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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Bridging Paradox: Co-discovering the Sacred in the Secular Liberal Arts Classroom

Andrew P. Wilson, *Mount Allison University*

Blog Series: Re/Kindling Creativity and Imagination
August 22, 2022
Tags: student assignments | student learning | religious studies

A “glacial erratic” on Skidegate, Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, Canada (photo by author)

Published by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion
301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
(765) 361-6047 (800) 655-7177 fax (765) 361-6051
Fully Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and Located at Wabash College

“Could God create a stone too heavy for God to lift?” This question may be familiar to those of us who teach about the traditional qualities of God in the philosophy of religion classroom. The so-called “paradox of the stone” is a pithy yet fascinating riddle that helps unpack the inconsistencies and logical incongruities at the heart of the notion of omnipotence as a divine attribute. And yet, over the years I have found that even with questions as crisp and deceptively simple as this one can be, students find it hard to relate to ideas like these as anything more than abstract intellectual exercises. If students don’t know or don’t care about the Christian God, or even much about Christianity, why would they care to explore the labyrinthine twists and turns this question implies? I have found that one of my key challenges as an instructor is to create fruitful connections and open easily traversed pathways that bridge gaps between what can seem like archaic or overly abstract ideas on the one hand and familiar, even urgent, issues from our contemporary cultural discourses on the other. These, it seems, may not only be the problems of a philosophy of religion class in 2022, but are reflective of the deeper challenges that the study of religion faces in the secular liberal arts context.

I teach a second level introduction to Western religious thought to undergraduates, most of whom have little if any substantive knowledge of Christianity—let alone the questions posed by religious studies. In this class, I engage with issues of faith and skepticism and the complex relationship between the two with undergraduate students from across the university. It is common to have, say, biology majors alongside fine arts students interacting with English majors who are in turn working on minors in international relations. The context is interdisciplinary and diverse. Few of these students are familiar with the broad intellectual and spiritual traditions of Christianity and yet all come to this class with their own set of questions. My role, in a class that can tend towards the abstract, is to provide points of connection where the tradition meets their contemporary experience and to guide a conversation where this encounter can be unpacked and more clearly understood—even if rarely resolved.

For example, arguments for the existence of God are a staple part of any introduction to philosophy of religion. Not surprisingly, I cover the basics with Anselm and Aquinas, but I also bring in an ancient Sumerian beer recipe, a science fiction short story by Arthur C. Clarke about the nine billion names of God, and a poem by Emily Dickinson comparing train tickets to knowledge of heaven. Later in the course, we deal with another topic involving the significant challenges of the classic Problem of Evil. In addition to the traditional formulations, and various logical and evidential approaches, we look at William Nicholson’s play, *Shadowlands*, exploring the experience of writer C. S. Lewis and the untimely death of his wife Joy Gresham—rendered so poignantly in Richard Attenborough’s 1993 film of the same name. Interestingly, the challenge here is not necessarily to defend the existence of God in the face of clear evidence of evil. It can sometimes seem more of a challenge to convince students that it is worth arguing the case in the first place. By the time we get to this topic, it is important to have a sense of value for what religion can be and do, culturally and practically speaking, before wrestling with the tricky paradoxical puzzles that the problem of evil brings into stark relief.

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By the end of the course, as one topic builds on another, my hope is that students will appreciate such things as the difference between probability and possibility and the relationship between the sacred and the secular. I want them to understand that religious thought exists entwined and enmeshed in our cultural experience in ways that thwart our neat secular/sacred division. But most of all, I want them to appreciate, with as much vividness as I can manage, how religion continues to "speak" to the perennial challenges of human experience and interaction.

In the most recent iteration of this course, as we approached the final weeks of semester, my students requested a topic of their own. As we passed the second-year milestone of the pandemic, they wanted to discuss the pervasiveness and power of conspiracy theories that seemed to have proliferated in the face of the ongoing global disruption that had so impacted their lives. For the students, the character of conspiracy theories appeared to parallel some of the major issues we had been developing through the course. I was certainly open to the suggestion. Typically, I would end the course with something topical, a current issue that served to draw together the various strands we had explored though the semester in practical and easily identifiable ways. But this time, I was fascinated to consider this alternative: a contemporary riddle that seemed for them so urgent and at the same time so challenging to account for. In our final discussions, I asked students to describe what was happening in those of-the-moment conspiratorial conversations. I asked them to consider scholarship on "conspirituality" and associated key examples that traced their way back to elements evocative of the New Age movement and the tragedy of 9/11. There they discovered issues of community and identity, of disenchantment and re-enchantment, and of faith and apocalyptic hope. Regardless of our conclusions in these final classes, it was apparent to me that they had located their own "paradox of the stone." In these culminating conversations I found myself amongst the most engaged cohort of students I had ever encountered, dealing with the issues from the course in complex and applied ways in collaborative, lively discussions that really mattered to them. Indeed, inspired by my students, I went on to teach a full course on the topic of "conspirituality."

In some ways, this culminating moment around the phenomenon of "conspirituality" exemplified the challenge of teaching in the secular liberal arts context, the increasing difficulty of "translating" religious tradition for a contemporary learner, and it also offered a moment to celebrate. For me it was solid affirmation of my pedagogical efforts to bring the traditional and the contemporary together as a way of creating a flashpoint of engagement. But it was also a reminder that the classroom is a community of learners of which I am a part. Little did I anticipate that it would be the students, the focus of my teaching strategies, who would be the bridge builders, providing me with this most effective and evocative example.

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https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/08/bridging-paradox-co-discovering-the-sacred-in-the-secular-liberal-arts-classroom/

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