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But the Bible Says So!: How to Respond to Appeal to Scripture in Student Writing

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Lurking on social media the other day, I listened to colleagues discussing how to respond to a student paper in a philosophy class. The assignment was about our responsibilities towards (nonhuman) animals. The student argued that we can do whatever we want with animals because God has given us dominion over them. Presumably, he had Genesis 1.26 in mind, but none of the course readings mentioned Genesis—or God.

People in the social media group had lots of suggestions on how to respond:

- Tell him that religion has no place in the classroom.
- Tell him that there should be no theist or atheist premises in academic writing.
- Just write “Irrelevant” in the margin!

That last comment got a lot of likes, hopefully because people found it funny and not because they considered it good advice.

The consensus was clear: *Tell the student that appeals to scripture are inappropriate in college papers.*

I don't think that's good advice.

My colleagues were ignoring something crucial. In this sort of situation, we can do deep damage to our relationship with our student and to the student's relationship with higher education if we don't tread carefully. Presumably the student who wrote this paper believes in God and the Bible. His religion will be part of his ethical decision-making going forward, and the Bible will influence his thinking and his actions.

Bearing this in mind, let's not tell this student that his thinking about right and wrong in class must be utterly divorced from his thinking about it outside the classroom.

My advice would be: Before writing any comments, identify your larger goals. Here are mine:

- I want our class discussions to help inform my students' thinking and actions about ethical issues, and in particular about whether it's OK to do "whatever you want" with animals.
- I want students to listen when I try to teach them more things after this and I want other professors to be able to teach them even more things. If I reinforce a student's likely skepticism about professors and religion, I make that harder.
- I don't want my actions to increase the chances that my students go out in the world thinking of higher education as an enemy to religion and God.

These goals suggest a different approach. Start by taking the paper seriously:

Do you think that's what the Bible means by 'dominion'? Some people think so, but I've always thought it meant something more like 'stewardship.' I mean, God is the Father, right? So, I think of it like if your parents go out and put you in charge of the family dogs. If they come home and discover that you haven't fed them or given them water, they'll be mad at you.

What do you think someone who doesn't believe in God and the Bible would make of your argument? How would you persuade them? For instance, imagine that you're talking to the author of our second reading or to the other kids in the class.

I would count this encounter as a success if the student feels like I'm treating him and his religion with respect and if he realizes two things:

- "Dominion" could mean "stewardship" instead of "freedom to treat them any way I want," and I need to think more about which one the Bible meant.
- I need to talk about this differently or I won't be able to persuade people who don't believe in the Bible.

That's a start. Much more has to happen before this student writes at college level. Later, I and his other professors will teach him more.

It's a very small step. Growth and intellectual development takes time. I probably won't see the

result of the learning process that I was part of. But occasionally I do.

My greatest success story in this context is a student who came into my Intro to Philosophy class as a freshman, determined to prove that Christ rose from the dead. It was rough going, but by the end of the semester, his sources weren't cringeworthy anymore, and he was presenting an actual argument. And he still trusted me. He majored in math but took Philosophy of Religion with me as a senior, and he explained that he wanted to continue developing his proof.

I braced myself. But during the semester, the class discussed faith and reason extensively, and I was able to ask him (privately): *Given that you think about faith as being the important thing, what makes it so important to you to prove that Christ rose?* He thought about it for a long time and finally decided that he didn't need to prove that Christ rose. Instead, he wrote a strong final paper in which he reflected on the meaning of faith, discussing his own experience and the course readings.

I rarely get wins that size. But taking my students' religious views seriously makes them possible.

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