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Will You Talk With Me?
Welcoming the Faithful and the Skeptical
in an Undergraduate Religious Studies Course

Catholic universities, indeed most religiously affiliated universities, find that religious belonging cannot be assumed and that many students are skeptical of faith. This challenges the religious studies instructor who assumes her task is to provide a summary of Christian faith. This paper argues for shifting the focus away from this approach and to one that engages students in dialogue about humanity's core questions using texts from the Christian tradition. This pedagogical change can lead to more critical engagement and even to more curiosity about the Christian tradition.

Introduction

"I was baptized as a Catholic, but we only went to church on Easter." "We went to church a lot when I was younger, but then I started playing sports and we just kinda stopped going." "My grandparents are really religious, but I don't really understand what it is they say that they believe." "I went to a Catholic high school and I feel tired of being forced to do all that religion stuff." "I believe in science." "I believe in a higher power, but not necessarily in God." "I believe in God, but I disagree with the Church's teaching on LGBTQ issues." "When my parents divorced, I really started questioning whether God cared about me and my family."

At the beginning of each semester teaching an introductory religious studies course at a small Catholic college, I ask students to tell me about their religious background and belonging.[1] Generally speaking, in a class of 25 students, I will have two or three who profess religious belief (they believe in God), maintain religious belonging (they go to church regularly), and are knowledgeable about their religious belief (they understand, at least in general, what Christianity claims about God and humanity). Another small minority of students claim to be atheists or agnostics. The majority of students in my class fall somewhere in the middle. They have a family or cultural connection to Christianity, often with grandparents who are religiously observant and parents who are a bit more laissez faire about religious activity. They have a vague sense of being Christian, but are unclear about what that means, both in terms of the core beliefs of Christianity and how those beliefs might impact the day-to-day life of the individual and the community.

In addition, many students choose my small Catholic college because of its pre-professional programs. They come to major in nursing, education, criminal justice, or business, and they have very clear career goals; they want to get through college with the degree that will equip them to get a good job as a nurse, a teacher, a police officer, or in a corporate office. They come to this college because it offers them a good way to accomplish these goals; the fact that it is a Catholic college does not usually a key factor in their decision-making process. Therefore,

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[1] At my university, the vast majority of students identify, at least nominally, with Christianity. Many are Catholic and others come from various other Christian denominations. There is also a small minority of students who identify with a religion other than Christianity, usually Hinduism or Islam.

many of them are somewhat taken aback when they discover that students are required to take religious studies courses.[2] Most students are ambivalent about this – they've never studied religion or theology – and they are a bit reluctant – they complain that these religious studies requirements take time away from their chosen major. A small minority of students are hostile; they see no point in studying religion and resent being forced to do so.

All of this presents a challenge to me as a teacher of a required undergraduate religious studies course in my Catholic college. How do I approach the teaching of a religious studies course in which the majority of my students are only loosely affiliated with the Christian tradition and are relatively uninterested in taking a religious studies course? This is a challenge that is not unique to me and my institution, of course; since all Catholic colleges and universities have some sort of required religious studies or theology curriculum and since all Catholic colleges and universities are drawing from the same generational cohort, we are all facing similar challenges. And, I would venture to guess, the same is true, at least in part, at colleges and universities affiliated with other religious traditions, especially in the United States.

This paper delves into this tension by exploring both the nature and role of the Catholic university in "a secular age" and some pedagogical commitments that can enable an instructor to find a way to balance the need for rootedness in the Christian tradition and the need for an openness that welcomes students who are hostile, skeptical, and accepting of religious faith and practice. In particular, the paper advocates for a shift away from viewing these introductory religious studies courses as opportunities to summarize the Catholic faith and towards using them as a chance to engage students in an intellectual dialogue with a selection of thinkers from the tradition. By shifting away from an implicit assumption of shared faith and to a model of dialogue with the tradition, students are invited to find wisdom in the Catholic tradition, regardless of their personal appropriation of it.

The Context: Teaching Religious Studies in a Secular Age

Philosopher Charles Taylor proposes a way of understanding "secularity" that he believes is more adequate for our contemporary Western culture and better reflects the history of Western civilization. Taylor argues that there are three ways that "secularity" can be defined. First is the historical understanding of the term: secular referred to that which was not sacred, that which pertained to the temporal or "earthly" realm.[3] The second, and more common, understanding is that the secular refers to an a-religious or non-sectarian standpoint; it is what remains when our culture has moved beyond its reliance on the myths, magic, and superstition of religious belief.[4] In contrast to these understandings, Taylor proposes a better way of thinking about secularity; for him, a secular age is one in which religious belief is understood as one option among many and, therefore, up for debate. This understanding of secularity indicates "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[5] Taylor's account of

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[2] As is typical of many Catholic colleges and universities, students are required to take a first-year introductory religious studies course, one upper-level religious studies course, one philosophy course, and one elective in either religious studies or philosophy.

[3] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-2.

[4] Taylor, *A Secular Age,* 2-3.

[5] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3. This vision of a secular age accounts for both the decline in religious participation and allegiance in, for example, Europe as well as the continued religious fervor and relatively high participation rates in the United States. In both places, religious faith is seen as one option available to people; one that is still chosen in the United States and one that is generally not chosen in Europe.

secularity proposes that an exclusive humanism – an entirely immanent worldview "accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing"[6] – is now possible and is, in fact, one often chosen.

Taylor argues that this third understanding of secularity reflects a significant shift in what he calls the conditions of belief – the underlying presumptions that make religious belief plausible or not. His question, then, is "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"[7] It is the conditions of belief that have changed such that religious faith itself is contested and seen as optional. This shift in the conditions of belief reflects a significant shift in our social imaginary.

As defined by Taylor, a social imaginary is "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations;" it is the "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[8] The social imaginary refers to the largely un-reflected-upon understanding that the people in a society have of the way things work.[9] And, Taylor argues, it was a shift in our understandings of the way things work that underlies the shift in the conditions of belief that underlie his understanding of secularity.

Our contemporary secular social imaginary has been shaped over what Taylor calls the "long march" from the late Middle Ages until today; in order to arrive at our modern secular social imaginary, three major shifts are made.[10] First, the "long march" was a march from a world where time and place were enchanted to an embrace of a disenchanted world and a buffered self; the world is no longer governed by forces beyond our understanding and the self is now seen as insulated and autonomous.[11] Second, there is a shift from a world seen as primarily social to one seen as primarily individual. In a modern social imaginary, rejecting belief is an individual decision; in earlier times, disbelief had communal repercussions.[12] Third, in a disenchanted world, time becomes flattened. Not only do we lose the connection between "sacred" and "secular" time, we lose the grounding of the "secular" in the transcendent. Whereas human flourishing, in times past, was assumed to have its end in some transcendent reality, in the modern social imaginary, this connection to a transcendent end has been lost and human flourishing in the here-and-now becomes the only goal.[13] In a disenchanted and buffered

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[6] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.
[7] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.
[8] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.
[9] Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann are helpful here: "Only a very limited group of people in any society engages in theorizing, in the business of ideas… But everyone in society participates in its 'knowledge' in one way or another. Put differently, only a few are concerned with the theoretical interpretation of the world, but everybody lives in a world of some sort" (Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 15).
[10] To the three considered here, Taylor adds two more: 1) a shift from a fullness of time (where "higher" time and mundane time interact) to a uniform, univocal secular time; and 2) a shift in the way we view the natural world – from a cosmos (an ordered world in which the natural and the transcendent are layered together) to a universe (an entirely immanent order that is autonomous and independent of any transcendent meaning). See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 55, 60.
[11] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38-39.
[12] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 42.
[13] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 50.

world where disbelief no longer has social consequences and simple human flourishing has become the goal, choosing against belief in God has become a thinkable option.

One of the ways that this shift in our social imaginary and the rise of secularity is seen is in process of religious disaffiliation, especially among young adults. Much has been written about this phenomenon, tracing the demographic trends and suggesting potential responses from Christian churches.[14] Speaking from my own context as a Catholic theologian teaching at a Catholic university, I want to focus on this trend of disaffiliation in the U.S. Catholic Church, but this context mirrors the trends in religious disaffiliation in general in the United States and Europe. In 2017, St. Mary's Press and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University published the study, *Going, Going, Gone*, which traces the demographic dynamics of disaffiliation among young adult Catholics in the United States. According the to the study authors, "Disaffiliation from the Church is largely a thoughtful, conscious, intentional choice made by young people in a secularized society where faith and religious practice are seen as one option among many… An accumulation of unresolved discrepancies ultimately lead to the conclusion that 'none of it makes sense' or 'I just don't buy it anymore' so 'why stay?'"[15] Some young Catholics leave the church because of negative experiences – disruptions in family life or ecclesial practice that lead to a questioning of religious belonging.[16] Others drift away; rather than pointing to a precipitating event, they note a generalized dissatisfaction with religious belonging and, over time, opt out of religious faith and participation.[17] A final group of disaffiliating young Catholics are those who dissent from Church teachings, usually around a moral issue.[18] In addition to young Catholics who have disaffiliated from the Church, the study also notes the presence in the Church of "sorta-Catholics" and "almost done Catholics" – those who still formally identify with the Church, but who feel like a marginal member of the community, who are unknowledgeable about the Christian faith, or whose parents are only loosely affiliated with the Church.[19]

Both of these trends – the move to a secular social imaginary in which religious belonging is seen as optional and the taking up of this option not to belong to a religious tradition by many young adult Catholics – have implications for the teaching of religious studies at a Catholic university. Some Christian groups respond to this modern social imaginary by rejecting it and operating as if we still lived in the enchanted world of the late Middle Ages. While there is some appeal in the simplicity of this approach, it is not ultimately successful because it fails to

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[14] See, for example: Pew Form on Religion and Public Life, *"Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation* (October 9, 2012), http://www.pew-forum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx; Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Heinz Streib and Ralph Hood, *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009); Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and the Theological Roundtable published in *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society*, 40, no. 2 (December 2013): 255-292, with contributions from Thomas Beaudoin, Patrick Hornbeck, and William Portier.

[15] Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2017), 11.

[16] McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 14-17.

[17] McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 18-20.

[18] McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 21-24.

[19] McCarty and Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone*, 9.

provide people with a way of understanding their faith in a way that takes secularity seriously. What is needed instead is an approach that deliberately brings the present context of teachers and learners into conversation with the Christian message.[20] It is an approach that takes the secularity of the modern social imaginary as seriously as it does the content of the religious studies classroom.

Rethinking the Introductory Religious Studies Course

In the United States there are 238 degree-granting Catholic colleges and universities enrolling nearly 900,000 students.[21] Many were founded by religious congregations and dioceses as ways of educating Catholic young adults in a Protestant culture that was viewed as hostile toward Catholics. However, since the 1960s, Catholic universities have joined the mainstream of higher education[22] and students choose these universities for reasons not always connected to the Catholic identity of the university. At first, this provoked something of an identity crisis among Catholic universities as many of them developed "a tendency to minimize Catholicism in their self-descriptions developed in order to attract a more diverse student body, gain financial support, or out of fear that the school be seen as 'unwelcoming' or 'oppressive' for others."[23] More recently, these universities have focused on renewing their Catholic identity through, among other initiatives, faculty formation in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the appointment of administrators tasked with a focus on mission and ministry.

Given this context in which Catholic universities are thinking about and recommitting to their Catholic identity while, at the same time, facing an increasingly secular cultural context and a disaffiliating student body,[24] the question of the purpose of the Catholic university and of the teaching of theology within the Catholic university remains important. In his classic, *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman argues that a Catholic university should be committed to a broad and liberal education that includes a wide range of disciplines. This equips students with flexible and transferable skills that enable them to think critically, which he sees as an end in itself. He says:

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[20] This is by no means a unique idea. Among others, Thomas Groome's Shared Christian Practice approach is one that takes the historical and cultural context of the learner seriously and invites learners to reflect on their own lives and experiences and to bring those into conversation with the Christian Story and Vision. See, Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); Thomas H. Groome, *Will There Be Faith? A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011).

[21] Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, "Catholic Higher Education FAQs," accessed September 14, 2019. https://www.accunet.org/Catholic-Higher-Ed-FAQs#HowMany.

[22] Thomas P. Rausch, *Educating for Faith and Justice: Catholic Higher Education Today* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 1. Rausch argues that, particularly in the period after the Second Vatican Council, Catholic universities grew in numbers (from 92,000 in 1945 to 430,000 in 1970 to today's enrollment of nearly 900,000) and adopted the scholarship and teaching standards of other universities. "Standards were raised for students and faculty. New graduate programs were added, including an increasing number on the doctoral level. Faculty members were now expected to do research and publish. Core curricula were revised, dropping specifically confessional courses. Religion departments were transformed into more academic departments of theology or religious studies. Lay men and women were brought into positions of responsibility in university governance, while the 1967 Land O'Lakes statement, hammered out under the leadership of Notre Dame's Father Theodore Hesburgh, affirmed the principles of institutional autonomy and academic freedom" (1).

[23] Rausch, *Educating for Faith and Justice*, 2.

[24] Like the disaffiliated young adult Catholics described in the *Going, Going, Gone* study, the Pew Forum has noted that "one third of those raised Catholic no longer identify with the church. Other Christian churches have experienced even greater losses" (Rausch, *Educating for Faith and Justice*, 2).

> It is the education which gives a man [*sic*] a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. It teaches him to see things as they are, to go right to the point to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant.[25]

Newman also believed that theology had an important role to play in the liberal education provided by a Catholic university. He suggests that "all science being connected together, and having bearings one on another, it is impossible to teach them all thoroughly, unless they are all taken into account, and Theology among them."[26] In other words, theology functions as a way of knowing about the world and, as such, a student's knowledge about the world would be incomplete without theology as a part of their liberal education. For Newman, a Catholic university "cannot teach universal knowledge if it does not teach Catholic theology."[27]

If Newman is correct in proposing that the purpose of an education at a Catholic university is about developing the critical thinking skills needed to participate thoughtfully in the world and that theology is a necessary part of developing these critical thinking skills, then it is important to consider how we go about this task as teachers of theology and religious studies in Catholic universities. Because teachers of religious studies can no longer assume that our students enter our introductory courses with either basic knowledge about Christian faith or with a personal history of having practiced Christian faith, we cannot expect them to think critically about a faith that they do not understand, are skeptical of, or reject entirely. Therefore, many religious studies instructors view the introductory course as necessitating a summary of the faith.[28] We approach our teaching as if we need to outline the content of Christian doctrine. Some take a historical view, tracing how the faith developed from the preaching of Jesus through history to our modern theological concerns; others take a topical approach, outlining the key theological concepts of Christianity: Trinity, salvation, revelation, eschatology, and so on. But, even in these approaches, we are tending to focus more on knowing about and understanding the Christian faith (both skills relatively low on Bloom's taxonomy[29]), without encouraging the

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[25] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 134. Newman continues with this description of the liberally educated person: "It prepares him to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility. It shows him how to accommodate himself to others, how to throw himself into their state of mind, how to bring before them his own, how to influence them, how to come to an understanding with them, how to bear with them. He is at home in any society, he has common ground with every class; he knows when to speak and when to be silent; he is able to converse, he is able to listen; he can ask a question pertinently, and gain a lesson seasonably, when he has nothing to impart himself; he is ever ready, yet never in the way; he is a pleasant companion, and a comrade you can depend upon; he knows when to be serious and when to trifle, and he has a sure tact which enables him to trifle with gracefulness and to be serious with effect. He has the repose of a mind which lives in itself, while it lives in the world, and which has resources for its happiness at home when it cannot go abroad. He has a gift which serves him in public, and supports him in retirement, without which good fortune is but vulgar, and with which failure and disappointment have a charm" (134-135).

[26] Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 74.

[27] Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 163.

[28] I am not suggesting that this summative approach cannot be effective, that teachers of these courses aren't cognizant of cultural factors like secularization and disaffiliation, or that these approaches don't lead to the development of critical thinking skills. Rather, I want to suggest that this approach is not the only way to find a balance between the need to be rooted in the Christian tradition and the need to acknowledge the context from which students are coming.

[29] See, for example, Lorin W. Anderson and David Krathwohl, eds., *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: Longman, 2001).

higher-order thinking skills, such as the analysis and evaluation that becoming a critical thinker about religious studies would require.

I want to suggest that one way of engaging critical thinking skills in the introductory religious studies classroom is to shift away from the perceived need to summarize the Christian faith and to an approach that invites dialogue with the tradition. This approach operates on the assumption that our students can find wisdom in a religious text even when they do not hold a religious faith. This means moving away from a teacher-driven lecture and discussion format – where I tell you what's important about St. Augustine, Martin Luther, or Elizabeth Johnson – to a student-driven conversation in which we discover together why St. Augustine, Luther, and Johnson are so influential in Christian theology. This is not to say that the instructor has no role in guiding the conversation and in being the expert in the room; rather, it is just that the instructor takes as equally important what the students want to talk about and what she wants them to know.

Educator Paulo Freire suggests that dialogue is a pedagogical approach that engages students and teachers in the shared experience of creating meaning. And, in this process, students are invited to think critically about their own context – their experiences, their assumptions, their prior knowledge – in conversation with the content of the curriculum – in this case, the two-thousand-year tradition of Christian reflection. [30] In her book, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, bell hooks similarly suggests that in conversation, in "learning and talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership."[31] This partnership is founded on what Freire calls "reading the world and reading the word,"[32] a conversation in which the student, the teacher, and the text all bring their voices to the conversation in the search for understanding. hooks makes the important point that conversation or dialogue in the engaged classroom embraces a diversity of opinions.

> In classroom discussions that are not conversations there is often a sense that argument and negative contestation are the only ways to address relevant issues. Negative conflict-based discussion almost always invites the mind to close, while conversation as a mode of interaction calls us to open our mind. All too often, professors have feared that if a conversation begins in the classroom that it will foreclose discussion of assigned reading material, of what matters, at least to them. However, mindful conversation, talking that is powerful and energetic, always spotlights what really matters. When conversations in the classroom lead to intense dialogue, students bring a heightened awareness to their engagement with assigned material.[33]

hooks also notes that conversations about what she identifies as spirituality are an important part of her understanding of conversation in the engaged classroom. Even when students do not claim a particular religious tradition, conversations about religion and religious belonging cultivate critical thinking. "It enables students to better recognize the interconnected nature of life and by so doing brings them face to face with the sacred. They find themselves capable of a conscious process of watchfulness that is mindful and aware."[34]

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[30] Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed" in *The Paulo Freire Reader* ed. Ana Maria Araujo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (New York: Continuum, 2001), 263.
[31] bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 43.
[32] Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed," 238.
[33] hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, 45.
[34] hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, 149.

From this perspective, teaching the introductory religious studies course is the exploration of the deepest questions that humanity asks, rather than a summary of the content of Christian faith. Teaching religious studies can become a privileged opportunity to talk about these deepest questions with students; this means facilitating a dialogue between the questions that students are asking and the ways that the Christian tradition has sought to address those questions. Dialogue – conversations founded on mutual respect and curiosity – creates a classroom dynamic where teachers and students are learning together. The practice of dialogue opens up the conversation so that everyone can participate, explore new ideas, and name for themselves their personal commitments. In addition, the practice of dialogue promotes the inclusion of a wide variety of voices in the academic conversation. Because each participant in the dialogue has her or his own perspective that is shaped by many different aspects of their personal story, including, but not limited to, gender, race and ethnicity, class, and age, each student can contribute to the development of a profoundly educative dialogue in the religious studies classroom.

One Pedagogical Technique: Text-Based Reflection

In what follows, I want to describe my own approach to fostering such conversation in my introductory religious studies classroom with a goal of engaging students in a reading of the world and a reading of the word. In my experience with my students, this is an approach that honors the two cultural trends noted above – of increased secularization where religious belief is one option among many and of increasing numbers of students who are skeptical of faith or have disaffiliated from organized religious practice. It is also an approach that contributes to the development of critical thinking skills, which, as Newman suggested over 150 years ago, is a necessary part of a Catholic university education. This is also an approach that, because it is focused on the facilitation of conversation in the classroom, has the potential to engage students in thinking critically about their own religious questions and to find, in dialogue with religious texts, some answers for themselves to the questions that humanity has perennially asked.

I should note that this is not the ultimate answer for what to do in a religious studies classroom in a culture characterized by secularity and disaffiliation. As with any pedagogical technique, it is merely one tool in my toolbox that I use in combination with other strategies, including lecture, small group discussions, project-based learning, and more. Nevertheless, it is one technique that I have found to be particularly helpful in drawing students into the study of theology even when they are initially disinterested or dismissive. A second caution is that this is a pedagogical technique that must be learned by students. As hooks and other theorists note, students do not automatically know *how* to engage in a conversation about religious ideas.[35] So, time must be spent helping students to understand how an academic conversation is different from (and yet related to) casual conversation, debate, argument, and problem solving. As the instructor, it is my responsibility to help my students develop the skills they will need to do what I am asking them to do.

Having acknowledged these cautions, I want to describe my approach to fostering conversation around religious ideas and how this approach is received by my students. First,

[35] hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, 44. "Those of us who recognize the value of conversation as a key to knowledge acquisition also know that we are living in a culture in which many people lack the basic skills of communication because they spend most of their time being passive consumers of information. Both television and computers help promote passive learning… Conversation is always about giving. Genuine conversation is about the sharing of power and knowledge; it is fundamentally a cooperative enterprise" (44-45).

student preparation of assigned readings is a key aspect. I want students to engage in dialogue with each other, with me, and with a text on a religious idea; without preparation of the readings, our conversation will not have this crucial foundation in the text. When I assign a reading, I tend to keep them relatively short (no more than ten or fifteen pages) and I require students to submit a reading reflection before class. In these reading reflections, students choose two quotations from the reading that "jump out at them" – one that resonates with them and one that challenges them – and write a short paragraph on why they chose it and what it means for them. This not only ensures that students are doing the reading, it is asking them to have a personal reaction to the reading. While I do want them to learn content from the reading, I also want them to engage it on a more personal level, asking themselves what they found that affirms what they already think or believe and what they found that pushes them to think about things in new ways.

I have been assigning this type of reading reflections for a couple of semesters and I am amazed at what students say in these reflections. Because their reflection is focused on a quotation from the text, they have to engage what the author is saying. And, because their reflection asks for their reaction to the quotation, they have to bring their own perspectives and experiences into the conversation. A couple of examples:[36]

- In this paragraph, a student is reflecting on a reading from Terrence Tilley's *Faith: What It Is and What It Isn't*.

  "Learning how to love is an accomplishment."

  This is a short and simple quote, however it spoke volumes to me. I was brought up in such a loving family that I never had to question what it felt like being loved. For as long as I can remember I have always felt loved and have loved the ones around me. Learning how to love was an accomplishment and I have been able to use it all throughout my life. Sadly, I know I was very lucky to grow up in the family I did because not everyone gets to experience love. For some, it is hard to love and accept love. This quote just made me step back and understand why others could be more "uptight". They just haven't reached that accomplishment yet, because their path to love had more roadblocks.

- Here, two students chose the same quotation from Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," but had different things to say about the quotation.

  "Moreover, I am cognizant about the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

  Student One: I resonated with this quote because it directly relates to what we discussed in our last class. There are so many different challenges faced every day in the United States. The example brought up in class was abortions. Several states in the south are starting to make abortions illegal for women. This was absolutely horrifying for me to hear and even though I don't live there my heart aches for those women. When King says injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, I immediately thought of the new abortion laws down south. Not only are the laws not right but they may also have a

[36] Student names have been removed from these as have some identifying information. It should also be noted that these reading reflections were written towards the end of the semester, when students were familiar with the process and with how our in-class conversations would be conducted.

spiraling effect on other states. Just because it is not directly happening to women in New England, does not mean that it couldn't one day in the future. If something is not right in one part of the United States, we should be standing together to fight for the cause. We are called *united* for a reason.

Student Two: This quote, stood out to me as something that challenges me, as I'm sure challenges many others. I believe that, as King states, injustice of different communities are interrelated to each other. As Americans, if an injustice happens in one area, we should all be concerned as if it was happening to us. I think this is something that tends to be lost in today's society. Even with myself, I can watch something on the news, and even if I think to myself "that's sad", or "that's unfair", I will turn off the news and continue about my day. This reminds me of a painting that correlates with a story we talked about in my literature class. The painting entitled, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In the painting, Icarus fell from the sky and landed in the water. There were people around him, but no one seemed to notice Icarus struggle. The message of this painting was that everyone is so focused on themselves, we tend to overlook those who need our help. King, on the other hand, took action instead of looking the other way. He thought less about himself, and the possible repercussions, and gave a voice to those who needed his help. I think that I, and everyone else, can learn from King's actions.

Second, the way that we use these reading reflections in class is structured. Using them in our class discussions reinforces that doing the reading and the reflections is not just busywork, that it lays the foundation for what will happen in the classroom. But, more importantly, having these quotations that they have already had the chance to reflect on means that students are ready to participate in a conversation that is grounded in our common text and that engages students in a discussion on that text. These class discussions always happen with students and myself sitting in a circle so that we can see each other. Each student has their first name on a table tent in front of them enabling all of us to call each other by name. To get the conversation started, we pick names out of a hat; when a student's name is chosen, they share one of their quotations and a bit about why they picked it. This then becomes the conversation starter and other students are invited to respond – they can agree and build on what a student has said, respectfully disagree, offer a different interpretation, suggest a related quotation from the text, tell a story that illuminates a point, and more. When a topic under discussion peters out, we choose a new name from the hat.

As the instructor and the subject area expert in the room, I come to class with some topics from the reading that I think we need to be sure to discuss. Sometimes, I will offer my own quotation just as students do; sometimes I will specifically draw their attention to a particularly important point that the author is making. But more often than not, the conversation ends up raising most of what I wanted to be sure to discuss. In addition, I do function both as conversation leader – ensuring that we don't get too far off track in the conversations – and as the expert in religious studies, providing clarification of ideas or explanations of Church teachings. During these conversations, especially at the beginning of a semester, there can be periods of awkwardness. Students need time to develop their conversational skills and to learn how to think critically about a text and their own experiences; and this pedagogical approach asks them to learn these skills by doing them, which can be halting and strained, at least at first. In addition, good conversation requires good thinking and this means that there are often times of

silence. The silence that happens while students think about what a student has offered in their quotation can, at first, feel awkward, but it is a necessary part of the process.

In general, students have responded very well to this pedagogical approach. In particular, they have noted two positive aspects to this format for class conversation. First, they appreciate hearing what their classmates think and how it kept their attention focused on the topic under discussion. "These discussions were great in helping us learn more about one another and this course." "It was nice to know people's personal opinions." "Most people were engaged and, even if not talking, were listening." "I loved these, getting many ideas, opinions, and having discussions that were independent yet guided." "This made people participate and I liked it because the quiet people usually have the best ideas." "I saw how when reading the same text, many people had different interpretations based on their backgrounds."

Second, students note that they were able to engage questions of faith in ways that felt natural and honest to them and that balanced a sense of rootedness in the Catholic tradition and was welcoming of all forms of belief or non-belief. "I think these were valuable discussions throughout the semester that made me think about my faith and my life." "I learned that religion can be more about life and not just what the Church says." "I am not particularly religious, but still found the class to be welcoming." "People were free to bring their own beliefs into a conversation without feeling like they were being forced to." "I have debated my religious beliefs for a long time and this class helped me realize religion is more than what they preach at church." "I learned how opening my mind to the different topics discussed made me more interested in religion." "I have a new appreciation for God and how and where God is when we are suffering with something." "I'm not really religious, but I enjoyed hearing the different perspectives of theologians. I feel like I am more open-minded now."

Beyond the positive reactions of students (which, in a university culture that emphasizes student evaluations, is nice to hear), I would draw attention to a third important outcome. It is my experience that students become better critical thinkers about religious texts over the course of a semester. Because this process requires students to read a theological text and respond to what resonates with them or challenges them and because they engage in conversation about these points of resonance and challenge, they are learn how to and then become more comfortable with seeing these religious texts as partners in the conversation. The readings are no longer simply sources of information (although they are that, too) and participation in class is no longer simply learning facts about Christianity to be presented back to me on a test. Rather, the theologians that we engage in our conversations become learning partners and students begin to see themselves as learning, not just from me as the instructor, but also from each other and from the text. And, when the text and classmates become conversation partners, students start to engage in evaluation, analysis, and application of these texts – developing the kinds of critical thinking skills that a university education should enable. And, because students have something to contribute to the conversation regardless of their personal appropriation of or belief in the Christian faith, they find themselves opening up to the possibility that Christianity might be a source of wisdom for them and their lives.

In the quest to find a "coexistence" between rootedness in the Christian tradition and the need to honor the context of secularization and disaffiliation among students in the teaching of introductory religious studies courses, this paper traces one pedagogical approach that seems to engage students in thinking critically about a religious text and talking thoughtfully about their responses to the text and each other. While this is not the only pedagogical approach that would

work, it is one that recognizes what students are bringing (or not bringing) to the religious studies classroom and yet engages them in a process of thinking critically about Catholic theology, a core mission of any Catholic university. Students report that they appreciate this approach as one that honors their various levels of believing, doesn't "force religion down their throats," and engages them in thinking critically about the faith-claims of the Catholic tradition. A number of students report that they find themselves reevaluating their skepticism about faith and being more open to religious belonging. Instead of focusing on information about the Christian tradition, this focus on conversation about a text from the Christian tradition seems to encourage practices of evaluation and analysis. But perhaps more importantly, it seems to encourage respect, open-mindedness, and a thoughtful "reading [of] the world and reading [of] the word."[37]

[37] Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed," 238.

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