

Encountering Religious Commitments in the Classroom

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Students and faculty always have brought important personal commitments into the classroom—religious, political, philosophical, and other commitments. Today, those commitments, especially religious commitments, are publicly present in classrooms far more frequently than they were thirty-five years ago. For growing numbers of students, personal religious commitments carry an authority that renders those commitments immune to critical analysis. Appeal to such commitments trumps the authority of the theoretical methods and concepts a course is designed to teach.

Faculty colleagues express surprise, perplexity, and sometimes frustration or annoyance at how religious belief statements appear publicly in their classrooms. This happens in various ways. Students walking out of classrooms when films were being shown because they considered the material "offensive to their faith." Students asserting in a discussion of gay and lesbian families that the material is not suitable for the sociology course because the bible condemns these abominations. Students expressing outrage that the bible does not carry the same weight of authority as scholarly sources in a communications course. As one professor put it reporting on a discussion, "The comment came from out of nowhere, flustered me completely, made the other students nervous, and shut down the discussion." Not a satisfying teaching experience for any professor, but one that raises important questions. What leads students to believe such comments are appropriate? What is happening in the learning process when students make such statements? What strategies might

instructors employ to convey respect for students' personal rights to believe what they will, while maintaining the critical rigor and disciplinary procedures of discourse essential to a classroom?

A set of historical and social shifts occurring during the second half of the twentieth century have profoundly shaped our current cultural context so that religious commitments are present more publicly in our classrooms. Relating these shifts to dominant epistemologies, or ways of knowing, and to knowledge of the psychological development of young adults clarifies some of the issues involved when students make religious statements in the classroom. Thinking about the issues and their context pedagogically suggests a set of possible strategies for effectively negotiating religious commitments in the classroom.

Our Historical Moment

Part of the reason religious commitments are more visibly present in classrooms today is the breakdown during the second half of the twentieth century of the "mission of America equation." This term refers to the way in the early republican period of the 1780s and 1790s that the nation hammered out how the people of the United States could have commonly shared values in a situation of religious pluralism. In the equation, liberty of conscience is the central American value, a value to which the nation was dedicated and which it was required, by divine mandate, to protect or suffer loss of its identity, its soul as a nation. The significance of this value, and the nation's mission to protect it, was available through reason, and so all citizens, whether atheists,

or Jews, or members of the many "sects" of Christians could share and protect this liberty.

Promoting the value of liberty and the practice of toleration it required provided a rationale for the religious pluralism that the new nation faced. It transformed this reality from a pragmatic problem (from roughly 330ce to 1789ce the presumption in the Western world was that no stable social order could exist without a single religion supported by and supporting the state) to a national virtue. Further, in order for the nation to realize its mission, it needed responsible, moral citizens. The various religious communities in the nation, all voluntary associations, provided such citizens through their work of relating their members to God and keeping them focused on salvation.

The various Christian "sects" supported the mission of American equation as well. This equation protected their right to exist, to work for the salvation of souls, to support their members on the journey to God. Hence, they taught the value of the inalienable right of individual conscience. In addition they taught, though they also often violated, the virtue of tolerance as a necessary corollary to the right of individual conscience, referred to as the "precious jewel of liberty."

Hammered out with confidence in reason and the human capacity characteristic of the Enlightenment, the mission of the American equation involved a religion of the republic, or civil religion, focused on liberty, and a religion of the churches, focused on salvation, that supported each other. The denominations of the magisterial Reformation, known in the 1950s as the

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“mainline” denominations, carried this equation into the twentieth century and provided the bridge between shared values in a religiously pluralistic world and individuals’ private religious beliefs and commitments.

For a variety of reasons, by 1965 confidence in the mission of the American equation had eroded, and the capacity of the mainline denominations to serve the bridging function between common social values and individuals’ beliefs was significantly diminished. Hence, for the past thirty-five years, and continuing into the foreseeable future, people in the United States have been working out the question of what central shared values there might be in American life, if any. The discussion includes, significantly, whether religious tolerance is integral to national identity.

Some of the forces that contributed to eroding the bridging function of mainline denominations also led to the severing of religion from ascriptive (socially and culturally inherited) factors—ethnicity, race, region, economic class. When embedded in set of ascriptive factors, religion worked more flexibly. In a larger setting of relationships the young grew up seeing how adults drew on their religious tradition’s teachings to criticize self and society and to fund the imagination to deal with novel challenges. As a result, individuals, even in traditions with apparently quite conservative views, developed a pragmatic and life-grounded way of thinking with their faith.

Severed from a larger web of relationships, religious belief and commitment become the project of solitary individuals. Belief becomes the defining, and for many the only element in religion. “Strong” belief, which means convictions held with intense emotion and never

changing (because if it changed it would not be true) has become the norm for what faith and personal integrity mean for many today. Hence, the religiousness we encounter in classrooms often is intense and deeply committed, at the same time that it is rigid, inflexible. (This is less likely to be the case for recent immigrants and students who come from robust ethnic subcultures.)

“Belief” has become a complex and ambiguous category, one that includes what traditionally would be understood as faith—a trust relation with the divine; knowledge—verifiable fact and supported theory; and, belief—intellectual assent to proposition statements that involve unverifiable claims. Students who do not discriminate among faith, knowledge, and belief often presume that if something is said, they are to “believe” it. Material that in any way challenges the religious beliefs they have brought with them into the classroom must be rejected, and if at all possible, proven wrong, if their belief system’s truth is to be maintained. When students ask, as colleagues have reported and I have experienced, “Do you believe in homosexuality?”, “Do you believe in the bible?”, they are asking complex questions that have little to do with belief as intellectual assent, and everything to do with how one constructs meaning and how the construction of meaning is related to being a person of integrity.

Epistemological Considerations

In the United States today the nature of knowledge is contested. Is it situated and constructed within communities, or is it absolute, objective, and available to individuals through reason? Further, is knowledge available through special revelation from the divine? Today,

many students in our classrooms who identify themselves publicly as Christian, or evangelical Christian, answer the questions with: 1) knowledge is objective; and, 2) it is available through special revelation. These answers conflate belief with knowledge. For students working within this epistemology, encounters with the variety of intellectual disciplines in our classroom frequently threatens their religious commitments. For these students, knowledge, truth, and personal integrity are constructed around two central notions. First, the bible, to be read literally and held as inerrant and infallible, gives them certain access to the mind of God. It is a divine text, exempt from the constraints that space and time put on other texts. Second, readers do not interpret the bible—it says what it says. Further, the text has a single, unitary meaning. Many students are unaware and, when shown, refuse to acknowledge that what they say the bible says IS an interpretation.

It is not a new phenomenon at the cusp of the twenty-first century for students to enter classrooms with absolutes. The work of William Perry, Mary Belenky and her colleagues, Robert Kegan, Sharon Parks and others describes a developmental stage where persons think with dichotomous categories and with absolutes. As persons develop, ideally they construct knowledge in ways more cognizant of its situated nature, negotiate the limited character of all knowledge, and make commitments that they know to be significant even if historically situated and therefore partial. But this development is influenced significantly by the larger social and cultural world within which students find themselves.

Given their world, students often

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enter our classrooms today with epistemologies that allow for two categories—brute fact and mere opinion. The category of constructed interpretation—that place where meaning is uncovered or constructed—is not yet part of their repertoire. When students enter our classrooms with this cognitive and affective orientation bolstered by divine absolutes, it becomes much more difficult for them to consider other options, namely the constructed and provisional nature of knowledge, and metaphorical or multiple dimensions to truth.

Students' cognitive developmental tasks and teachers' pedagogical tasks are complicated further by the ever more evident contours of one dimension of post-modern life. Many people, including those in suburban, affluent, educated settings, accept the existence of spirits, demons, angels, and other supernatural forces as part of their worlds and appeal to them to explain events in their lives and in the larger social arena.

What the epistemological realities of post-modern, post-industrial, consumerist life in the United States mean is that growing numbers of our students encounter the rules of discourse that govern academic disciplines with few analogues from their experience on which to draw in mastering these rules. Further, many students are less than willing to presume that these rules are useful, valuable, or contribute to knowledge when they do encounter them.

Psychological Considerations

Students, of whatever age, are in a process of cognitive, affective, and social development. They are in a process of forming selves and finding voice. As students engage in this process, they draw on cultural wisdom traditions with which

they are at ease. For large numbers of traditional-aged undergraduates today, especially those of Euro-American heritage or those of African, Asian, or Hispanic descent who are assimilated into the broader consumer culture of the U.S., the language of evangelical Protestantism is the wisdom tradition on which they draw. What to the ears of faculty may sound like ideological fundamentalism often is not. Rather, it is students expressing meaning that they have constructed from the material at their disposal.

Growing numbers of students arrive at evangelical Protestantism through communities of peers who are “Christians.” Students in college and out often have grown up in deeply disturbed and chaotic family systems and social settings. For some of these students, the organization of self, knowledge, and reality around what they understand as “biblical absolutes” has been an important step on their developmental journey. They can, however, become mired in a dualistic view of life, one that entertains only one alternative to life carried out according to biblical absolutes—the dissolution of the self and utter personal and social chaos.

Many students in college and university classrooms have negotiated two or more sets of parents and families from the age of two or three. They have been forced to construct meaning on their own, in a pluralistic setting of values, authorities, and possibilities, at very young ages. Whatever meaning they have constructed has come hard won. It is held fiercely. With what meanings they have personally constructed and personally protected, it becomes understandable that disciplinary knowledge, concepts, and practices may be encountered as deeply threatening and

disturbing. Hence, students turn to religious commitments and beliefs that promise stability and certainty to protect their world views, their psyches, and their sense of personal integrity.

Pedagogical Implications for Classroom Practice

Students who have constructed meaningful worlds, often on their own and against great odds, enter our classrooms daily. As noted, they rarely arrive with an understanding of or skill for conversing civilly in “public” space as academic disciplines conceive this process. We who teach them do well, then, to give considerable care to composing the classroom as a space for civil, disciplinary discourse. Doing so makes us better able to transform the arrival of religious commitments in classroom conversations from silencing moments into gracefully teachable moments. Some suggestions to that end:

1. Be self-reflective about your thought and felt reactions when students use religious language. Faculty also carry religious commitments into the classroom. How do our commitments and the assumptions behind them color our listening to students? [A simple reflective process: Retrieve a time when a student made a religious statement in the classroom. What was your thought reaction? What was your felt reaction? What do your reactions tell you about you and your assumptions—about religion, about students, about learning? What do they suggest by way of questions regarding students' development, your discipline, the learning process?]
2. Spend time at the beginning of a course on what the rules of discourse are in the discipline of the course. Help

students see that the discipline is rooted in a community of discourse. Discuss how the practitioners of your discipline deal with their own personal commitments, including religious commitments.

3. Establish norms for discourse in the classroom and warrant them in terms of the discipline being learned. This avoids the need for faculty members to appeal to "common sense" or "shared values" as warrants for civility, two things on which there is little consensus today. Further, establishing norms for disciplinary discourse provides students a ritualized space of self-protection for their personal commitments that also permits them to try out thinking in a new way without feeling that their security is at risk.

4. Be discerning in listening to

religious language and its context when students speak. Try to understand why they are using such language, what it means in their larger context, where they are developmentally. Consider how they may see the connection between their religious statement and the material or issue at hand. (Depending on the situation, one might ask the student directly what the connection is.)

5. Think about whether it is better to ignore or respond to any particular religious statement made by a student in the classroom. But don't presume that ignoring religious statements will make them go away. A good norm to establish for the classroom is that religious statements will be situated, analyzed, and explored for assumptions and implications in the way any other statements are. Ignoring religious

statements may reinforce students' notions that whatever an individual says he or she believes is accurate, true, trustworthy, and worthy of respect within the context of the course discipline. While we want to respect diversity in the classroom, it is not the case that our disciplines assume that all views of reality are equally valuable or useful in all contexts, most especially this particular one.

6. Structure the classroom and assignments to support students' cognitive development. Support their movement from dualistic views of reality to views that recognize the situated nature of knowledge. Help them to realize that commitments can have integrity and worth without having to be universally applicable or absolute.

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