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 trivializes the authority of the theoretical methods and concepts courses are 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 false beliefs were being discussed because they considered the material offensive to their faith. Students asserting in a discussion of gay and lesbian families that the material is not usable for the sociology course because the bible condones those orientations. Students expressing outrage that the bible does not carry the same weight of authority as scholarly works in a communications course. As one professor put it in a discussion, "The material is so much more than a set of facts to be memorized. It is a way of life."

Not a satisfying teaching experience for any professor, but one that raises important questions. What leads students to believe such commitments 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 events occurring during the second half of the twentieth century have profoundly shaped our current classroom context so that religious commitments are present more publicly in our classrooms. Refusing to allow students to dominate epistemological, or ways of knowing, and to knowledge of the psychological development of young adults clarifies some of the insights implied when students make religious statements in the classroom. Theology 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 "divinity of America equation." This term refers to the era of the "newly Republican period of the 1870s and 1880s when the nation was undergoing a revolution in its values in American culture...a period of religious pluralism in the equation, liberty's concern over the central American value, a value which the nation was dedicated to and which it was acquired, by divinely mandated, 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 to all citizens, whether white, or Jewish, or members of the many "sects" of Christianity could share and protect this liberty."

Promoting the value of liberty and the practice of toleration is required to build the religious pluralism that the new nation needed. It transformed that reality from a pragmatic problem from roughly 1600 to 1780. The assumption of the Western world was that no stable moral order could exist without a single religion supported by and supporting the state it or national virtue. Further, in order for the nation to exist, its members had to be defined as religiously responsible, moral citizens. The various religious communities in the nation, all voluntary associations, provided such citizens through their work of fulfilling the members to good and keeping them focused on salutary. The various Christian "sect" supported the mission of American society as well. This equation protected the right to exist, to work, for the salvation of souls, to support their members, and to enter the world of good. Hence, they taught that the value of the inalienable right of individual conscience in addition they taught, though they also often violated, the value of religion as a necessary condition of the right of individual conscience, referred to as the "precious jewel of liberty.""
"The comment came from out of nowhere, flustered me completely, made the other students nervous, and shut down the discussion."
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students see that the discipline is rooted in a community of discourse. Discuss how the practices of your discipline deal with their own personal commitments, including religious commitments.

3. Establish norms for discourse in the classroom and warn them in terms of the discipline being learned. This avoids the need for faculty members to appeal to a common sense or a shared value as a warrant for civility, two things on which there is little consensus today. Further, establishing norms for disciplinary discourse provides students a realized sense of self-protection for their personal commitments that also permits them to try turning 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 too whether they may see the connection between their religious statement and the material or text 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 religious statement made by a student in the classroom. But don't assume 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, meaningful, 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 to all contexts, most especially this particular one.

6. Structure the classroom and assignments to support students' cognitive development. Support their movement from didactic 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.

References and Resources


