evidence with opinion and to think things through to their conclusion, regardless of where the thinking took us.

But if he was rigorous and demanding, there was also the pastoral side. He was also a Methodist minister. He was always interested in what was happening in our lives, always sensitive to the pressures we experienced in graduate school and always supportive. He encouraged us to follow wherever our research took us, even if it was out of his own field of expertise. He was equally kind to seminary students and I never heard him dismissive of a master’s level student in any circumstance. He appreciated everyone’s struggles. Behind the gruff exterior there was a great well of empathy.

During this time, I learned of his great love of Bach and his affection for Baroque organ and harpsichord. Of course, he wanted to play this music “authentically.” He was delighted to acquire a harpsichord of his own and occasionally invited some of us for “recitals.” He also played the organ in a local church of which I was Rector while I tried to write my dissertation. The organ was pedestrian at best, but it was a pipe organ, and Manfred managed to make it sound almost like a good instrument!

After I joined the faculty in the seventies, I shared an office suite with him. He was always collegial and willing to share what was happening in his life. Gradually, I noticed a shift in his theology. The hard edges of the confrontational Luther gave way to an interest in Erasmus. Here rhetoric and style began to carry some of the weight that used to belong only to “tough reality.” Progress and improvement, albeit circumscribed and modest, became possible. “Catholic-Arminianism” now moved to the center. Manfred did his best, most valuable work on Erasmus. It was this mediating, irenic, reforming Catholic that Manfred found to be his historical soul mate. He was a Methodist pastor at heart and a good part of his own journey was in claiming that.

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So we remember Manfred Hoffmann and learn, among other things, something of what he might call an “existential dialectic.” Scholarship must be rigorous. In life, the “way things are,” the “facts,” must be pursued and faced up to. We cannot fabricate history or any other part of reality. But there is another “fact” of life. We long for something better, more perfect, more just, more loving. And we long for each other. The way to honor that longing is to listen and, as Erasmus teaches us, to be civil; to be careful with each other. The mystery is that as we seek to do both things, we find that we may, indeed, make a “little progress.” Perhaps it is a shadow of “going on to perfection.”

Charles D. “Ted” Hackett
Professor Emeritus in the Practice of Church Ministries

Read Hoffmann's obituary here.