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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teaching with Intellectual Hospitality

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Blog Series: Changing Scholarship

April 08, 2024

Tags: hospitality | Changing Scholarship | Biblical | Literacy | Generations

Recently I led a workshop at a church. I was asked by the pastor to address the topic, “What is Biblical Literacy?” Of particular note, congregational leaders wanted to know how to get millennials and Gen Z back to church. With the apparent drop, no, plummet in said groups’ attendance, this particular body was seeking any handles, tips, or miracles to reach persons in these age brackets. According to some attending the event if church members could become more biblically literate, they could help twenty- to forty-year-olds see how relevant the Bible is here and now.

Of course the aforementioned congregation is not alone. Any number of churches, temples, mosques, and religious institutions are struggling to get persons born circa the 90s in seats. This is not to paint a broad stroke as there are indeed exceptions to the rule. However, documentaries on God, Faith, and Millennials continue to highlight said challenges. It is clear that millennials, many of whom are current seminary or divinity school students or graduates, are pushing the religious envelope. They long for environments where attention to social justice, sexuality and gender, personal story, and spirituality shape conversation and praxis.

During my workshop the dialogue around biblical literacy led to exchanges between various religions, honoring their sacred texts. In this Christian context, the question of whether this specific church was “promoting a different path beyond Jesus as savior” arose. Boom! At this point I shared with attendees what I often note in the classroom. It is important to treat what happens in academic settings with intellectual hospitality. This is never to aver that contexts outside of the hallowed halls of academia are not intellectual. They are indeed!

What I was purporting to those astute members during the seminar is that as professors we must be mindful that not everything we teach should be shared in other contexts. Not all readings, ideas, and theories are applicable to the work of faith-forming religious institutions outside of graduate theological institutions. Some matters need to stay in the classroom while others are apropos for the Sunday School or for the training ground for one's religious beliefs or spiritual development.

I dared not answer that one question posed to me because it was not my place. That was the work of the pastor. I am an ordained preacher. Intellectual hospitality calls me to know my scholarly assignment as a professor, adhere to the directives given for any invitation, and sojourn with leaders of religious institutions seeking to ensure the survival of their congregations and communities.

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