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Method, MacIntyre, and Pedagogy: Inviting Students to Participate in Theology as a Living Conversation

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Method, MacIntyre, and Pedagogy: Inviting Students to Participate in Theology as a Living Conversation.

Teaching theology within academic institutions with confessional commitments and theologically conservative students requires holding together, in creative tension, two pedagogical goals. The challenge is to promote rigorous academic inquiry by encouraging student openness to engagement with perspectives that challenge their own beliefs while simultaneously constructing a course that is experienced as a safe space where students do not feel their personal faith is under attack. This essay presents the argument that a methodological framework for introductory theology courses informed by Alasdair MacIntyre's reflections on the nature of living traditions holds great promise for achieving these objectives. The essay will also describe how a creative extended analogy drawn from the game of basketball facilitates student comprehension of this initially abstract intellectual framework. Finally, the essay will offer some representative examples of student participation in course online discussion forums in order to illustrate the effectiveness of this approach for student learning.

Is it possible to construct and teach undergraduate theology courses in institutions with Christian confessional commitments that respect the integrity of the students' own convictions and promote open academic inquiry? In this essay, I argue that a methodological framework for the "Introduction to Christian Theology" course informed by Alasdair MacIntyre's reflections on the nature of "living traditions" and "tradition-constituted inquiry" holds great promise for achieving these objectives. This approach facilitates a pedagogy that does not require the instructor to disguise his or her own convictions in the name of neutrality, while simultaneously allowing for the construction of a hospitable space for students to be themselves and to develop their own theological voices.

However, beginning a course with a methodological prelude that will serve these pedagogical goals is initially disorienting for students since it does not fit common preconceptions of Christian theology. Many students at Christian colleges expect their theology class to be primarily catechetical or to be a course in apologetics designed to

equip students to “defend their faith.” For this reason, this essay will also describe the creative analogies I employ to facilitate students’ understanding of the relevance and importance of this methodological framework.

The heart of the argument is a description and account of the ways in which a methodological framing of the course that presents theology as part of a living tradition's internal arguments and conversations provides an effective way to meet the challenge of teaching students from theologically conservative backgrounds. Because the introductory course in theology offers students what is perhaps their first significant exposure to the extent of diversity and disagreement among Christians in the present and throughout Christian history, the course is often unsettling to students who had previously assumed that their inherited understandings of the faith represented, in a relatively unproblematic fashion, what most Christians believe and have always believed. Since students will be exposed to viewpoints that challenge their inherited understandings, it is crucial to construct a course that is experienced by students as a safe space for struggling with difficult theological questions rather than as a class that is experienced as a threatening assault upon their faith. However, the necessity of constructing this kind of hospitable and safe space is in creative tension with the central importance of promoting open academic inquiry by encouraging students to cultivate a willingness to engage and learn from, rather than simply reject theological viewpoints that will inevitably challenge and raise crucial questions about their own current web of convictions. My courses are designed to provide a safe space precisely for the task of facilitating student engagement with new and difficult questions that were not typically faced in their religious upbringing.

Finally, I will offer some representative examples of student participation in online discussion forums in order to illustrate the effectiveness of this approach for student learning and the achievement of these key pedagogical objectives. I have drawn upon contributions from students from two sections of “Introduction to Christian Theology” and one section of “Theology, Violence, and Nonviolence.” These courses were offered in the fall semester of 2015. I will not disclose student names to protect anonymity. However, all of the contributions I have utilized are those which, I believe,

reflect positively upon thoughtful and conscientious students, most in their late adolescent and young adult years. My inclusion of these particular forum contributions are meant to reflect the respect and appreciation I have for my students and to honor their willingness to articulate their thoughts, insights, concerns, and theological struggles.

“Shock and Awe,” “Indoctrination,” and the Pretense of Neutrality

In a seminary alumni magazine, Jason Allen narrated his negative experience in his first college theology class. In doing so, he raised important questions about teaching theology in a Christian academic institution. I have included some excerpts:

Naïvely, I entered college assuming everyone shared beliefs similar to what I had been taught as a boy in my Bible-believing home and church. . . . [T]he professor wasted little time before proceeding to take aim at our “youthful presuppositions.”

I felt as though I was being subjected to some form of theological hazing, a rite of passage for a room full of erstwhile naïve 18-year olds. Beginning with the creation narrative, the professor proceeded through Genesis dismissing the historicity of the book chapter by chapter. . . . Midway through the professor's frontal assault. . . a classmate raised her hand in protest. “My daddy is a preacher and ever since I was a little girl he taught me to believe in Adam and Eve and the garden.” Patronizingly, the professor responded, “Just because your daddy taught you something does not mean it is true.”

Thankfully, at Southern Seminary you will find professors that exist to strengthen a student's faith. . . . Southern Seminary boasts a faculty that teaches the truthfulness of Scripture from Adam to the eschaton. . . . By standing with Southern Seminary as we stand for the truth, you can help ensure that this generation, and generations to come, will have preachers that rightly divide the word of truth. (Allen [1] , 46)

One virtue of this essay is that it provides us with a glimpse of how not to teach theology. Assuming that this description is a charitable account of what happened, this particular professor employed what one of my colleagues refers to as the “shock and awe” method. Beginning a course with a frontal assault upon the beliefs of one's students, even if one considers their theological understandings to be naïve, is

profoundly disrespectful and, to say the least, not in accordance with the best practices of the art of persuasion since the likely outcome will be the adoption of a defensive posture on the part of students. This particular professor endeavored to initiate students into academic theological studies by first establishing that they must systematically distrust everything about the Christian formation they have received.

The commitment of professors at any Christian academic institution to teach theology from a standpoint of allegiance to a particular interpretation of the meaning of the Christian faith is not itself problematic. However, the potential danger of Allen's unqualified use of the language of "the" truth is that it could give rise to a stance of certitude that our current understanding of the Christian faith is simply and unquestionably the singularly correct articulation of the faith. The sensibility that tends to be cultivated by the language of the truth is that there is little need to listen appreciatively to Christian voices who disagree with "us," since those who disagree with us disagree with the truth as such, and therefore are not merely wrong but perniciously so. This approach is often characterized as indoctrination in the pejorative sense of the word. The negative associations that cling to this word suggest a way of teaching that suppresses difficult questions, presents a preferred interpretation as the only plausible understanding of the faith, and either caricatures, or refuses to treat as credible, the voices of Christian thinkers with whom "our group" has disagreements.

However, efforts to avoid indoctrination are often accompanied by the tendency to ride the proverbial pendulum to the opposite extreme. In light of multiple critiques of characteristically modern conceptions of rationality, few today would claim that a stance of pure neutrality vis-à-vis substantive convictions or methodology is truly possible. Nevertheless, legitimate concerns about avoiding proselytization or indoctrination exert a powerful temptation to adopt something like a posture of neutrality. However, neutrality in the theology classroom is at odds with what Christian theology, by definition, actually is: a persuasive discourse requiring commitment to the Christian faith and community. To further complicate matters, no theologian is merely committed to the Christian faith in a broad and generic sense. Rather, she or he stands somewhere

within or at the intersection of various ecclesial and theological traditions and could never be entirely neutral vis-à-vis diverse interpretations of the Christian faith.

Still, the desire to avoid proselytization often leads to courses that present a smorgasbord of options and opinions on various issues, from which students are encouraged to choose their own preferences. Stanley Hauerwas ([5] , 26) has noted that this approach is a peculiarly modern form of pedagogy which is hardly value-neutral but rather, is a mode of catechesis in its own right. Students are actually being further indoctrinated into the habits and consumerist ethos of our society, which tends to produce rootless selves who create their own identities through shopping and consumption. Beliefs, ideas, and values are represented as commodities from which the sovereign individual chooses to construct his or her own idiosyncratic "belief system."

Drawing insights from the field of critical pedagogy, Marit Trelstad ([21]) reinforces the point that pedagogical neutrality is impossible and that pretenses to neutrality often mask covert modes of indoctrination. All academic disciplines, she argues, contain biases deeply intertwined with their methods and contents. All educators, to some extent, are working to proselytize students to some valorized position. At minimum, teachers are trying to persuade students of the value of their academic discipline and the relevance and usefulness of certain methodological approaches. She maintains that respect for students requires transparency concerning aims and biases inherent in any mode of academic study of religion. Trelstad laments a lack of self-awareness on the part of some instructors in biblical, religious, and theological studies. Pretenses to neutrality often mask objectives that more closely resemble the making of converts than supporting independent thinkers. She notes the tendency to label religiously conservative students as stubborn or ignorant. Professors who speak of "breaking" students of their previous convictions or approaches to the Bible are actually in the grip of a colonialist mindset that seeks to conquer and convert all to the supremacy of a privileged framework of thought (2008, 194, 196-197, 199).

Teaching Theologically Conservative Students

Several contributors to this journal have characterized religious conservatism as a form of faith founded in trust in external authorities such as religious leaders,

religious doctrines, or the Bible, understood and interpreted in ways that might be described as biblical literalism. Thomas Martin ([14] , 219) correlates religious conservatism with James Fowler's third stage of faith development, the synthetic-conventional mode, in which the faithful accept what religious authorities tell them and seek to conform rather than engage in their own critical reflection about religious beliefs and practices (see also Trelstad [21] , 191-192; Smith [19] , 134-35; Kirkpatrick [8] , 128-129; Baldwin [2] , 165-166; Fowler [4] , 151-183). The overwhelming majority of our students would self-identify as Christian and most seem to have some measure of serious personal commitment to their faith. A significant majority of students, at least when they arrive as freshmen, could be categorized as conservative evangelicals. Many were home-schooled or attended theologically conservative Christian high schools. However, contrary to the analysis of religious conservatism as tethered to authority-bound forms of knowing, most of my students do not display unquestioning deference to religious authority figures. While most students embrace perspectives appropriated from their religious upbringing, most do so by default. Many students articulate their realization that they had previously simply assumed that their inherited faith was the way almost all Christians thought about their faith.

Contrary to many negative characterizations of conservative students, I find that most, at least in my context, welcome the opportunity to learn about and wrestle with new ideas and perspectives. Many students, though certainly not all, articulate a more individualist and anti-authoritarian predisposition than one might expect if they were deeply embedded in Sharon Parks' authority-bound forms of knowing ([17] , 55-59). My students often articulate belief in the importance of "thinking for oneself" and making one's faith one's own. One can discern the beginnings of a transition to something like James Fowler's Individuative-Reflective stage of faith ([4] , 174-183), as students start seeing outside their inherited boxes because they have become aware that there are other boxes. As an example, one student wrote:

I like the distinction noted in class between the Bible itself and each individual's "interpretive take," recognizing that they are not one and the same. Every single time we read the Bible, we do so with our own lenses based on our previous knowledge,

experiences, and cultural contexts. . . . God intended for humanity to be unique and therefore for our culture and biblical interpretations to be unique as well. . . . [I]t is important to seek out interpretations of the Bible that differ from our own in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the sacred text.

Certainly, students find challenges to their previous convictions unsettling, disorienting, and frightening. But many students simultaneously articulate a sense of exhilaration when it is recognized that there may be other ways of understanding and interpreting the Christian faith. Multiple students articulated not only a sense of anxiety that comes with reassessing previously settled convictions, but also the conviction that this process is indispensable to an intellectually mature faith. The two student contributions below are representative of sentiments expressed often:

This class is making me think so much more than I ever thought it would, and it's actually frightening sometimes. I thought that everything I learned growing up was "right" and that there was no need to hear others' views, but that mindset is slowly shifting and it's somewhat unsettling.

Another student challenged her fellow students:

Are we too afraid to have our previous understandings of scripture reworked? . . . It's not an easy thing having something you believed your entire life altered or criticized in a different light. . . sometimes I don't want to be wrong or hear anything different from what I have known my entire life, but ultimately getting past this fear yields more benefits than negative outcomes.

Appropriating Alasdair MacIntyre's Account of the Nature of Living Traditions as a ...

A theology class with MacIntyre's account of living traditions as its methodological framework offers some important "handles" for helping students navigate some of the inevitable challenges of academic theological studies; in particular, the perceived threat to students' inherited understandings of their faith. MacIntyre describes a living tradition as "a historically extended, socially embodied argument. . . about the goods which constitute that tradition," ([11] , 207) or, as I appropriate this definition for my own purposes in the classroom, about the appropriate

interpretation and performance, the “living out” or practice of the tradition. Early in the semester, I suggest that we might fruitfully view the Christian movement in its entirety as a two-thousand-year-old living tradition, characterized by both stability and flexibility. There are aspects or features at the heart of any living tradition that give it its identity or relative stability. These features are so crucial that they cannot be jettisoned without the tradition becoming something else entirely. Within a tradition, MacIntyre points out, “some elements of present theory or belief may be such that it is difficult to envisage their being abandoned without the tradition as a whole being discarded” (1981, 137). When students recognize the extent of disagreement among Christian thinkers, past and present, they often experience great anxiety that everything is up for grabs. An emphasis on the stability pole provides a way to exorcise the specter of chaotic relativism for students who experience a certain destabilization of their own sense of certitude as deeply threatening.

Of course, it is difficult, to say the least, to specify the indispensable features of a living tradition in propositional form, to describe exhaustively what this “something” is, or to nail down some essence of Christianity in a timeless and trans-contextual formula. Doctrinal developments within the patristic era, such as the authority widely attributed to “the apostolic rule of faith,” doctrinal decisions made by ecumenical councils of the first five to seven centuries of the Christian movement, and the categorization of some beliefs as heretical, represent an early consensus that there are indeed certain identity-sustaining convictions and practices so integral to the faith that relinquishing them would undermine the integrity of the faith.

But a living tradition not only will, but must, change over time as it encounters new situations that pose previously unasked questions and force new challenges. According to MacIntyre, “a tradition is sustained and advanced by its own internal arguments and conflicts” (1981, 242; 1977, 460-461). Viewing a living tradition as a socially-embodied, historically-extended argument means that diversity and disagreement are part and parcel of such traditions, as part of the ongoing interpretive effort to be faithful to the tradition, rather than a problem to be overcome.

Organizing the "Introduction to Theology" course around this conception of a living tradition is extremely fruitful due to the theological and ecclesial diversity my students will encounter during their college years and beyond. At my institution, the curricular and co-curricular experience of students is one of engagement with diverse Christian views on a range of subjects, such as divine providence, human sexuality, and the ethics of war, violence, and peacemaking. My goal is to offer a framework that might enable students to appreciate and benefit from this facet of their experience. The notion that theological reflection is an ongoing argument and conversation within a living tradition provides an invitation to something akin to a paradigm shift, from the perception that those who think differently are a threat to my faith to the recognition that those who think differently may challenge my present understanding of my faith but this challenge is an opportunity to interrogate my present understanding for its coherence, credibility, and faithfulness. One of my students articulated how this framework helped her make sense of her experience:

This idea of a living tradition is not something that I had ever heard of until coming to this class, but I am so grateful for the imagery that it gives me. I came from a very conservative Baptist school, so my insight into Christianity was very narrow. What I believed must be the only right way and everyone else needed to change. This mindset worked just fine until I came to Messiah and met all of these Christians that seemed just like me, except they came from another denomination. At first this was really intimidating to me because I didn't know what to do with the fact that Christianity can take many different forms. . . . I think that the idea of being flexible in our living tradition is highly important to the overall health and stability of this faith that we claim. The flexibility actually contributes to its stability. There is a lot to be learned from the other Christians because we can bring our ideas together to work toward strengthening our faith as a whole.

I propose to students that there is a loosely identifiable innovation process in play in living traditions. First, innovations happen when something the tradition-bearing community previously believed or practiced and once considered unproblematic begins to generate negative consequences or strikes a sour note. As a living tradition unfolds

over time and encounters new situations, MacIntyre argues, established beliefs and belief-presupposing practices are called into question, "sometimes through being challenged from some alternative point of view, sometimes because of an incoherence identified within the tradition's current web of beliefs, sometimes because of the discovery of a lack of resources to address a new theoretical or practical problem" (1990, 116). MacIntyre characterizes this kind of situation as an epistemological crisis in which a schema of interpretation that hitherto has been trusted has broken down irremediably in certain highly specific ways ([10] , 458).

Second, an epistemological crisis generates the need for an imaginative conceptual innovation, which gives rise to new beliefs or the revision of older beliefs (MacIntyre [12] , 362; [13] , 116). Epistemological crises have often led Christian groups back to the Bible with fresh questions and a new set of lenses to see things previously missed. Often, they have had to wrestle with questions not addressed or answered explicitly by the Bible. In either case, theological innovation is the inevitable result and the process leading to innovation is typically conflictual in nature. MacIntyre speaks of those living traditions that are governed by sacred or authoritative texts in this way. Certain traditions are:

embodied in a set of texts which function as the authoritative point of departure for tradition-constituted enquiry and which remain as essential points of reference for enquiry and activity, for argument, debate, and conflict within that tradition. Those texts to which this canonical status is assigned are treated both as having a fixed meaning embodied in them and also as always open to rereading so that every tradition becomes to some degree a tradition of critical reinterpretation in which one and the same body of texts. . . is put to the question, and to successively different sets of questions, as a tradition unfolds. (1988, 383)

Third, efforts are made to justify or defend proposed modifications by arguments internal to the tradition. And the case must be made for why the proposed modification is in faithful continuity with, rather than a betrayal of, the tradition.

Just as traditions as a whole make modifications in response to pressures that produce a felt sense of incoherence, individuals, in their encounters with new ideas and

insights, may undergo similar processes. For students coming from theologically conservative homes, the encounter with the biological sciences as taught by the faculty at my institution often generates its own kind of epistemological crisis as previous conceptions of the reliability and authority of the Bible are called into question by the encounter with new information. Instead of thinking that they are faced with a choice between the Bible and science, students learn that there may be ways to understand the literary genre of the first few chapters of Genesis other than as a factual report. In this way, I suggest, the authority of the Bible may not be threatened by new insights. Instead, what is threatened is a conventional interpretation of the Bible within some Christian communities. Hopefully, the idea of an innovation process provides helpful conceptual handles that may enable critical theological engagement and the ability to make creative adjustments when my students find themselves in an epistemological crisis due to experiences or insights that challenge previously settled convictions.

Creative Analogies and Strategies to Facilitate Student Comprehension of this Methodological ...

Beginning a theology course at a Christian college by proposing a methodological framework for inquiry requires of students an initial critical distancing from their expectations of the course. Many assume that a theology class is primarily catechetical or should be designed to help students become proficient in the apologetic task of defending their faith. This generates a degree of cognitive dissonance since I am, after all, inviting students to adopt a dramatically new framework for the analysis and evaluation of theological convictions. Therefore, it is helpful to render these ideas as concretely and comprehensively as possible through the employment of creative analogies.

To clarify the nature of living traditions, it is noted that there are many examples of living traditions, historically extended communities with certain constitutive social practices. Some of these are typically categorized as religions but others are not. The analogy I find most helpful is the game of basketball. To illustrate the idea that living traditions are characterized by stability and yet change significantly over time, I show brief video clips from basketball games played in the 1950s and 1960s. Students are

quickly able to identify significant differences between the game today and basketball as played forty to sixty years ago. The style of play is dramatically slower and more deliberate. Players were less likely to drive to the basket and more likely to pull up and shoot a fifteen- to twenty-foot jump shot. There was no three point line and in college basketball, no shot clock. Uniform styles were different.

I ask my students why, in spite of such differences, basketball games played in the 1950s and 1960s and those played today might count as the same game. Students identify some of the indispensable features of the game such as the requirement that the ball be advanced either by dribbling or by passing and that one scores points by getting the ball into a cylindrical hoop placed at a height sufficient to constitute a challenge to a player being defended by an opponent. Some of the more interesting debates occur as students identify features of the game as indispensable that may, in fact, be modified in different circumstances. Students may initially identify five players per team on the court as indispensable, but I point out that most persons consider three players on the court for each team instead of five players to count as basketball when only six players are available for a pick-up game. In spite of the identification of a goal placed ten feet from the floor as an indispensable feature of the game by some students, I suggest that it is plausible that the height of the basket could be raised to eleven feet to accommodate the athleticism and leaping ability of today's players.

Students then watch a video clip from the movie *Rollerball*, a 1975 film about a dystopian future in which the world's favorite sport is a form of roller derby that features a metal ball, motorcycles, and play so violent that fatalities are prevalent (Jackson [Z]). The game resembles basketball in only one respect: scoring involves placing the metal ball into a hole in the side of the wall that bears a slight resemblance to a basketball goal. After facetiously suggesting that this is what basketball could look like in the future with some changes to add excitement to the game, I ask whether such a game could plausibly count as basketball. Students tend to render the judgment that it could not since indispensable features of the game, such as the requirement to advance the ball by either dribbling or passing, are rendered impossible with a ball that cannot be bounced. And while there is variability within basketball regarding how much

contact referees allow, it is difficult to imagine a game to count as basketball in which raw brutality, such as bludgeoning an opponent to death with metal-spiked gloves, could count as a legal form of contact. It would seem that part of what gives basketball its identity is the premium placed upon quickness and finesse that would be lacking if the game were changed to privilege raw violence.

These exercises allow students to wrestle with these questions as an extended analogy for thinking about theology: (1) what are the indispensable features that make the game we call basketball what it is; (2) what modifications, such as the addition of a shot clock and three-point line, enhance the game and eliminate problems that have developed in the course of the game's development; (3) what kinds of modifications would amount to the heretical transformation of basketball into another game entirely?

I also seek to illustrate the ways an epistemological crisis might generate a creative innovation. My example is the introduction of a shot clock. The ability to retain the ball on offense while refusing to take a shot, typically in order to hold onto a lead and run out the game clock, produced such a crisis. Teams were able to bring a game to a standstill by passing the ball, refusing to take shots, and forcing the other team to foul. In the NBA, the turning point was a game in which the Fort Wayne Pistons defeated the Minneapolis Lakers 19-18 in a game in which they held the ball for minutes at a time to minimize the impact of the Laker's dominant center, George Mikan. This was a crisis because the popularity of the game was threatened. But the innovation represented by the shot clock was justified in the name of the spirit and integrity of the game. Basketball, it was argued, was designed to be a vigorously competitive and relatively fast paced game in which each team has multiple opportunities to score. The ability to hold the ball for minutes at a time was judged to undermine how the game was meant to be played. The innovation represented by the shot clock was not viewed as a betrayal of the tradition but rather, in faithful continuity with the tradition since it protected the game from a strategy that, while legal within the previous framework of rules, harmed the game.

The Design of General Education Theology Courses

My focus in this essay has been upon general education theology courses required of every student at my institution. There are a variety of introductory theology courses that meet the college's "Christian Beliefs" requirement. In the fall of 2015, I taught two sections of "Introduction to Christian Theology" and one section of "Theology, Violence, and Nonviolence." These courses typically have thirty to thirty-seven students in the class. Each class period features a combination of lecture and large-group discussion based upon discussion questions, often open-ended generative questions designed to elicit a wide range of possible responses and occasionally, small group discussions. "Introduction to Christian Theology" provides an overview of classic Christian doctrinal themes such as God and revelation, Trinity, Christology, theological anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Given the limitations of the semester, some themes receive more attention than others. I devote significant attention to the difficulties and complexity of biblical interpretation and theology. After theology's tasks and sources, the course turns its attention to the themes of God, revelation, providence, and creation. I spend far too little time upon Christology and Trinity, but certainly provide readings and some brief classroom attention to these issues. The heart of the class centers upon sin and salvation, with a particular focus upon recent theological reflection upon the nature of sin as involving societal systems and structures, that serves to broaden the more characteristically evangelical focus upon sin as primarily disruptive of the individual's relationship to God. In the segment on soteriology, the class is not only introduced to classical western debates about justification, but also to more recent reflection upon the eschatological narrative arc in which the centrality of the Reign of God calls forth reflection on the ethical and political implications of Christian ecclesial life and discipleship. In "Theology, Violence, and Nonviolence," these doctrinal themes are also addressed, but given the emphasis upon the themes of violence, nonviolence, and peacemaking, I spend significant time wrestling with the difficult questions raised by violent portrayals of God in the Bible. For many students, this is profoundly disturbing because their previous assumptions regarding biblical authority are deeply challenged by the encounter with the texts themselves and by biblical scholars and theologians who question their historicity and

the extent to which we should interpret these texts as representative of God's character and purposes. In this class, the question of whether we should speak of God as violent or nonviolent is linked to ethical questions such as the death penalty, just war theory, pacifism, and active peacemaking and nonviolent resistance.

The difficulty of introductory classes is the perennial challenge of balancing the need to communicate complex theological ideas to students while focusing primarily upon the process of theological reflection in order to equip students with skills and tools for thinking theologically. This involves introducing students to the theological diversity and disagreements that have characterized Christian history, different approaches to the interpretation of scripture, the ways in which critique and objections are articulated, positions are defended, and most important of all, helping students linger over the kinds of difficult questions that unsettle previously settled convictions and previously unexamined assumptions.

My general education theology courses are structured to reward effort, comprehension, and especially, engaged participation. Forty percent of the grade is based upon reading assignments that are due every class period. Reading assignments are usually relatively easy but require attentive reading, such as the ability to identify an author's thesis and supporting arguments. Forty percent of the course grade is based upon a progressive, take-home examination. Instead of having one or two tests in the classroom with the clock ticking, the exams feature one question that is due every week. Students are free to use all of their resources but these questions require students to demonstrate their comprehension of course material. Some test questions require the student to craft supporting arguments in defense of their own viewpoint on a given topic. Others require students to identify the assumptions that render a theological viewpoint intelligible or account for why one theological position is different from another. Other questions require students to be able to apply a theological concept to a hypothetical theological debate.

Since I have so strongly emphasized that theology is self-involving as the ongoing conversation and argument of a living tradition, participation is crucial. Students are offered two participation options. Students can base most of their

participation grade on their contributions to conversations inside the classroom or most of their participation grade upon online discussion forum conversation. Students choosing the latter option are required to make three forum contributions of at least eight to ten sentences every week, while students choosing the first option are required to make one forum contribution each week. A new forum, based upon the themes covered in class, is created each week. Occasionally a prompt is offered, but typically I rely on students to initiate and continue the online conversations. Students are invited to comment upon readings or classroom presentations and are welcome to raise questions, objections, critical evaluation of readings or ideas encountered, as well as to respond to classmates. Articulating disagreements is encouraged. The fundamental ground rule is mutual respect for one's fellow students. The rule for disagreement is to engage in "reason-giving" rather than "opinion-sharing." In other words, arguments must be offered if one disagrees with a classmate or a perspective encountered in the readings or the classroom. Over the years, I have only had to intervene twice when a student crossed the line to inappropriate incivility or personal attack upon a classmate. I am very generous in my grading of forum participation so long as students contribute something that moves the conversation forward. Though I will occasionally respond to a student forum contribution, I seek to allow the students to interact with one another. I want to give students significant leeway to reflect upon issues or struggle with new theological ideas. I do not wish to convey the impression that students will be corrected if they say something that disagrees with my own perspectives. When I do respond, it is usually in response to a question a student has directed to me, to affirm the insightfulness of a student contribution, or to suggest a variety of ways to frame a particular issue or a variety of ways that Christians have thought about a particular matter under consideration. In other words, I "chime in" when I believe my knowledge of Christian theology will add something that moves the conversation forward or offers insight otherwise unavailable to students.

Achieving Key Pedagogical Objectives: A Participative Model of Theology in the Classroom

One of the central objectives of my introductory theology courses is to enable students not only to view theology as a two-thousand-year-old living conversation but also to imagine themselves as active participants in that conversation. If successful, I have set the stage for an understanding of theology in which the spirit of open inquiry and interaction with diverse perspectives is integral to the discipline. Indoctrination is inherently unfruitful if debate and disagreement are integral to the ways in which living traditions develop over time and are therefore indispensable to the quest for truthfulness and faithfulness. Of course, what I labeled as indoctrination, neutrality, and shock and awe are not pedagogical philosophies, but rather are general tendencies to which all of us, at times, may be vulnerable. But when we fall prey to these temptations, we ask too little of our students. Telling students exactly what to think, condescendingly communicating to our students that everything they currently think is both wrong and naïve, or presenting students with a package of options as if theological convictions were but arbitrary personal preferences, fall short of challenging students to think rigorously and to participate in the give and take of theological reflection and argumentation. In this section, I will identify the ways in which this methodological framing of the course provides important resources for responding to three significant challenges.

The first challenge is the need to construct a safe space for students to be themselves, to wrestle honestly with the difficulties of encountering viewpoints that call into question their inherited understandings of the faith, and even to push back and reject insights, ideas, and perspectives that may more closely reflect my own theological convictions that will inevitably be shared since I am the teacher. This challenge is inherent in the fundamental reality that academic theological, biblical, and religious studies, by their very nature, involve engagement with content, perspectives, and methods of analysis that may be profoundly threatening to students' inherited or previously constructed convictions and meaning structures (Trelstad [21] , 191-192). If a student experiences a class as one in which his or her faith itself is under assault, or as an environment in which the student is disrespected if he or she disagrees with the teacher, the likely result will be a stance of self-protective defensiveness. Therefore, if

the goal is to invite students to become active participants in a living argument and conversation, it is necessary to cultivate a classroom environment that is a hospitable and safe space for each student to be himself or herself theologically and indeed, where students are affirmed for exercising their own theological agency as critics of some of the perspectives they will encounter. For this reason, Marit Trelstad challenges professors to cultivate something akin to a pastoral sensitivity:

if we know that conservative students may experience social and personal disruption from education in the field of religion, perhaps we should take their concerns, fear, and distrust seriously and not simply dismiss them as ignorant. Thus, we should be able to sympathize with our conservative students. They have a lot to lose. (2008, 191)

Brian Smith also points out that many devout students are reluctant to speak up in full class discussions about their convictions for fear of being criticized by the instructor or other students (2013, 145). A presentation of theology as a living argument and conversation offers a helpful resource for the construction of a safe and hospitable environment for student participation. The invitation to step into the conversation does not require students to repudiate or discard the understanding of the faith which they bring to the class. Indeed, no one could scrap, leave behind, or systematically doubt in Cartesian fashion, all at once, one's entire ensemble of convictions, or habits of thought, behavior, and spirituality. One can only begin the theological journey as the person one actually is at the present moment. To embark upon the journey does not require the kind of rupture represented by the loss of the entirety of one's inherited faith. There is no need for a frontal assault upon forms of Christian faith that are considered to be naïve. Instead, students are invited to "come as you are."

Respecting each student requires responding to students in ways that honor their willingness to share their own views and to articulate their doubts, uncertainties, and even disagreements with the instructor. This respect is essential if one is to succeed in drawing students into the classroom conversation and into a willingness to risk listening to those "other" voices represented by the texts that are read, the

viewpoints presented by the professor, and those of classmates. Marit Trelstad places a strong accent upon the necessity of trust between student and instructor as a prerequisite for successful teaching and learning. She points out the obvious: most students like to be acknowledged and treated as valued members of the discussion, rather than stereotyped, seen as an educational project for transformation, or silenced. All students, regardless of theological orientation, appreciate having their ideas treated with respect (Trelstad [21] , 194, 196-197, 199).

Numerous contributions to the online discussion forum provide evidence that students considered my class a safe space for articulating doubts or anxieties about what they were learning and a space where they felt they would be treated with respect. At my institution, the first crisis of faith for many theologically conservative students comes with their first encounter with critical biblical scholarship in the general education biblical studies course. Many students struggle to come to terms with basic questions about the historicity or factuality of certain biblical narratives. In both classroom discussion and online forums, students have experienced my classes as a space in which it is safe to articulate these anxieties. One student wrote:

I am quickly tearing my belief system apart, but I am not seeing a solution as to how to put it back together. It seems that the more we learn, the more we realize that a lot of things in the Bible aren't true necessarily. I am trying to digest the idea that God allowed for there to be errors in the Bible. . . . How do I sift through the stories and know what to take away from them?

Knowing how threatening and disruptive biblical scholarship is to the inherited faith of my students, I devote significant attention to the issue of scripture as a source for theology and present several models of biblical inspiration, authority, and interpretation. One of my goals is to help students recognize that there may be numerous ways of "putting things back together again." The willingness of this student to articulate her anxieties was met with understanding and appreciation by her classmates, along with their own accounts of how perspectives on biblical inspiration presented in the class had helped them make sense of the Bible. One student responded in this way:

It is pretty unnerving learning that many of the Bible stories I was taught in Sunday school are not factual. . . . I really like the concept of "general inspiration." God exercised general divine oversight in the formation of Scripture in a way that permitted the human element to assert itself more forcefully and independently than certain other views typically allow. . . . God drew people into relationships with him, and their experiences of God shaped their views and values, also influencing the texts they produced. This explanation really helped me to understand a little better the contradictions within the Bible.

Another student chimed in:

When Seibert speaks about general inspiration he looks at the indirectness being helpful because it allows humans to understand concepts God creates on a human level. While Jonah might not be historically accurate, it does hold truthful insights about the nature of God. Similarly, when looking at the New Testament, the parables hold profound truths but in a way understood to the culture of people at the current time period. "Inaccuracies" used to bother me until I realized they are just looking at the literary devices, similar to the parables.

Ironically, another student in this conversation expressed a sense of relief that biblical scholars and theologians are wrestling with these difficult questions. She had recognized certain problems in her ordinary reading of the Bible. Because she had been taught that the Bible had no errors, she had equated her doubts with a loss of faith. For this student, encountering other models of biblical inspiration and authority was liberating and perhaps even faith salvaging.

Other contributions to the online discussion forum provide evidence that students considered the online conversation a safe space for disagreement with viewpoints presented in the classroom, including the very methodological framework I propose as fruitful for theological inquiry. One student wrote:

I was very intrigued by the idea of theology needing to be flexible. Dr. **Crane** gave the analogy of how the rules of the game of basketball have changed over the past 50 plus years. . . . Because these "basketball creators" were human and not omniscient, it was too difficult for them to foresee every part of the game until it was

played for many years. . . . it became evident that there were flaws in the rules of the game (such as not having a shot clock). The way I understood it, Dr. **Crane** was making the point that, in the same way in which basketball required innovation over time, parts of Christianity need to be innovated. With that said, is this a fair analogy to make? Can the Author of Christianity, God, be compared to humans, who are imperfect? Did God make mistakes in his authorship of Christianity, just like the “authors of basketball” were imperfect in creating the original rule-set for the game?

This student felt sufficiently safe and welcome to raise critical questions about the theological assumptions implicit within the methodological framework that structured the class. While I do not reply to every student contribution in order to allow students the space to interact with one another, I affirmed the student for posing a very insightful critical question and by doing so, providing the class with a positive example of the give and take of theological debate. Raising questions about the limits of an analogy and seeking to surface assumptions implicit within a theoretical framework exemplify, after all, the very critical thinking skills we are seeking to nurture. I offered a response that identified the valid concerns that animated her question while suggesting ways we might understand divine revelation, not as the delivery of a perfect and complete religious system with all the right answers, but rather as including the reception of divine self-communication by finite and culturally situated communities whose grasp of truth is always partial and fragmentary. I did not reply to offer the student the one correct authoritative answer but to model how a participant in theology's living argument should take critique as a positive challenge to respond with reasons for the position one holds.

If I have sought to model theology as a living argument, then students should be empowered to push back and challenge or question viewpoints presented in the classroom. Over the course of the semester, students across the theological spectrum felt free to articulate their convictions, dialogue and disagree with other students on matters of theological importance, and to interact freely with me as well. One of my most theologically conservative students thanked me for challenging him to think more rigorously while treating him and his views with fairness and respect. But another

conservative student felt sufficiently safe to articulate his objections to the entire enterprise of teaching the results of critical biblical studies and forms of theological reflection that might unsettle certain student beliefs about the Bible.

A second major pedagogical challenge is that of encouraging students to engage in open and rigorous academic inquiry that may take them to places beyond their ecclesial and theological starting points. A significant amount of skill is required to inhabit, as it were, the creative tension between inviting students to allow themselves and their current theological beliefs to be challenged by other theological perspectives while simultaneously seeking to cultivate a safe space for students to be themselves. In the final analysis, convictions can never be coerced. One truly believes only what one is persuaded is true. However, a model of Christian theology as a living conversation is an invitation to students to enter into modes of open academic inquiry. If theology is the church's historically-extended living argument, then it necessarily involves the encounter with those others who represent very different interpretations of the meaning of the faith. At minimum, students are invited to listen charitably, to respect, and to understand divergent theological perspectives.

In class, I point out that we learn the most about ourselves and our own beliefs through interaction with those who disagree with us and by doing so, force us to think more rigorously about our current ensemble of convictions. Each individual's theological understanding is likely to be richer and deeper to the extent that one's intellectual development has been enriched by interaction with a wide variety of voices from very different historical, cultural, ecclesial, racial or ethnic, political, and socio-economic locations and perspectives. Emphasis is placed upon the ways in which great thinkers from different time periods, social locations, and theological perspectives, as well as persons from different faiths or no explicitly religious faith, often enable us see things, whether in scripture or in our own unspoken assumptions, that we may not have seen before. I point out that sometimes, through the encounter with those who think differently, we change our minds about something important because our intellectual opponents give us good reasons for doing so. At other times, we retain our current convictions but are now able to offer better or more compelling reasons for why we

think as we do. At other times, we are able to make slight adjustments in our current web of convictions that add nuance and recognize ambiguity or complexity.

It is through engagement with diverse perspectives that valued academic skills of critical, analytical, and integrative thinking are nurtured. Of particular importance to the development of these skills are classroom efforts to analyze and understand why two theological positions differ from one another. One of the most fruitful exercises is a comparison of the implicit hermeneutical assumptions about how one looks to the Bible for ethical guidance that informed the divergent views of the defenders of slavery and the abolitionists. After reading essays by James Evans ([3] , 33-51) and Mark Noll ([16] , 20-25), students learn that defenders of slavery adopted a topical hermeneutic that appealed to explicit biblical statements about the subject of slavery, while the abolitionists appealed to what they believed to be the deep moral vision in the gospels and the logical implications of the moral principles articulated by Jesus. Students initially assume that the abolitionists' conclusions were obviously correct. But when many students recognize that their own default modes of biblical interpretation are more similar to those of the defenders of slavery, real deliberation begins. If we judge the abolitionists to have been correct one hundred and fifty years ago, what might be the implications for how we draw upon the Bible today for moral guidance on controversial issues? Incredible classroom discussions follow as students realize that the Bible does not itself provide a hermeneutical "decoder ring" and therefore, we must make complex interpretive judgments not explicitly warranted by the Bible. One student wrote:

Slave-holders had biblical evidence that God's people like Abraham owned slaves. Looking through their lens of that time, that seems logical. Ethically and morally, I do not agree. I believe with the Abolitionists that the greater whole of the Bible preached a message of love and compassion for all of God's people, and the institution of slavery was not representative of Christ's teachings. However, when this was turned on a current issue such as gay marriage, it troubled me. . . I can see good arguments from those for and against gay marriage. Just as the slaveholders may have said, those who are against gay marriage may say that it directly denounces gay marriage in the Old Testament. However, the greater whole of the Bible says that we are to be Christ-like

and loving to all people, regardless of their beliefs/practices. The bigger fear I have is that if I were to side one way, I would be taking the literal approach like the slave owners, and if I take the other side I am simply liquidating the Bible into general ideas/themes. How do we prevent ourselves from simply having preconceived ideas on an issue and then finding Biblical evidence for our preconceived/taught ideas?

If students modify or rethink previously settled convictions, it is because the student felt sufficiently safe that he or she was willing to step into the give and take of arguments and counter-arguments. If I have succeeded, students have allowed themselves to ask questions they have not asked before, to listen attentively to those with whom they might initially fundamentally disagree, and to be open to challenges to their own present theological understandings. One student described her experience in the class, and her willingness to wrestle with new perspectives and rethink previous assumptions. I consider her intellectual integrity to be a prime example of the openness I seek to nurture in students. She wrote:

Most class sessions I get uncomfortable because all I've ever known is being presented in a completely different way, and it's scary. I've been challenged to think about why it is that I believe what I believe, and is it really my own personal beliefs or those that I was exposed to growing up? I've learned that salvation is not solely individual but also a "group project." I've learned that hell may not be the fire pit I've always envisioned it to be. Multiple times throughout the semester I found myself looking up things we discussed in class that didn't sit well with me, either on the computer or in my Bible. It just blows my mind how many things we were raised believing may not actually be spelled out in the Bible like we assume them to be. Interpretation is so key and it's amazing how different people can interpret the same thing to mean something completely different to each person. Overall, I'm thankful with how this course impacted me and my walk with Christ and I was stimulated beyond what I ever thought possible.

Another student wrote:

I will put my personal reflections on how I have changed as a whole here. . . . It seemed like every class caused me to call into question something I had been taught

from a young age – which I greatly appreciated. The two things that probably struck me most were the discussions on the legal metaphor of salvation as well as what is to come (heaven and hell). I honestly had never questioned the legal metaphor (and all the punitive connotations it entails) before this class. Viewing salvation as something that is happening here and now, being worked out in my life, as well as something communal, really struck me. My commission is not just to make sure people are “saved,” but to improve their lives here on Earth, making the Kingdom more and more evident. Finally, I had never really been exposed to different interpretations of hell in a way that was academic or encouraged consideration of the other positions. I was blown away by the thought that hell may very well be the presence of God's perfect love. . . . I guess this is all to say thank you, Dr. **Crane**, for helping me view my faith (and my faith tradition) in a new way.

This openness to different theological perspectives was manifest in the fascination expressed by many students upon learning about alternative Christian viewpoints regarding the symbols of hell and judgment. Several students wrestled with problems they had previously intuited regarding views of hell as a place of endless torture and in doing so, displayed the beginnings of the critical thinking skill of seeking intellectual coherence, asking whether holding certain convictions is compatible with the holding of other convictions. One student wrote:

The idea of hell, and God sending people to hell was always difficult for me. . . . It always left a bad taste in my mouth. The ideas presented [in the readings] were extremely thought provoking and made a lot of sense. To me it was such a relief to see something other than God just sending people to hell to burn in eternal agony. With that, it just always seemed like there was no purpose to it, nothing good was accomplished. When someone died who wasn't a believer it just caused that much more sorrow and pain here on earth.

With a bit of humor, one student described his experience of profound wrestling with the divergent perspectives he encountered in the class:

I think that Professor **Crane** is just conflicted about Just War vs. Pacifism and nonviolence. I think he wants as many people to be as conflicted as he is because once

I start to feel like I have a solid foundation for defending one set of beliefs over the others he gives us a reading to contradict it! (This is a tongue in cheek, jovial complaint).

A second student also expressed appreciation that the class presented different perspectives in ways that challenged her to grapple with her own convictions in new and deeper ways. Since she is not a conservative student, this comment illustrates the ways in which course material is designed to challenge students across the spectrum. She wrote in response to the previous student's comments:

This class has been very challenging for me because it has made me look and struggle with scenarios and questions. I generally-speaking identify as a pacifist. . . . I think the idea of looking at force and violence as not always one and the same is helpful. I definitely disagree with the idea of non-involvement with government or with the world as some pacifists might argue, because I truly believe we as Christians are to bring about systems of change in whatever avenue, including the government. That said, I have always struggled with benefiting from what I disagree with, and benefiting from enforcement of justice systems that are good, of maintaining social justice policies. . . . I really appreciate that these are questions unresolved for Prof. **Crane** and others in the class, because I don't think there is an easy answer. I agree with your jovial complaint!

The third major challenge is that of facilitating or nurturing in students the development of their own theological voices. Because I teach at a Christian academic institution, courses in Christian theology are designed to promote the Christian faith. But many fear that privileging any tradition as authoritative in the classroom at least runs the risk of indoctrination that is in tension with the value of students' intellectual agency. For example, Shane Kirkpatrick ([8]) identifies his fundamental pedagogical objective for the introductory Bible course he teaches to be that of facilitating the transformation of students into learners capable of thinking for themselves and negotiating the competing demands of authority in their lives through the exercise of their own sense of authority. Kirkpatrick opts to pursue the pedagogical goal of facilitating the development of student capacities that will contribute to the broader

concerns of liberal arts education, such as critical thinking, creative problem-solving, and responsible global citizenship as opposed to seeking to make a contribution to the wider Christian church, even though he teaches at a church-related liberal arts college. Kirkpatrick fears that religious commitments, when combined with authority-bound forms of knowing, threaten the goal of equipping students to become agents of their own education. He fears that “religious discourse about the Bible often mystifies our human decision-making role. Uncritical appeals to self-evident truth received from authorities can encourage the kind of passivity that proves to be educationally and developmentally detrimental” (2010, 128, 133).

Though his own pedagogy is rooted in strong theological and confessional commitments, Lake Lambert ([9]) describes the challenge posed by active learning models of education. He notes that proponents of an active learning paradigm envision the successful classroom as one in which the teacher is but a facilitator who constructs environments and experiences in which students learn to discover and construct knowledge for themselves. The goal of active learning is to foster free thinking and a suspicion of all hierarchy and inherited tradition (2000, 72).

In response, I would argue that a MacIntyrean account of tradition undermines any sort of binary opposition between the authority of a tradition and the agency of learners. If a living tradition is an ongoing argument, responsible participation in that tradition is antithetical to blind submission. The internal plurality and diversity of a living tradition calls into question the notion that some singular authority figure deserves unquestioned deference. As Mark Medley ([15]) points out, tradition is not merely “that which is handed over,” an ossified and hypostatized block of teachings passed down unchanged and uncorrupted. A living tradition includes the act of transmission in which each person is a participant within a living and dynamic “traditioning” process (2009, 69-73). This traditioning process includes ongoing reinterpretation, ever new applications of inherited convictions and values, and the ability to make modifications when dissonance is experienced. Therefore, a vision of theology as a living argument invites students to recognize and affirm their own theological vocation, voice, and agency as interpreters of the faith.

One threat to the development of students' own theological agency is what Gayle Baldwin ([2]) describes as powerful emotional and "tribal" loyalties to their home churches and family. Students may feel anxiety that their questioning, probing, and changed viewpoints represent disloyalty to people who are important to their own identities (2006, 165-166). The methodological framework is designed to enable students to realize that the form of Christianity in which they were nurtured is not the one normative or paradigmatic expression of the faith. This offers a kind of permission to rethink previously settled convictions and change one's mind when one has good reasons for doing so from within the ongoing theological conversation that is the Christian faith. Modifications of beliefs, therefore, need not be seen as a betrayal of the faith, but rather as part of the historically-extended church's quest for ever greater faithfulness in speech and practice. As one student noted:

I have felt the same way about this course shaping my faith. I have learned about many things that I have never thought of before. I have been more open to new ideas that were not openly considered or presented to me before. If my beliefs change or differ from that of my parents or even my home church, I am still a Christian because of the core beliefs that I hold.

Another student demonstrated her willingness to listen and consider other viewpoints. This drew her into a process that resulted, not in jettisoning previous understandings, but the making of adjustments in her current web of convictions to make a place for ambiguity. Here we see a student neither parroting back a theological belief she had inherited nor changing her perspective entirely, but rather, engaged in the process of exercising her own theological agency as she wrestled with a complicated issue:

When I first thought about the question: "Does the Christian understanding of sin teach that humans are: (a) villains who are guilty because of their wrong choices, or (b) victims whose sin is the result of forces beyond our control," I quickly concluded that. . . humans are villains who are guilty because of our wrong choices. I believe that God gave humans free will and thus gifted us with the responsibility of our actions.

After reading the story about Karl, I struggled with my previous answer. I think that Karl is still responsible for his actions, even though I think that he definitely was a victim when he was bullied. . . . Even though he was bullied, and faced a lot of trauma, he still chose to react to misfortune by becoming a villain and is therefore responsible for his actions. Even though my answer makes sense to me, I still struggle with it. I have met so many people who are caught up in sin due to traumas they experienced in their childhood. It just makes me wonder how merciful God is, because He knows how hard it is for people like Karl to choose the right path. I struggle because Karl did not choose his life. He did not choose to be mistreated, bullied, and abused, and yet God holds him accountable for the fact that he chooses to act violently as well?

One student spoke of his attraction to an alternative viewpoint on hell and judgment, but indicated that he would need to study the matter further. In other words, he did not jettison a previous viewpoint because I, another authority figure, told him to change his mind. Instead, he took seriously his own theological agency:

It was really a blessing to see a different idea other than endless torture for whoever doesn't believe in Christianity. But I'm not going to hold this [alternative viewpoint on hell] to be true yet. I still want to look into it more myself in the Bible, and my own exploration.

Another student was intrigued by my own alternative perspective on the nature of salvation. But this student demonstrated her own clear sense of theological agency when she noted that she did not agree with everything she read:

I'm not completely sold out (yet) to everything I've read in Dr. **Crane's** chapter, but I am really fascinated by his explanation of salvation. Instead of a complete substitute to what I have grown up believing, it feels like a more fleshed-out version of how salvation should be understood.

Conclusion

Beginning introductory theology classes with a methodological framing indebted to Alasdair MacIntyre's account of tradition-constituted inquiry has proven extremely fruitful in my particular institutional context. This success is due, in large measure, to highly conscientious students who are willing to step into the game, if I may speak

metaphorically, and allow themselves to enter the give and take of interaction with multiple and diverse perspectives on the meaning of the Christian faith. This model is certainly not universally applicable for all courses in Christian theology or Christian thought in other institutional contexts. It would require significant modification if I were teaching, for example, in an institutional context in which a significant number of my students did not self-identify as Christian.

The advantage of this methodological framing of the class in my setting is that it presents theology as self-involving, as a discipline that requires students to be agents of theological reflection in their own right instead of conveying to students the notion that theology is merely something one learns about in a passive sense. A further benefit is that this approach simultaneously allows students to enter the give and take of the ongoing argument as the persons they currently are while inviting them to allow their current convictions to be challenged through the encounter with radically different theological voices. In an institutional context in which most of my students are theologically conservative, this approach has allowed me to find that critical balance point between providing a safe space for inquiry for students for whom academic biblical and theological studies are initially perceived as threatening while nevertheless providing texts and experiences that are designed to draw the student out of his or her theological comfort zone and into serious reflection upon ideas that are “other” to the student's own perspectives. What is most fulfilling as a teacher is to see that the class has facilitated students' development of their own theological agency as participants and practioners of the tradition.

Footnotes

1 The concern or reservation being expressed here has to do with Allen's language. I am not rendering judgments about his academic institution.

2 Similarly, Thomas Martin argues that so-called value-free pedagogies are never actually free of values but rather, function by default within the unconscious and unarticulated values of the dominant consumerist ideological context. (2008, 218-219).

3 Sharon Daloz Parks describes a developmentally-early form of knowing as "authority-bound." This form of knowing involves basing one's convictions and knowledge upon an authority outside the self (2000, 54–55).

4 I am grateful for the challenge levied by an anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this essay, who pointed out that such claims are vulnerable to the accusation of "essentialism." In opposition to essentialist tendencies, one could argue that the continuity of a living tradition is a matter of what interpretive communities do as interpreters and practitioners of the tradition. I would certainly agree that the continuity of a living tradition is indeed contingent upon the interpretive judgments and ongoing practices of interpretive communities. We cannot specify in advance all of the ways a tradition might unfold or develop. However, if space allowed me to develop the argument, I would seek to make the case that there are at least some logical or grammatical constraints implicit within the Christian canon and tradition that set some constraints and parameters upon what subsequent generations of Christian interpretive communities might credibly and plausibly do as interpreters of these texts and as stewards of the tradition. For example, it would be difficult to imagine Christian faith without the elementary grammar of sin and redemption or to envision a Christian faith which posited the solution to the human dilemma as one in which humans are entirely capable of rescuing themselves apart from any mode of divine deliverance. Addressing the substantive theological, philosophical, and hermeneutical issues raised by these concerns about essentialism is beyond what is possible in this essay.

5 Many students are homeschooled or attended Christian high schools where evolutionary theory is presented as falsehood at odds with the truth of the Christian faith. It is when their Christian professors in the biological sciences affirm certain evolutionary understandings of human origins that the crisis for many students is generated.

6 Some of the video clips I have utilized include these highlights from a 1967 game between the Los Angeles Lakers and Boston Celtics at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDK5VDdX‐yo&feature=related>, and from a 1954 game between the Minneapolis Lakers and the Syracuse Nationals at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54qY7HRx8iI&feature=related>. I have also utilized this clip from the 2014 NBA finals,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bckeFYPj‐o>.

7 I do not initially inform the students that the clip is about a game called rollerball (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oxHCnSJzMc>).

8 Of course, the participants in the Christian religion are not all on the same proverbial page at the same time. Different segments of a living tradition render different judgments on whether or not certain modifications are necessary or are in faithful continuity with the tradition. Thus, some Christian groups affirm the acceptability of women in all spiritual leadership roles and some do not. Various ecclesial communions differ on their understandings of divine providence, how Christ's death is redemptive, and questions about human sexuality.

9 Since my institution's ecclesial roots are in the Anabaptist tradition, "Theology, Violence, and Nonviolence" is designed to explore complex questions about God, violence, peacemaking, just war theory, and debates within theological ethics about issues such as criminal justice, the death penalty, and the complexities of concern for social justice and the role of coercive governing authority in the struggle for justice. The course is not designed to portray a pacifist position as the only faithful or authentic Christian position on these matters. This class is the required general education Christian Beliefs class for Peace and Conflict Studies majors. However, the vast majority of the students in this class are not Peace and Conflict Studies majors.

10 One example of a test question designed to test student comprehension was based upon a classroom presentation in which a careful analysis was offered of the theological assumptions undergirding what I categorize as the conventional evangelical account of how the individual comes to faith in Christ. In class, I point out that this account depends upon the assumption that divine righteousness is retributive justice and a legal metaphorical framing of the God-human relationship. The test question: In what I have characterized as "the conventional version of the plan of salvation," how does the legal metaphor shape how we understand sin, the problem sin poses for humans, God's roles and actions in the drama, and the option we are presented with by

God to appropriate our own salvation? My first test question is designed to reinforce the introduction of the MacIntyrean account of living traditions as applied to the Christian faith and task of theology. The question is designed to evaluate the student's ability to recognize the different elements of what I described as "the innovation process." It is one thing to memorize the four component parts of this conceptual framework. But comprehension requires the ability to recognize an actual instance of this process. Students are given the internet link to a Catholic News Service article that provides an extremely helpful brief summary of the theological reasoning employed within the Vatican document entitled "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized." Using four different pen colors, students are required to underline those portions of the brief summary that fit most closely into the categories of: (1) the impetus for change or the crisis that generated negative consequences; (2) the proposed or actual modification; (3) the theological arguments offered to justify the proposed modification, and; (4) those theological arguments that endeavored to make the case that the modification is in faithful continuity with the tradition rather than a betrayal of the tradition. Each of these elements is clearly present within the official document and in the summary (Thavis 20; International Theological Commission 6).

11 Of course, it is possible that an epistemological crisis "localized" within the intellectual and personal experience of any individual means that the credibility of a religious faith breaks down for that particular person. Therefore, even though I teach theology from a stance of commitment to the Christian faith within an academic institution with certain confessional commitments, I recognize and respect that some students will no longer find the faith credible and their voices are welcome within the classroom as part of the living conversation.

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