

How I teach theology to undergrads

Being religious is not about following rules. It's more like dancing.

by [Aristotle Papanikolaou](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue



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When I was hired at Fordham University in 2000, I was told that I was to teach the core freshman theology course, Faith and Critical Reason. I guessed that many students in the class would resent being forced to take a theology course as a core requirement, for two reasons: (1) many students would be burned out on the theology courses they might have taken in a private Catholic high school; and (2) some students would question how theology could be taught in an academic setting

when it is a matter of private, subjective “opinion.” The study of theology is virtually absent in schools at all levels in the United States, and many students find it an affront that Fordham would dare defy that consensus on the moratorium on the study of theology. These students, I thought, would be on the defensive, having already decided that taking this course was simply the price they had to pay for attending Fordham.

I structured my course to address this resistance by making students aware of how they arrived at their own ideas about theology. To accomplish this self-critical awareness, I set up the first part of the course as a sociological, historical, and philosophical exploration of secularization in the United States. We look at the debate about secularization, return to the past to make schematic sense of how we got here, and discuss fundamentalism as the face of modern religion. In historically tracing the process of secularization, students study Descartes, Newton, and the masters of suspicion—Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud—who, in my opinion, did theology a favor with their unrelenting and vociferous attacks on religion.

My goal in this part of the course is to make students aware that their ideas about theology, their interpretation of the religious experience in terms of being religious versus being spiritual, and their resistance to and caricatures of what it means to be religious did not emerge in a vacuum. Where they stand in relation to theology has much to do with a process that began almost 400 years ago with the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. They are products of this history as much as they are actors in it. I end with a discussion of fundamentalism to demonstrate that what students see as the dominant face of religion is, ironically, a modern phenomenon. In making students more critically aware of the context within which they construct their own ideas about theology and religion, I help them to be more open to thinking otherwise. My goal is to open them up to the possibility of theology as a form of self-critical reflection on questions posed to the human experience that are simply unavoidable.

It is only after they develop this self-critical awareness of the current situation that I lead the students to more existential questions about faith: faith and the existence of evil, the nature of faith, faith and reason, and faith and practices. Christian theology is not explicitly addressed in this latter part of the course, although it clearly frames the discussion. The exploration of these themes is self-consciously theological. But the goal is less to convey specific content than to open students to new ways of thinking about these issues—ways different from the usual caricatures.

Many students think that theology attempts to rationalize the existence of God in light of evil. But is that the only way to think about the question of God and evil? Some students think that faith has nothing to do with reason. But is that really the case? Most students think that one faith cannot be argued to be more reasonable than another faith—even if that faith is in something absurd, like the flying spaghetti monster. But does that make sense? Students also think the point of religious practices is to prove oneself to God. But is that all there is to it?

Students who declare that they are spiritual as opposed to religious tend to have a monolithic view of religion, which religions themselves have fostered. They think to be a part of religion is to blindly accept an authoritarian structure that dictates what should be believed, is run by dictatorial leaders, and tries to scare people into compliance by reminding them of the possibility of hell. Students think the gist of religion is to do and believe what one is told so as to get a reward after death. They also think religion is hypocritical, as it seems not to practice what it preaches. Notwithstanding the measure of truth embedded within these claims, my goal is to show the students that it could be otherwise.

This “otherwise” is an understanding of the human being as called to a relationship of communion with God. I emphasize an understanding of the God-world relation in terms of *theosis*, which I prefer to translate as divine-human communion. Practices like prayer and fasting were not developed to prove something to God or to score points with God. They are time-tested practices that rewire the body to make it available to the always-on-offer presence of God. It is at this point of the course that my own Orthodox Christian faith is most apparent.

I want to show my students that their understanding of bad religion is based on bad theology—a nominalist, dualistic conception of a God who stands over and against the world, creating the world, dictating rules, and moving souls around after death. I hope to persuade them that good theology attempts to make sense of how God can be in relation to the not-God, the world, and still be God, or how the world can be in communion with God without being consumed by divinity. For this reason, I end the course with readings either written by Orthodox thinkers (such as St. Gregory of Nyssa or Anthony Bloom) or treating an Orthodox theme like the Jesus Prayer (as in J. D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*).

I try to lead students away from overbearing überstructures designed to force people to think a certain way or think they are never doing enough. Instead, I lead

them toward an understanding of being religious that has to do with formation of the person to be in a certain way—a being that is in communion with the divine. Being religious is less about agreeing to certain propositions or following certain rules, and more about transforming one’s mode of being in the world. Being religious is very much like being an artist.

Because Fordham has a special BFA program with the Alvin Ailey School, I use dance as an analogy. I ask the students whether someone who has studied dance but has never danced “knows” dance as well as someone who has trained as a dancer. They immediately and instinctively answer that the trained dancer knows more about dance. I then try to lead them to articulate what this knowing entails, if it’s not simply reading books about dance and attending performances. A dancer must submit to a regimen of training that usually begins with basic practices that must be mastered to the point where they are performed without thinking. This training is done under the tutelage of a teacher, who has been through the training. The student of dance then progresses to more advanced practices, still under the guidance of a teacher, struggling to integrate techniques of dance into their very being as a dancer.

All this training is usually done within an institutional setting, where there are clear hierarchies, boards of directors, politics, a community of dancers that don’t all like one another, dancers who are more concerned with their ego than simply dance for the sake of dance. And yet, in the midst of all this ugliness, there is a tradition of formation in dance that is passed on from generation to generation. It is time-tested, and through it one may emerge as a dancer, but it could not have been formed without institutionalization. It’s only by submitting to this tradition that one can lead oneself to a kind of performance where a dancer is not aware of the audience, is not dancing to the audience, but is dancing simply for the sake of dance. This is the kind of performance where the dancer doesn’t control the choreography; rather, the choreography and all that it attempts to express has seized the dancer. Those capable of this kind of performance are usually the saints of the tradition of dance. They don’t attempt to reify the past, but they add to the tradition while always remaining within it. This kind of performance could never be possible without submitting to the training, and it’s only through the practices of the tradition that one can hope to be this kind of dancer.

Being religious, then, is about being in a way that embodies the divine presence, and working toward being available to the divine presence in and through religious

practices and tradition. Being religious is not a set of rules one must follow or a bunch of propositions to which one must assent; it is first and foremost an art form, an expression of beauty that is also truth and goodness. The rules and propositions of the tradition—and every tradition has its rules and propositions—aim at the production of the person as a work of art.

To illustrate this, I turn explicitly to the Christian commandment “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and . . . love your neighbor as yourself ” (Matt. 22:36-39). I pose a hypothetical to the students: If I had a neighbor whom I hated and toward whom I felt anger, but I gave that neighbor \$5,000 so that he or she could avoid being “whacked” for not paying gambling debts, have I fulfilled the commandment? The students are smart enough to know that just giving money out of kindness or out of sympathy does not fulfill the commandment. I then tell them that, hypothetically, as a Christian, I have a problem—I know in my heart that I have hate and anger for my neighbor. As Maximus the Confessor says, “The one who sees a trace of hatred in his own heart through any fault at all toward any man whoever he may be makes himself completely foreign to the love for God, because love for God in any way admits of no hatred for man.” How, then, do I change that? Once we get past comments like, “Well you can love someone without liking them,” students start to get the idea that love is something that one works toward, something that is realized in a way that has depth in and through certain practices. My hate for my neighbor may be overcome if I force myself to have conversations with him. Conversation is a practice. Students understand that two people who celebrate 50 years of commitment have a love that is different than when they first met. Such a celebration does not necessarily mean that the relationship was free of moments of temptation and possible betrayal. But students understand that for two people to celebrate such a love that has achieved a depth not present at the start of the relationship, practices had to be performed. These practices both sustain the relationship and make it possible for love to reach such depths.

Maximus is constantly in the back of my mind as I try to explain to the students that practices help to form virtues such as patience, kindness, honesty, empathy, forgiveness—to name only a few—that are needed to make growth in love possible and to avoid vices such as dishonesty, fear, anger, hatred, and self-loathing, which destroy relationships. The Christian commandment to love is a calling to a certain kind of relationship with God, a realization of love. Since God is love, it’s a

relationship of communion with God, of experience of God, of *theosis*. This relationship, however, requires work. Not to merit the love—as if love could be merited—but to make oneself available for the fullness of love that God offers, which is nothing less than God’s very life.

Students are not quite sure what to say when I ask them how a practice like fasting contributes to the learning of love. I explain that fasting is linked to something we consume every day, food; that every time we fast, it’s an occasion to bring God to our awareness; and that this awareness helps sustain a relation with God that makes love possible. This makes sense to the students. If two people had a relationship of distance and never wrote to one another, then forgetfulness would be likely, and love could not grow. Since God is invisible, forgetfulness of God is one of the greatest human temptations. Fasting helps to mitigate that forgetfulness and, in so doing, makes love for God possible. In addition to memory, fasting as a discipline helps form the virtues mentioned above, which, again, are the condition for the possibility of realizing a depth of love.

Students think of religion as a coercive structure. I try to show that it’s a way of life.

There are plenty of Christians who follow all the rules and assent to all the required propositions but cannot seem to get past anger and hatred of those who disagree with their propositions and rules. And there are Christians who use faithfulness to rules and propositions as a platform for attacking others. But in the end, to *be* Christian is not simply to follow rules and assent to propositions; to *be* Christian is to love in the form of the greatest commandment. Like being a dancer, it is to perform love in such a way that love (God) has seized our being.

The question of this generation of college students is not “why God?” but “why religion?” My hope, perhaps overly optimistic, is to introduce a different way of understanding being religious, one that entails an experience of the living God. The possibility of such an experience requires tradition, institutionalization, and practices. But this experience emerges in a way that allows one to manifest the beauty of the tradition even amid its ugliness and to situate oneself in relation to this ugliness without anger, hatred, or self-righteousness.

My students are searching for purity. I teach them that they will not find it and that they need to learn to live with ambiguity—even in a liberal democracy, in which lie their greatest hopes. What I want them to see is that humans are created for

communion with the living God. There is a way of being religious that is the experience of God, and it is this experience that gives them the greatest hope to negotiate the ambiguity in the world.

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