

## CREATIVE TEACHING

### ANCIENT BAFFLES AND MODERN TIMES: TEACHING ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

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#### ABSTRACT

A special challenge of theology courses in the private liberal arts college is the ability to maintain an institutional commitment to identifiable moral and religious values while at the same time respecting the personal and academic integrity of a pluralistic student body. The Ultimate Questions course has been constructed to introduce such students to fundamental religious questions, problems and critiques and to demonstrate that these considerations begin in a wide variety of human experiences, activities and conceptualizations. Having depended on such thinkers as Tillich and Rahner to suggest that the *religious* problem is ultimately the *human* question, the course turns to an investigation of mainline Christian doctrine, worship and praxis as distinctive responses to the ultimate questions.

In the summer of 1975, Bellarmine College of Louisville was one of twenty American schools invited by the Danforth Foundation to a fortnight's conference in Colorado Springs on the subject of values in higher education. On special challenge put to participants in the conference was that they demonstrate ways in which the moral and religious commitments of their institutions made an identifiable impact on their students—without abridging their personal or academic freedoms.

One element of Bellarmine College's response to this Danforth challenge was the refocusing of a course already contained in the core curriculum and simply entitled "Introduction to Theology." By 1976 the course had become "Ultimate Questions," required of all students seeking the B.A. degree; generally students take the course at sophomore level, and there are usually six sections offered in any given semester. The course took its shapes and its title from a section in the Bellarmine Charter of Purpose:

Bellarmino calls upon all members of the academic community to address themselves to ultimate questions about reality and human

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life: the meaning of God, freedom, society, suffering and death, care and hope. It is when men and women have come to grips with questions such as these, and have achieved some measure of carefully considered response, that they begin to advance toward educated maturity. . . .

The College does not accept the notion that a school's responsibility is to teach students simply to fit into the society in which they live. It submits that students must be taught to evaluate this society and to exercise their trained human powers to change it wherever necessary.

Not surprisingly, Bellarmine College has maintained a core liberal arts curriculum of some sixty hours supplemented by an additional sixty-six hours in concentration and elective areas. Since most of the core courses are taken at freshman and sophomore levels, many of the students enrolled in Ultimate Questions would be likely to be taking simultaneously such courses as introductions to philosophy or general psychology, a world literature survey of two semesters (modeled on the Great Books format), or classes in art or music history.

Admittedly, the Ultimate Questions course carries with it good measures of personal and societal scrutiny. It is taught out of an interdisciplinary base, and, of course, each faculty member who teaches it places a different turn of emphasis on the material. By and large, however, the course has been able to maintain a unity of purpose in all sections while winning positive evaluations and reviews from students of widely varying academic backgrounds.

Rather than beginning with religious discourse, the Ultimate Questions course turns to such diverse disciplines as astronomy, psychology, and American literature to suggest that fundamental life questions pervade the academic realm. To avoid sudden disjointedness in the presentation of these diverse areas, one or two examples are chosen from each discipline and treated as models rather than any attempt at comprehensive overviews. Additionally, selected figures from the different academic areas are highlighted in the course as exemplary and persistent ultimate questioners: Galileo, Einstein, Kierkegaard, and Victor Frankl.

Many institutions, of course, have developed courses with the intention of introducing students to the major philosophic and theological issues. They have also walked the tightrope that stretches between an institutional commitment to broadly-based philosophic meanings and an educational ability to awaken questions and insecurities in students often just beginning to realize that life-and-death issues are at stake in the world of thought as well as in the world of economics or politics.

In suggesting the Bellarmine College approach, then, we make no claim for extraordinary originality. Rather the brief description of the

course that follows is intended to stimulate comparisons, suggestions, and discussions among the many theologians who work with the same set of incredible curricular desiderata: a course that will interest, cause radical questioning, and yet offer options, honesty, and commitment all in one.

The Ultimate Questions course has four major sections, each requiring about four weeks time in a regular sequence:

- I. Ultimate Questions: Diverse Expressions
- II. Thoughtful Responses
- III. The Religious Response
- IV. The Christian Response

#### *I. Ultimate Questions: Diverse Expressions*

At the opening session, each student is confronted not only with syllabus, reading list and the attendant anxieties; they are also provided with a selection of archival photographs, vintage about 1900, from which they choose one and keep it throughout the semester. At semester's end, they must present an essay in a special notebook that suggests a time when the photographic personality came to grips with some matter of ultimacy; how they did or did not cope successfully; how religious experience did or did not play a part. This biographic device helps students to translate concepts and theories into life situations without forcing them to be "confessional" themselves. They are cautioned about the possibility of personal projection into their fictional account. If for any reason they do not care to work with such a procedure they are given the option of reporting on worship services other than their own. In the same special notebook used for the photographic-biographical essay, students are also required to keep notes on all reserve readings, listed below.

The first part of the course has three basic purposes: (1) to show that ultimate questions are persistent, multiple, and an unavoidable part of living; (2) to indicate that the ultimate questions and mysteries show up in practically all the arts and sciences, as well as in every fully-lived life . . . they are not just questions raised by a few recluses or religious fanatics; (3) to suggest that life is surrounded by a difficult-to-define "other dimension" or mystery of which humanity is but a part; that is to say, there is more to life than what merely shows on its surface.

The first weeks of class are spent in building a catalogue of ultimate questions culled from the worlds of quantum physics and astronomy and with reference to such thinkers as Sagan, Asimov, Jastrow, and Eiseley. Few studies can be found to expand the mind so quickly as that of big bangs, black holes, and anti-matter. After even a brief encounter, most students concede that philosophic and theological talk is almost

tame compared with the vocabulary of modern astronomy and physics. Students learn rather rapidly that both religion and science have been chastened since the epochs in which either was thought to have ready answers to all questions.

Literature and film are next invoked as rich sources for a serious consideration of life's cryptic edges. For example, there are class readings as well as recordings from such American sources as Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Students generally perceive the common thread connecting the selections: that the most seemingly ordinary lives, as they are portrayed in great literature, are freighted with possibility, insecurity and mystery.

Students are also asked to suggest those films or even albums of the past year that effectively portray characters experiencing some primal emotion or one of the basic life questions. Films frequently mentioned by students lately are *The Deer Hunter*, *Close Encounters*, and *Ordinary People*.

A short section on psychology finishes out this first part of the course. Rollo May's article "Our Schizoid World" is discussed in order to explore the meaning and causes of contemporary anxiety and also to situate humanistic and social psychology within the meaning-seeking tradition.

#### Readings for Part One:

Abraham Heschel, "The Sense of the Ineffable," "Radical Amazement," and "The Ultimate Question" in *The Wisdom of Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975)

Rollo May, "Our Schizoid World" in *Love and Will* (New York: Norton, 1969)

Paul Tillich, "The Depth of Existence" in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribners, 1948).

Note: All books are available in paperback, except where noted.

All articles are placed on library reserve in multiple copies.

## II. Thoughtful Responses

By the second month of the course, students generally report having acquired some sense of the issues involved. They are ready to try their first venture at examining various non-religious responses to the pervading questions. They are for the most part persuaded by this time that whereas most commodities available today come with sets of instructions and guarantees, the human phenomenon is different in that its meaning and purpose must be in part discovered, in part created. The human being, the unquenchably questioning animal, begins to learn something about its reality just by attending to the persistence of ques-

tions. The asking-animal begins to find *interpretation* to be a critical factor in the human equation.

A book that has been found to be particularly helpful here, and one which the students have genuinely seemed to like, is Leslie Stevenson's *Seven Theories of Human Nature*. In a short, concise, generally fair account, Stevenson puts to each theory he presents an overlay of four basic questions: (1) what is the basic structure of the real? (2) how does humanity fit into this picture? (3) what is the basic flaw in the human make-up? (4) what is the basic remedy for this flaw? Professor Stevenson spends a chapter on Christianity as one of his seven theories (but we defer consideration of that until the last division of the course); and he additionally considers Plato, Marx, Sartre, Freud, Skinner, and Lorenz. In a concluding chapter, Stevenson himself ranges over several pivotal questions comparing and contrasting the responses he has found in his subjects: How much in human nature is innate and how much learned? What measure of freedom will be accorded the human creature which can in many ways, at least, be demonstrated to be conditioned? What are the implications of the debate over whether all reality can be ultimately reduced to matter in motion? Does morality have an objective basis? Does God exist? As Stevenson's questions get shorter, their answers become more complex. And that, of course, is no fault of Stevenson's.

If there is a bewilderment threshold in the Ultimate Questions course, this is usually the place where it is reached. Thoughtful students have begun to realize the complexity both of the questions and the variety of answers. If they are specially perceptive, they also begin to realize at this point that philosophies, religions, faiths, families can help them in such a process; but it is up to each alone ultimately to choose and to live out a comprehensive, coherent approach to life.

Reading for Part Two:

Leslie Stevenson, *Seven Theories of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

### III. Religious Responses

"The great question is not why do we die - but why do we live?" Greeley's phrasing in *The Great Mysteries* summarizes well the religious undercurrent of the Ultimate Questions course that begins to surface in the third division. The critically religious person knows full well the varied interpretations to which life is subject: the ordered, hierarchical, participational universe of a Plato; the pointless jest, random purposelessness proposal of certain existentialists; the "hidden wholeness" and painful hopefulness of certain other religious existentialists; the curt "nasty, brutish and short" definition of life from Hobbes. But the critically religious individual is possessed of an angle of vision that insists that we see now but partially and that what we see and feel

and hear is a pledge of what is yet to be. In short, the religious person is different from the merely philosophic or sensitive person in that he or she considers that there is a source and goal to human living; this source or goal is something or someone more than the totality of human experience and aspiration projected or magnified or totalized. Coming to know more about this Ground, this Source, this Holy, coming closer in touch with this Reality, tracing the implications of all this for the human condition—this is part of the description of the religious phenomenon.

But before pursuing religious discourse about God or purposefulness, the course turns to an examination of the reality of religion itself, beginning with definitions from major modern commentators: Freud's religion as wish-fulfillment; Marx's religion as social pacifier; Fromm's religion as value definer and framer of human orientation; William James' religion as gatherer of energies; Buber's religion as relational; Durkheim's sociological analysis; Wach's criteria for true and false religions.

Categories that are constant throughout the major natural and historical religions are examined: Otto's idea of the holy; Eliade's sacred time and sacred space; Joseph Campbell's account of the power of myth. Finally, faith is studied as a profoundly human fact and also as interpretive, integrative, religious act. Arguing that most people are possessed of a faith stance in life that is often unarticulated but is profoundly revealed in human attitudes and actions, the lectures turn to consider Newman's convergence of probabilities; Peter Berger's signals of transcendence; Kierkegaard's conception of the leap of faith and the three "stages on life's way"; aesthetic, ethical and religious; and Gregory Baum's description of depth areas as pointers of faith's plausibility.

#### Readings for Part Three:

- Mircea Eliade, "Archetypes and Repetition" in *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959)  
 Peter Berger, "Theological Possibilities" in *A Rumor of Angels* (New York: Doubleday, 1969)  
 C. S. Lewis, "What Christians Believe" in *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960)  
 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (to demonstrate the use of imagination in conceiving the religious perception of the world; New York: Penguin, 1977).

#### IV. The Christian Response

Not surprisingly, the section of Christianity—which tries to hit a broad-based, but recognizable mainline of the major Christian traditions—begins with Christology. Christianity at its root refreshingly begins not with philosophic abstractions nor doctrinal statements, but

with an intensely personal and mystical experience of the Christ, both as historical companion and as resurrected Lord.

What is the claim Christianity makes for this Christ? How is it possible that one who has appealed to uncounted millions of unlettered people has also satisfied many of the earth's most challenging thinkers as the key to the mystery of the universe? Somehow in this individual, "the hopes and fears of all the years" came to meet; somehow the approaches he stood for in his life as to how we relate to our own truer selves, to the earth, to the rest of humanity, to the personal God of the Universe pointed to a most profound reading of the human condition.

Jesus in his "every person" role is recognizable in the pivotal part of Matthew's account of the temptation scene (chapter four) wherein Jesus must face down three false interpretations of life. The role is evident again in the Beatitude section following in which Jesus provides his startling counter-portrayal of the human condition, the picture of the genuine blessedness and possibility of things below seemings and surfaces. Jesus' ability to use simple parable to shock his hearers into new ways of seeing priorities (Crossan); his selection of the kingdom as an organizing principle through which to envision human destiny; his coming to grips with suffering and diminishment; his perception of bringing life to the full while proclaiming the blessedness of the ordinary (Rahner)—all of these provide bases for pondering John Shea's comment that "Jesus imaging is the way Western people ask the meaning of life. . . . Explorations into Jesus are not only historical expeditions, but the way the self asks its deepest questions."<sup>1</sup>

Armed with at least a provisional biblical background to the imaging of Jesus, the course then turns to a study of such pivotal dogmas as Incarnation and Resurrection. From these great proclamations it is possible to know much both about the message of Jesus as well as the primordial importance of the messenger. It is also possible to become intrigued with the God of Jesus. And from that point on the class is plunged into the traditional arguments for and against the reality of the Christian personal God. This involves, of course, a direct march over the mine field of the discussion of the nature of evil. Given the inevitability of suffering, the lectures suggest, personal identity is established for the Christian not so much by the quantity of suffering borne as by the quality of one's response to it under the power of grace.

After examination of Christology and theodicy, consideration turns to ecclesiology as the study of the movement in history that keeps alive under grace the perceptions and power of Jesus the Christ. *The Church in the Modern World* of the Second Vatican Council is most helpful here.

The question of ecclesiology allows a consideration of strengths and weaknesses in any undertaking so vast as church. It also allows a useful

<sup>1</sup>John Shea, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), p. 25.

discussion of life-styles and usually a fascinating discussion as students try to translate into their own categories the traditional seven great virtues and seven deadly sins. Dante, well-humored man that he was, would no doubt enjoy it immensely. If time permits, near the end of the semester, the class views Brian Clark's film *Hell* which introduces quite starkly not only otherworldly eschatological considerations, but intense lessons in Christian social consciousness as well.

Readings for Part Four:

- A. J. Wilhelm, *Christ Among Us* (New York: Newman, 1972)  
 Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1976). Selections only.  
 Langdon Gilkey, *Message and Existence* (New York: Seabury, 1980). Selections only.

The selection of a text for this portion of the course has been notoriously difficult. Wilhelm is clear, comprehensive, though sometimes repetitive. There is a psychological drawback in an essentially "ecumenical" course of using a Catholic catechism as a text. Previously used titles in this area:

- C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).  
*A New Catechism* (New York: Seabury, 1969).  
*The Common Catechism* (New York: Seabury, 1975). Hardcover only.  
 Monika Hellwig, *The Christian Creeds* (Cincinnati: Pflaum, 1973).  
 Andrew Greeley, *The Great Mysteries* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

The course usually begins and ends with a quotation from W. H. Auden: "The funniest of mortals—and the kindest—are those who are most aware of the baffle of being." At course's end, we try to get students to assess as much as they are willing the personal effect the classes have had on them. Such self-examination causes some to become discouraged, some few cynical, others more critically faithful. If Auden is right, a study such as this one, properly conducted, leads to an infection of kindness, tolerance and wit—undoubtedly traits that would be welcome on any college campus.

We do feel, however, that at Bellarmine College, some such risk of a course is necessary if we are to be true to our educational mission as indicated in the Charter of Purpose cited at the beginning of this article:

It is when men and women have come to grips with questions such as these, and have achieved some measure of carefully considered response, that they begin to advance toward educated maturity.

The attaining of educational maturity has caused some dis-ease from at least the time of Socrates. At Bellarmine we try to do our small part in unsettling our students, but also in giving them firmer grounds for still deeper foundations.