

Pastor Teaches Nuns Religion

It's not so strange for the young Episcopal minister to find himself teaching a Protestant religion course at St. Joseph's College, but the Rev. Mr. Richard Nolan thinks it's a bit different for him to be teaching a class of nuns Oriental religions.

He is enjoying the experience. The Rev. Mr. Nolan finds his class open-minded, eager to learn, challenging—"a teacher's dream."

Besides teaching at St. Joseph's College and the University of Connecticut, the Rev. Mr. Nolan has a parish in Bristol, is editor of a book on the diaconal ministry and is assistant academic dean at the Hartford Seminary.

He was asked to lecture at St. Joseph's because the college wanted to widen the theology curriculum to include electives in Protestant and Jewish tradition and thought.

He took the job because he thinks better religious education will bring about better relationships between the churches.

"I think it's incredible—and great—that Catholics are encouraging nuns to take these courses," he said. "I never had more fun. They are there because they want to learn."

He finds the nuns are more willing to discuss issues than his undergraduate class at St. Joseph's.

"Girls are not argumentative," he said. "Girls don't challenge; they're great at giving back what the professor gives. Too many professors discourage thinking. I want a show of opinions. Out of this we both learn."

If he doesn't cause confusion and doubt among his students, the Rev. Mr. Nolan doesn't feel he is reaching them.

"Doubting can lead to questions that can lead to greater understanding of where one stands and this process may cause people to re-think ideas," he said.

Often the confusion and doubting will last far beyond the Rev. Mr. Nolan's class. He thinks it is the students's responsibility to seek out a consistent way of looking at their experiences.

"It can be pretty miserable," he said. "It's only in the past four or five years I've been able to piece things together for me."

A lot of misunderstanding in the churches can be avoided by religious education, according

to the Rev. Mr. Nolan. However, he is not convinced there will ever be one way of thinking about Christianity.

"I hope we can decide what is important and agree to agree on those things and agree to differ on the less important things," he said. "For example, Christians agree Jesus is the Messiah and that He had a unique relationship with God best described as 'Son.' But to try to define with precision Jesus' relationship with God is impossible. When we try to get too precise or try to find answers to questions that have no answers—that's where there is sharp disagreement."

If children in Sunday School were taught that the Bible contains myths, legends and history, then they would be more able to accept religion, the Rev. Mr. Nolan feels.

"This is a pastor's dilemma," he said. "Should he bring his parish up to date and risk shaking up some of the people?"

While the adult world doesn't like to learn the Bible is as full of myths, legends and history as every other great body of literature, the Rev. Mr. Nolan said the university students are relieved to hear it.

"Religion is more credible to them, but they won't go to church," he said. "They think the power structure in the church won't budge and they think it is what they learned it was in Sunday School. They think the church is run by conservatives."

The Rev. Mr. Nolan says he is a liberal in one sense but conservative in others.

"I'm liberal in the sense I'm open to radically rethinking traditional Christian theology, but I look toward the Bible as the norm for re-interpretation," he said.

Modern Biblical studies have given theologians a better basis for interpretation through understanding of the language of the time and the circumstances under which the Bible was written, according to the Rev. Mr. Nolan.

"In the light of modern scholarship we are better able to understand the Bible—some of the things Jesus did are not in the Bible as we thought they were," he said.

He cited the legend of Jesus walking on the water, saying for a long time people really believed this was a historical fact. Now, however, scholars think this passage in the Bible is more a sermon about Jesus than an actual event.



Better Religious Education

The Rev. Mr. Nolan looks over his book on the role of the deacon in the early and modern Church. He believes better religious education will bring about better understanding among the churches (Courant Photo by Robert B. Ficks).