

**Response of Eduardo Fernández, S.J., to Philip L. Wickeri's  
GTU Distinguished Faculty Lecture: "Award and Alive:  
Secularization And Religion Reconsidered"  
November 17, 2009**

Given Professor Wickeri's clever title for his talk this evening,  
"Awkward and Alive: Secularization and Religion Reconsidered", I, too,  
have taken the liberty to name my brief response: "*Even more Awkward and  
Struggling to Stay Alive: Reflections from a Fellow Missiologist and  
Pastoral Theologian*"!

I am not sure why but ever since my boyhood, I have liked making  
lists. School supplies lists, fireworks lists, summer projects lists, and even  
up to the present day . . . , "to do" lists . . . all these have somehow helped  
me to focus, focus, focus! And so, tonight as we gather to honor a friend,  
mentor, and colleague, someone who, in my opinion --- through his research,  
teaching, charitable work, priestly ministry, and openness to mission, even if  
it means uprooting and starting anew, has "walked the talk,"--- I have come  
up with a list of things which I believe are significant in what we heard this  
evening. As I only have 5 minutes or so in which to do this, and to be  
honest with you, Dean Holder didn't specify if they were Latino minutes . . .  
I guess I best get started!

**List “A”: Some Points about the Relationship Between Religion and Secularization Worth Remembering:** 1) Since centuries past and for centuries to come, religion is not an irrelevant factor of human life. Whether ignored, encouraged, suppressed, debated, or celebrated, religious experience remains an essential part of human cultures. As he has reminded us, religion, which many said would soon disappear, is not only alive and well, but, in several key places on our planet, is undergoing a revival. Tonight we heard a challenge to take seriously this aspect of the current “signs of the times.”

2) Those of us in the business of religion, however, should not overlook the fact that religion and secularization can be both liberating and confining. After all, stated somewhat simplistically, we know from our own experience of the separation of church and state, that it is never a good thing for one entity to have all the power.

3) We often hear “secularization” described monolithically, especially in opposition to that which is religious. His use of Charles Taylor’s categories this evening, however, reminds us that this term needs to be nuanced. It’s political, sociological, and cultural manifestations are not all the same. Finally, . . . 4) the construction of a local theology is good and necessary, but so is a sense of the global, which we, here at the GTU, are

blessed to experience particularly through the presence of our sisters and brothers from other countries.

In the few minutes remaining, please allow me to go to List “B” or **Those Aspects of his talk, which as we say in Spanish “los llevo en el Corazón”, or translated roughly, which I will take away in my heart:** 5)

Because all theology is contextual, we must work harder to acknowledge not only the socio-political and cultural environments from which these theologies spring but also their liturgical, ethical, and relational settings.

This inclusion of lived religion, as opposed to simply intellectual discourse about it, opens us up to the mystery, not only of the Divine, but also of our graced presence within the cosmos. 6) How to stay true to this challenge of engaging our religious sensibilities not only to seek truth but also to promote peace and harmony among peoples? The communities which sustain us with their hopes and fears, faith and questioning, support and challenge, often remind us that it’s all much bigger than our own attempts at articulating that which is always much more. Tonight Philip has reminded us to pay attention to the practices, both ritualistic and moral, that the communities of which we are privileged to be part, hold dear. I also heard an invitation to let go of fears around our own vulnerability. For, in moments of doubt and

desperation, it is often their love, their spark of the Divine, which will sustain us and show us the way.

Thank you, Philip, for your words tonight . . . your generous work among us these years. . . and your encouragement to pay attention to that which ruffles us . . . to suffering . . . and to life. As you and Janice soon head back to China, know that you remain in our hearts, prayers, and ruffled feathers! Thank you all for your presence and attention.