For John C. Raines
By Terry Rey

L’esprit du château fort c’est le pont-levis
~ René Char

A waltz through the stacks on the third floor of Temple University’s Paley Library brings one past more than forty doctoral dissertations minted in the history of the Department of Religion that are signed by John C. Raines as adviser. Like undercounted ethnic minorities in each U.S Census, other such dissertations are surely missed along the way, so we are speaking in reality of more than fifty, over and above the dozens of others for which John has served as a reader, not to mention the many M.A. thesis and portfolio projects that he has supervised over the years. The range of topics that they cover make for quite a mesmerizing waltz indeed, something that perhaps could only have been achieved at Temple and more certainly only by someone as unfailingly committed to his students as John has been for several decades. Consider, for example, the following steps in the dance:

- “Christian missionizing and social transformation: A history of conflict and change in eastern Zaire” (Jack Nelson, 1984)

- “A method for the study of Islam in America through the narratives of African American Muslim women” (Beverly McCloud, 1993)

- “Bhikkhu Buddhadasa’s dhammic socialism in dialogue with Latin American liberation theology” (Puntarigivat Tavivat, 1994)

- “The Brazilian popular church in crisis: Local religion and global capitalism” (Manuel Arturo Alvarez, 1994)

- “Encountering modernity: Buddhist nuns in postwar Taiwan” (Meei-Hwa Chern, 2000)

- “Ren and society: Social cohesion in Mencius and Emile Durkheim” (Yamin Chen, 2004)

- “A womanist social ontology: An exploration of the self/other relationship in womanist religious scholarship” (Renee McKenzie, 2005)

Dated 1975, meanwhile, the earliest Raines-directed dissertation that I have found is one authored by the now-distinguished medical ethicist Thomas McElhinney, marvelously entitled “The Future of Man and the Ethics of Genetic Engineering.” And, in light of John’s winding up in a Little Rock jail as a Freedom Rider in 1961 and his lofty standing as a
Christian ethicist, it is only fitting that the last dissertation that he chaired at Temple, defended in 2010, was Charles Brian MacAdam’s “A Strange Distinction: Religion and Civic Life since Martin Luther King, Jr.” Although he is supposedly now retired, furthermore, John remains an active reader on several dissertation committees, most recently for a dazzling study of Harry Emerson Fosdick by Kipp Gilmour-Clough of some 300 pages, which John read and provided incisive and extensive commentary on in just three days! Here it is a month since Rebecca Alpert, Kipp’s adviser, sent it to us, and I am still not through with the second chapter, sorry to say.

I wrote the entirety of my own Temple dissertation, “Classes of Mary in the Haitian Religious Field” (1996), in Haiti, prior to the advent of email. Each time I completed a chapter, I would run off four copies and send them to the members of my dissertation committee: Len Swidler, my advisor, John Raines, Katie Cannon, and Leon-François Hoffmann, a Haitianist at Princeton. Without fail, within a couple of weeks of doing so, a letter would arrive from John with his invaluable feedback. A year or so later, at a time when I had written off the idea of a career in American academia, being then quite entrenched in the human rights struggle in Haiti and quite contentedly resigned to be spending the duration of my life there—which could very well have ended by now, had things gone that way—I received an international phone call from out of the blue one day at my office in Port-au-Prince.

It was John calling to tell me about a new faculty position in Religious Studies at Florida International University (FIU) and encouraging me to apply. So, I did, along with well over 100 other scholars, though with little hopes of even getting an interview, due to what was then my very meager publication record. And, when the good folks at FIU invited me to interview with them anyway, at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November of 1997 in New Orleans, I figured that my chances were nixed because I simply could not leave Haiti then. But, John went for me to The Big Easy, standing in as an advocate for the absent interviewee, surely charming his peers in drumming up my scholarly potential (it didn’t hurt, I imagine, that a distinguished Temple alum was chairing Religious Studies at FIU at the time, Nathan Katz).

I had not asked John to do such a kind thing, nor did I even know about it until after I actually landed the job the following year! I remained at FIU for eight years, got tenure there in a wonderful and quite Temple-influenced department, and then jumped at the chance to join the storied Temple faculty in Religion in 2005, just in time to count John Raines as a departmental colleague. For all of this, I feel immeasurably fortunate and grateful, and none of it would have happened but for John.

Along with his erudition as a scholar and inspirational, lifelong commitment to social justice, it is his expansive generosity in availing himself to his students that led me to shudder when I read in some administrative departmental document—oh, the things we get to read when we become chair!—that I was in part hired to join the Temple faculty in Religion “to replace John Raines,” for there really can be no such thing. I have been honored to inherit John’s “Foundations in Religion and the Social Sciences” graduate seminar—which was the most important course that I took as a grad student with him some twenty
years ago—and to take on the advisement of several of John’s doctoral students as he assumed emeritus status.

But there can never be a replacement for John C. Raines, who has so illuminatingly modeled for me and many others what it means to be a scholar, a mentor, and a humanitarian. I also aspire to write with such elegance and to teach with such aplomb as John, and one day I, too, will be giving away all of the books in my library to under-funded graduate students. The books won’t be replaced either.

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