The ACTC Liberal Arts Institute Conference on

The Intersection of Religious and Secular Cores in Liberal Arts Education

**“When Cores Collide”**

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(for conference circulation only)

Let me begin this story of colliding cores by setting an elaborate stage populated by actors poised for action.

I teach at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester Massachusetts. Holy Cross is, and as proclaimed by the very first sentence of their mission statement, “by tradition and choice, a Jesuit liberal arts college serving the Catholic community, American society, and the wider world.”

As one could expect from our name alone, and confirmed in a 2002 study “Holy Cross students are more religiously engaged than their counterparts at non-Catholic colleges and universities.” 50 percent of our students have attended Catholic schools, while 83 percent report that they were raised Catholic, and 74 percent then identified themselves as Roman Catholic. Ten percent of Holy Cross undergraduates identified as Protestant, while 4 percent identified with other religious traditions (including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Eastern Orthodoxy) and none identified as Jewish. This is a picture most likely still true today and certainly for the years 2006 – 2010 that I discuss later despite impressive gains in first generation to college and ALANA students.

As for their beliefs, the 2002 report states “83 percent [of Holy Cross students] confessed belief in God (when those who believe in a ‘higher power’ are included, this number rises to 96 percent). Likewise, 85 percent believe in an afterlife compared to 81 percent of 18-22 year-old students in other surveys. Only 13 percent of Holy Cross respondents gave a religious preference of ‘none’ compared with 21 percent of 18-22 year-olds and 20 percent of 18-22 year-old students. Nine in ten Holy Cross students reported that they considered themselves to be either “religious” or “spiritual”; nearly three-quarters reported they had either a “strong” or “somewhat strong” religious identity. Atheism is extremely rare among Holy Cross students.

The report concludes “While sometimes critical of official church teaching, they [Holy Cross students] enthusiastically embrace Catholicism’s core emphasis on the sacraments, community and social justice. Combining above average levels of religious belief and practice with critical reflection on Catholicism, they possess a religious faith that is simultaneously committed and questioning.” However, their questioning is from a quite clear and confident Catholic cultural perspective, fully committed to a religious core while barely, if at all cognizant, that a secular core even exists.

The challenge to teach this group comes from our ideal, as expressed in the first sentence of the second paragraph of the mission statement, “As a liberal arts college, Holy Cross pursues excellence in teaching, learning, and research. All who share its life are challenged to be open to new ideas, to be patient with ambiguity and uncertainty, to combine a passion for truth with respect for the views of others.” To serve as a gateway to both our Jesuit and liberal arts traditions, Holy Cross instituted a program, called Montserrat, named after the mountain in Spain where Jesuit founder Ignatious Loyola laid down his arms and dedicated himself and his life to God.

In this program, students enroll in a yearlong, small-group seminar organized within one of seven learning clusters with broad, interdisciplinary themes, such as The Self, The Natural World or The Divine. These Montserrat seminars are designed to help students develop critical thinking, writing, and communication skills by encouraging students to engage deeply with complex issues and research and debate open-ended questions all while working and living closely with class and cluster mates. Students within each thematic cluster live in the same residence hall so that conversations started in class can easily continue over dinner or break out again spontaneously in the common areas or during a late-night study break.

To contribute to this program I joined the cluster with “The Divine” as the common theme, and taught for four years, a year-long course about how and what science thinks about gods**.** The first semester was devoted to the origin of science from creation myths to the Newtonian synthesis and in the 2nd semester we jumped into current discussions about gods from practicing scientists who are atheists, agnostics and theists.

Thus calling this paper “When Cores Collide” was completely disingenuous of me as by design I took students with a culturally religious core, taught them the origin and development of science and of methological naturalism, the worldview of the vast majority of working scientists, and then via the arguments of theistic and atheistic scientists, purposefully smashed religious and secular cores together in the hopes that is made for engaged learning.

To be fair, I did this with great care for maintaining a safe learning space where one must learn to disagree without being disagreeable. I accomplished this with several strategies all focused on the analytical as opposed to the personal. The two most important was to de-emphasis and even not allow the personal into the discussion. It was already established and would occur organically that I would self-identify as a devoted atheist and a secular Jew so that that potential bias was at the very least not hidden. Thus much emphasis was placed on the rhetorical analysis of the authors we were reading.

For example, the question is what is Steven Weinberg claiming, and what are his reasons, evidence and warrants as opposed to what do you think, or what do you think of Steven Weinberg. Then, after a full discussion of Weinberg’s arguments, we would discuss to what degree we were in accord or discord with him, and why.

To do this, we relied on the materials from the Little Red Schoolhouse at the University of Virginia, especially their document You Don’t Need to Win an Argument to Succeed

Because Arguments Solve Problems, They Have Many Goals. This document concludes with the statement that “When we think of arguments not as a battle that we win or lose, but as an ordinary exchange in which reader and writer seek the best solution to a problem, then we can count as success outcomes less than the total capitulation of the reader.” To aid in this view, the document presents Nine Degrees of Acceptance, listed here:

1. Reader, I want you to accept, believe, and act on my claim wholeheartedly.
2. Reader, I want you to accept my claim.
3. Reader, I want you to accept my claim, at least for this specific purpose.
4. Reader, I want you to acknowledge that my claim is one you could accept, even

if you are not now prepared to do so.

1. Reader, I want you to accept that my argument is a good, even if you cannot fully

accept my claim.

1. Reader, I want you to accept that, even if you do not accept my claim, others

would have good reason for doing so.

1. Reader, I want you to acknowledge that my claim is supported by a coherent and

reasonable argument.

1. Reader, I want you to acknowledge that my claim is supported by an argument

that others might find coherent and reasonable.

1. Reader, I want you to acknowledge that you at least understand my reasons for

making my claim.

In addition to this, I also balanced the authors for whom we performed this analysis. Two articles by Steven Weinberg would then be compared by two from Vatican Astronomer George Coyne, S.J, or physicist and Anglican priest John Polkinghorne. If we read Richard Dawkins “The God Delusion,” we would also read Francis Collins “The Language of God” or Ken Miller’s “Finding Darwin’s God.” I would also counterbalance Carl Sagan’s “The Varieties of Religious Experience” with Owen Gingerich’s “God’s Argument”, and lastly Physicist Chet Raymo’s “When God is Gone Everything is Sacred” with Michael Guillen’s “Can a Smart Person Believe in God.”

Lastly, at no time would any student be required to express or be graded on what they themselves believed. The questions, and grades, were always based on what they know or understood about the beliefs and arguments of the authors read and discussed.

This program met with a full spectrum of successes and failures. In one class when George Coyne S.J. was actually a visitor to the class, and expressed his understanding of evolution, a student unable to contain himself yelled “That’s blasphemy.” Or a student who responded to the test question “Show that you understand the meaning of the word “theory” in the scientific domain, and have some sense, through specific examples, of how theories are formed, tested, validated, and accorded provisional acceptance; recognize, in consequence, that the term does not refer to any and every personal opinion, unsubstantiated notion, or received article of faith and thus, for example, to see through the creationist locution that describes evolution as “merely a theory” with “I am unable to respond this question, because I am shocked at the example at the end of the question. Such a statement I found to be extremely offensive as it singles me out. This is so offensive, that I felt I could not justify it with a response.”

Then again, on the other side of the spectrum, there were students who thanked me for getting them to read, see or think about ideas that they were once afraid of encountering. To the best of my knowledge no one converted to another religion, or to my relief, became an atheist, while many claimed an increased more confident faith, and to a great extent, almost all became more comfortable in their own skin and owned better their own beliefs.

However, I still wonder if my idea that choosing a topic so dear to student as a way to motivate them to care about the course content was a good choice. Did their devotion enhance their interest but only at the cost of making it harder for them to develop the critical thinking, writing and communication skills because it was not possible to treat the content dispassionately despite my rules of class discussion and debate that maintained a civil classroom?

In the end, it matters not whether one has cared about the sacred-secular question from their first reading of Lucretius’ *On Nature of Things*, or from Galileo’s troika of *The* *Starry Messenger*, *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*, and *Dialogues Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, or even from Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. What matters is that now a number of the texts in our canonical or common cores are most definitely in fierce argument about those subjects for which we are most invested and enthusiastic. As higher educators, it is our institutional obligation and privilege to guide students to participate in a whole range of related questions without necessarily providing definitive and absolute answers. In this way we can guide them to make personal discoveries, to know their own minds, and to articulate their own positions. We also need to show them how to disagree without being disagreeable. If our students read, write and think critically about crucial issues at the intersection of sacred and secular cores, then no future disputation will seem beyond the realm of reasoned argument. Since for most times and circumstances the appropriate institutional response to passionate differences in worldviews is to teach, knowing full well that this will lead to a measure of the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful.