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CONTENT AND MESSAGE IN TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION

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I was waiting for a plane in the San Francisco airport when a former student approached me. I suspected that I had seen her before; but even after she had reminded me of her name, I couldn't quite place her or quickly reconstruct whatever previous classroom circumstances pertained. So, trying to catch up with things as unembarrassingly as possible, I asked her a series of questions. "Do you remember when you took the class from me?" I wondered. She responded that it must have been during her junior year, but it might well have been when she was a senior. Still fumbling, I asked, "do you remember what class it was?" "No, not exactly," she replied, "but I know it was a class in religious studies." Then, having struck out completely, I posed the omnibus question, "well, can you recall anything at all about the class, its subject, any books you may have read, anything we talked about, the topics that were covered?" By this time, she too was embarrassed. "No," she said softly, "but I do remember that my grade was a B plus."

I have pondered this conversation on numerous occasions, for its implications tend to match my own recollections of being a college student. Years after receiving my baccalaureate degree, I would probably be hard pressed to list the title, reading list, or specific subjects of many of the courses in which I was enrolled. But I have no difficulty remembering the standout courses. I do have vivid memories of certain books that I read. And there are professors that I encountered who made lasting, indelible impressions on me, two or three of whom functioned as role models inspiring me to go into the teaching profession myself. As I look back upon my own experience from the vantage point of being a university professor myself, however, I am conscious that the care I take to make certain that particular topics are covered in a course and that their contents are correct in monitored curricular terms may be rather secondary to the ways in which such courses function for students. This would be a distressing recognition for me were it not for the fact that I have also made a related discovery, namely, that the students who enroll in such courses are following a learning process of their own. What registers most profoundly with them is the intellectual substance that speaks most eloquently to the questions, interests, and curiosities they have when they take the courses. I am not proposing that all courses should be judged on

the basis of their immediate relevance or conscious impact, for some of the most effective courses are ones that create interest, stimulate questions, and spark curiosities. The lasting impact of such courses may not be known or recognized for years after a formal undergraduate education has been completed. I am proposing that courses are about subjects that do things for the students. The educational framework, from the students' perspectives, is manifestly more personalized and only approximates the formal curricular framework within whose terms the courses have been conceived.

Consequently, after a course has been completed, the student ought to be able to remember what the course was about and what the student learned; and there is hardly ever a one-to-one correlation between these factors. Courses are about subjects, but they also carry messages that are frequently more memorable and more potent than whatever specific theses are developed, no matter how controversial, about that subject matter. I am proposing that the message registers, and is probably remembered years later, when it can be effectively correlated with the questions, interests, and intellectual curiosities that belong to the student's particular biography of learning.

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One of my advisees (not a student in any of my classes) expressed dismay over the complement of classes he was taking one academic quarter. "I have three of them," he said. "In European literature we are reading about Friedrich Nietzsche and the nihilists. In my beginning psychology course we are classifying psychoses and neuroses. Any my philosophy instructor is lecturing on existentialism, with its vocabulary of fear, dread, anxiety, and despair." The cumulative effect had become a burden rather heavy to bear. "Tell me," he said, "does the faculty offer any courses on happiness?"

Another student told me that he had signed up for a course in the Peace Studies program. He came away from it fully convinced that the professor believed in peace and was against war. But he had

expected the same when he enrolled in the course, and so did everyone else. Consequently, the professor had no opposition; the class itself was a meeting of like-minded advocates.

Still another student confided that he had enrolled in an ethnic studies course because he was ready to acknowledge that he possessed only minimal knowledge of peoples, cultures, and races other than his own. The course on ethnicity, he learned, when offered by Professor X, was mostly a course about the accuracy of Marxist interpretations of class conflict and economic exploitation. Certainly, he had "gotten his money's worth," the student acknowledged, but it wasn't quite what he had expected to learn. The "message" he had taken away had not been forecast in the formal description of the contents of the course that had been prepared for the college catalog or had been distributed in the syllabus.

Similarly, students enroll in college courses in world religions, so they say, because they sense that such religions play powerfully formative roles in the social and cultural makeup of the contemporary global community. Those students with personal interest or involvement in religion are most probably also stimulated by such questions as "are all religions true?" and/or "is there compelling intellectual criteria for judging the claims of one religious tradition to be superior or preferable to the claims of any of the others?" This, it would seem, is the educational biographical interest framework within which the "message" of the course will be situated and with respect to which its implications and consequences will be registered and reflected upon. It follows, therefore, that it is from these personal interest points that the content of a course will be monitored and examined, and from within this personal framework of interests, questions, and curiosities that the students enrolled in the course will be listening. Therefore, the conclusions about such message-items that the instructor draws will be understood by the students in the course, and will doubtlessly be remembered, perhaps for many years thereafter—after they have served their specific educational function as biographically assigned. At the same time, whatever elaborate theories the instructor wishes to communicate about the subject will probably not register with the intended intellectual force unless they are respectful of the specifics of the learning environment into which they must be fitted. Some instructors will urge students to cultivate an enduring and increasing intellectual interest in one or more of the cultural environments to which they belong, perhaps an interest of sufficient staying power to lead the student into graduate studies in this area. Some students will please the instructor in just this way; that is, they will emulate the instructor's interest and consider a professional vocational

commitment reflective of their instructor's. But the majority of students—no matter whether the instructor thinks well of them for this behavior or not—will be listening for the “message” and will apply the contents of the course to a more highly individualized learning environment, that is, if the “message” is clear enough to be used that way and if the intellectual proposals are unambiguous enough to be so applied.

The religious studies profession has some difficulty thinking about education in these terms because it is justifiably wary of the intrusion of personal convictions into an intellectual inquiry that claims to be objective, dispassionate, and as sophisticated methodologically as any of the other fields and disciplines that belong to the natural sciences and humanities. There are large differences, however, between intentional proselytizing—ideological advocacy, indoctrination into a faith—and a recognition that the contents of academic courses are received and understood via specific interests that both the instructor and the learner bring to the subject. In this regard, my proposals are that courses about subjects do things for students and that the ways in which subjects are treated and portrayed carry both implicit and explicit messages for those within whose personal interest frames such analytical and interpretive work is carried out.

For example, courses about religion exhibit messages about power—specifically about how institutions compete for status and influence within complex social, political, and economic frameworks. No matter how objectively, dispassionately, and descriptively the content of the course is presented, the learner will get a sense of the instructor's disposition toward this topic. One will learn what he/she thinks and believes about the legitimacy of institutional religion: whether its claims on social, political, and economic power are excessive or not; whether institutional religion is a social, political and economic force to be feared or applauded; and to what degrees and extents. Similarly, courses about religion also provide vivid examples of the dynamics of authority, that is, of how human beings choose and maintain priorities in both individual and collective senses. They also invite consideration of virtue, that is, of how human beings make moral decisions. In all such instances, the primary subject is religion, but never as an item that can be treated or approached in isolation. The consideration of the subject invokes attitudes, stances, and positions on a wide range of related subjects concerning which distinctive messages are communicated.

Thus, if this is the way it is in fact, there is no reason why such connections should not be acknowledged. And if they are acknowledged, is there any reason why they should not be made

deliberate? If courses are about content and about message, shouldn't instructors be as attentive to the second as they are to the first of these indispensable factors? And shouldn't they be equally conscientious about both?

We can state the proposal in noninterrogative language. Considerable religion gets taught, in addition to being taught about, in academic courses in the study of religion, and the admission of the fact stands as no violation whatever of constitutional safeguards or rigorous academic standards. The reason is that students' interests in the subject cannot be restricted, segmented, or bounded. The specific requirements of the individual life cycle (which are formative factors in the learning environment) will judge an overly academicized representation of the subject to be arbitrary and limiting. From within the biographical framework, the request for both content and message, and the recognition of the reciprocities that pertain between these, stands as both mode and vehicle through which compelling human knowledge is received.

Thus, I offer this proposal on the educational dynamics of the academic study of religion as testimony in behalf of a larger, more expansive view of learning. I recognize acutely that any argument in support of the conviction that the whole person is involved in the educational process will be taken as a vote for a personalistic philosophy in contrast to positions that carry more circumspect intellectual principles and warrants. In this regard I would emphasize that the academic study of religion belongs to and is supported by the fundamental inquiry that infuses liberal arts education. Since such education is directed toward the perennial issues and questions—about such matters as justice, truth, virtue, and piety—I have every confidence that this too is what religious studies is about, that is, within the framework of liberal arts education. Indeed, liberal arts education is testimony to the time-tested conviction that this, at bottom, is what everything is about. Consequently, it is to be expected that the substance of the sacred scriptures (as with the contents of the great books) is about the perennial issues and questions. If this is so, and if this, at bottom, is also the motivation that both prompts and sustains student interest in a subject, religious studies will find its vitality and nurture in allowing its durable content to encourage and find expression in such compelling messages. What is taken away from the course is as significant substantively and pedagogically as what is put into it. Indeed, it is through the message that is received that the content is both construed and communicated. ■