Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses

Barbara E. Walvoord
Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

1 Faculty and Student Goals for Learning: The Great Divide
   13
2 Were the Goals Met? Students' Academic and Spiritual Development
   56
3 Pedagogies: What Influenced Student Learning?
   82
4 Case Studies: Large Classes
   99
5 Case Studies: Small Classes in World Religions, Introduction to Religion
   131
6 Case Studies: Small Classes in Theology, Bible, Christian Formation
   160

Appendix A: Faculty Demographics
   209
Appendix B: Student Demographics
   212
Appendix C: IDEA Surveys
   215
Appendix D: Discipline-Specific Surveys Administered to Highly-Effective Classes
   221
Appendix E: Choosing Highly-Effective Faculty
   238
Appendix F: Data Tally for Highly-Effective Classes
   240
Appendix G: Prompts for Student In-Class Reflections
   243
Appendix H: Suggestions for Leading Faculty Workshops
   245
References
   248

Index
   251
Faculty and Student Goals for Learning: The Great Divide

This chapter answers the first research question: what were faculty and student goals for learning? The chapter reveals some of the hopes and expectations students bring to their introductory theology or religion class, whether they expect the class to challenge their beliefs, and how they plan to address the challenges. It contains ideas that faculty may use for shaping their own course goals and addressing their students' goals.

The data reveal what I call the "Great Divide" in goals that faculty and students marked as "essential" or "important." Faculty, including those who taught a variety of course titles at public, private non-sectarian, and religiously-affiliated institutions, more frequently marked what I have broadly called "critical thinking" than their students did, and students more frequently marked development of their own beliefs and values than faculty did.

This chapter begins by presenting the survey data that highlight the "Great Divide." Next, the chapter presents more detail about students' goals. A section focuses on self-identified Christian students who express no doubts about their faith — 63 percent of the total students in the Highly-Effective classes. About 40 percent of these "Secure Christians" expected the course to challenge their beliefs. Some welcomed the challenge for two quite different reasons: some believed it would help them achieve self-reliance and explore alternatives, rather than blindly accepting what church or family had taught; others looked forward to strengthening their faith through testing. Whether they welcomed the challenge or not, Christian students planned to meet the challenge in a wide variety of ways,
including disassociating the course from their beliefs altogether, "keeping the faith" no matter what the course presented, remaining open to new ideas, and, for a few, some form of critical thinking. Yet virtually no students, as they entered the course, mentioned doctrines, authors, or detailed concepts that might guide them in envisioning how critical thinking could help to shape their religious and spiritual beliefs and practices.

Next, the chapter offers more details about faculty goals, including what faculty mean by "critical thinking" in introductory theology and religious courses. The chapter also explores the goals that faculty sometimes voice in their journals but do not list formally on the syllabus. I call these "sub rosa" and "let it happen" goals.

I don't suggest what goals faculty should have; rather, I urge that faculty be thoughtful about their goals, articulate them clearly for students, find out about student goals, and conduct a robust conversation in the classroom about goals. The end of the chapter offers case studies and suggestions about how that conversation might be conducted.

The Literature on "Young Adult" Development

The literature on "young adult" development can be helpful in understanding the findings of this chapter and others, so I briefly outline it here, before turning to the data. Though the classes in the study contained some older students, 89 percent of the Highly-Effective classes contained less than 10 percent of students who were 26 or older (Appendix B). The "Database" classes, which were primarily religiously-affiliated baccalaureate and masters institutions, do not offer information on student ages, but they, too, probably contained preponderantly students under 26.

The literature variously outlines stages of development, or orders of consciousness, tied more or less securely to age, though uneven or recursive patterns of growth may cause a person simultaneously to exhibit traits of different positions. Those who have outlined these growth patterns often admit that the concept of "stages" is problematic. Rather than outline the full progression through life stages that various theorists propose, I want here to pluck from the literature some common "movements" that a faculty member may expect to find in a given class. One such movement is from "dualism" in which the world is seen in black and white, toward "relativism," in which one recognizes multiple truth claims but has no way of deciding among them, and then toward a tentative commitment that recognizes relativism but makes choices, though such choices in young adults may be hesitant or short-lived – not yet the firm "commitment in relativity" of later adulthood (Parks 2000; Perry 1998). A second, related move is from "Silence," in which one has no voice or cannot be heard toward "Received Knowing," in which one relies on external sources for truth; then toward "Subjective Knowing," which includes mastery of academic tools that are part of analysis and critical thinking and are manipulated without the investment of the self; and finally toward "Constructive Knowing," a later adult position where the self and the tools are integrated (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986). A third move is from a consciousness that can only subjectively experience the self and its needs, toward the ability to act responsibly for the welfare of others (Kegan 1994).

To those unfamiliar with the literature, I would suggest beginning with Parks, who summarizes and references her predecessors such as Perry and Fowler. Parks was the one author most cited by highly-effective teachers in the study when I asked them what they thought was the most important work on young adult development. One faculty member in the study wrote that he prefers Kegan, whose formulations are "more complex, less hierarchical, or evolutionary." Belenky and her colleagues were not often mentioned by study participants but their concepts of "voice" and of the ways in which the self can be held separate from academic work or integrated with it have been very helpful to me in illuminating how students find "voice" in the introductory classroom and how teachers create structures in which those voices can develop.

With this literature as background, the chapter first uses the survey data to outline the dimensions of the "Great Divide," and then uses the qualitative data to analyze in greater depth students' positions as they entered the course, where they wanted to go, and how they expected to meet possible "challenges" to their beliefs. Next, qualitative data further explicate what faculty wanted, especially what I include under the term "critical thinking." Finally, the chapter presents case studies and suggestions about how faculty can articulate their goals, find out about students' goals, and engage their students in productive discussion about goals.

Survey Data Reveal the "Great Divide"

Figure 1.1 shows the differences and similarities in faculty and student goals, using data from the discipline-specific surveys completed by students and faculty
Faculty and Student Goals for Learning

Table 1.1 Goals marked "essential" or "important" by Highly-Effective faculty and students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals: Survey items from disciplinary list (D) or IDEA list (I)</th>
<th>REL Fac (%)</th>
<th>REL Stud (%)</th>
<th>PUB/PNS Fac (%)</th>
<th>PUB/PNS Stud (%)</th>
<th>ALL Fac (%)</th>
<th>ALL Stud (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>84 65</td>
<td>92 59</td>
<td>86 64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop general intellectual skills such as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing (D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view (I)</td>
<td>94 100</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application to decisions</td>
<td>76 79</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to apply course material (to improve thinking, problem solving, and decisions) (I)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factual knowledge</td>
<td>84 75</td>
<td>67 78</td>
<td>79 76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquire a body of knowledge (e.g., about the world's religions, about the Bible) (D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining factual knowledge (terminology, classifications, methods, trends) (I)</td>
<td>88 71</td>
<td>83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental principles</td>
<td>91 79</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning fundamental principles, generalizations, or theories (I)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand other religions</td>
<td>71 68</td>
<td>92 77</td>
<td>77 71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand and appreciate a variety of religious beliefs and practices (D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of discipline</td>
<td>55 53</td>
<td>42 49</td>
<td>51 52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn the methods of the discipline (D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing skills, competencies, and points of view needed by professionals in the field most closely related to this course (I)</td>
<td>26 21</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action for better world</td>
<td>52 62</td>
<td>25 44</td>
<td>44 57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take action for a better world (D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>52 73</td>
<td>25 54</td>
<td>44 68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop students' moral and ethical values (D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in the 66 Highly-Effective classes (Appendix D). The study administered multiple surveys to faculty and students, with slightly different items and slightly different terminology for the scales, though all scales had "essential" as their first item and either "important" or "very important" as their second. A more detailed representation of faculty and student goals in the Highly-Effective classes is provided in table 1.1, which shows data from the Highly-Effective classes on two different surveys, each with somewhat different goal statements: first, the 8 discipline-specific goals I composed from a reading of the pedagogical literature in theology and religion (Appendix D), which are used for figure 1.1; and second, the 12 IDEA goals, which are used in the national IDEA system for classes across disciplines (Appendix C), and which were completed by most of the Highly-Effective faculty but not by students.

The student data show the students' goals near the end of the course, after they had experienced the course and had a chance to learn the faculty member's goals, but the question specifically asked them to reflect the importance of the goals "for yourself."
Table 1.1 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals: Survey items from disciplinary list (I) or IDEB list (I)</th>
<th>REL</th>
<th>REL</th>
<th>PUB/ALL</th>
<th>PUB/ALL</th>
<th>ALL</th>
<th>ALL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fac (%)</td>
<td>Stud (%)</td>
<td>Fac (%)</td>
<td>Stud (%)</td>
<td>Fac (%)</td>
<td>Stud (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing a clearer understanding of, and commitment to, personal values (I)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious and spiritual</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop students’ own religious beliefs and/or spiritual practices (D)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider or strengthen students’ commitment to a particular set of beliefs (e.g., Roman Catholic, Buddhist, Calvinist, evangelical) (D)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking own questions</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquiring an interest in learning more by asking my own questions and seeking answers (I)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For 8 discipline-specific goals (identified on the table as “D”):
N = 43 faculty, 1,284 students (77% of those enrolled) from Highly-Efffective group
REL = Religiously-affiliated institutions (n = 31: 16 Protestant, of whom 5 were masters and 11 baccalaureate; 15 Catholic, of whom 1 was research, 2 doctoral, 9 masters, and 3 baccalaureate (Carnegie classifications)
PUB/PNS = Private non-sectarian college (n = 1) and public universities (n = 11: 3 research, 3 doctoral, 5 masters)
For 12 IDEB goals (identified on the table as “I”)
N = 48 faculty from Highly-Efffective group
REL = Religiously-affiliated institutions (n = 34: 17 Protestant, of whom 5 were masters and 12 were baccalaureate; 17 Catholic, of whom 2 were research, 2 doctoral, 10 masters, and 3 baccalaureate (Carnegie classifications)
PUB/PNS = Private non-sectarian colleges (n = 3 baccalaureate) and public universities (n = 11: 3 research, 3 doctoral, 5 masters)
Fac = Percent of the total faculty marking the goal “essential” or “important” (for IDEB) or “essential” or “very important” (for 8 discipline-specific goals)
Stud = Average of the average percentages of all classes, for students marking the goal “essential” or “very important”

A definition of “critical thinking”

I use the term “critical thinking” to refer to a particular type of intellectual activity involving analysis and argument using reason, logic, and evidence. Some faculty in the study used the actual term; others did not. A common academic understanding of critical thinking was articulated by 46 experts from fields of philosophy and education, in a consensus-shaping “Delphi” process conducted by the American Philosophical Association:

We understand critical thinking to be a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. CT is essential as a tool of inquiry. As such, CT is a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one’s personal and civic life. While not synonymous with good thinking, CT is a pervasive and self-rectifying human phenomenon. The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. Thus, educating good critical thinkers means working toward this ideal. It combines developing CT skills with nurturing those dispositions which consistently yield useful insights and which are the basis of a rational and democratic society. (Facione 1990, p. 2)

Also helpful is a critical thinking rubric developed by Facione and Facione (1994), which describes high-scoring student work:

- Accurately interprets evidence, statements, graphics, questions, etc.
- Identifies the salient arguments (reasons and claims) pro and con.
- Thoughtfully analyzes and evaluates major alternative points of view.
- Draws warranted, judicious, non-fallacious conclusions.
- Justifies key results and procedures, explains assumptions and reasons.
- Fair-mindedly follows where evidence and reasons lead.

In line with this work, I employ the umbrella term “critical thinking” to the survey items listed under “critical thinking” in table 1.1. Also relevant is the IDEB item on “learning to apply course material to thinking, problem-solving,
and decisions.” The discussion of faculty goals later in this chapter further illuminates the discipline-specific applications of critical thinking that appear among theology and religion faculty in the study.

**Differences by institution, discipline, or course title**

Undoubtedly, differences in goals can be found within different institutional types, course titles, disciplinary frameworks (theology or religious studies) and other factors. The sample of Highly-Effective classes that ranked the goals is quite small for generalizing about sub-groups, but because it seemed important to get some idea of what differences might exist, Table 1.1 also compares religiously-affiliated institutions with the public/private non-sectarian institutions. However, my point in this study is not to compare all the permutations – how goals in religious studies classes differ from theology classes, or Bible classes from world religions classes, or religiously-conservative schools from religiously-liberal. The sample size and the disparity of goals even within those subgroups prohibit such an undertaking. Rather, my purpose here is to highlight the presence of the “Great Divide,” which appears in all the classes as a group; to point to some differences between public and religiously-affiliated institutions; and above all to urge that faculty members be clear about their own goals and those of their students and conduct a robust dialogue in their classrooms about goals for learning.

**Summary of findings from the survey data**

These are the important findings from the survey data represented in figure 1.1 and Table 1.1:

- **Faculty members’ most frequent goal was critical thinking:** 96 percent of faculty rated the “Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view” item from the IDEA survey as “essential” or “important” (the other choice was “not important”). Of the faculty, 86 percent rated the “Developing general intellectual skills such as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing” item from the discipline-specific survey as “essential” or “very important” (other choices were “somewhat important” and “not important”).

- **Students less frequently chose critical thinking:** “General intellectual skills such as analyzing, evaluation, and synthesizing” is the “critical thinking” item to which faculty and students responded. Though 86 percent of faculty chose this goal as essential or very important, only 64 percent of their students did so. Students chose critical thinking less frequently than they chose

“acquire a body of knowledge: e.g., about the world’s religions, about the Bible” (76 percent), “understand a variety of religious beliefs and practices” (71 percent), and “developing your own moral and ethical values” (68 percent), and about the same as “developing your own religious beliefs and/or spiritual practices” (65 percent). A marked disparity between faculty and students’ choice of “general intellectual skills such as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing” occurred in both religiously-affiliated and public/private non-sectarian institutions, though the disparity was slightly less pronounced in religiously-affiliated ones.

- **Students’ most frequent goals were factual knowledge and understanding various religions/viewpoints:** “Acquire a body of knowledge” (76 percent) and “understand/appreciate a variety of religious beliefs and practices” (71 percent) were the goals students most frequently chose as “essential” or “very important.”

- **Faculty agreed that factual knowledge and understanding various religions/viewpoints are important:** Faculty chose “acquire a body of knowledge” and “understand/appreciate a variety of religious beliefs and practices” at about the same percentages as their students. Given the disparity of other goals, however, it is likely that students and faculty had different ideas about the role of facts – whether to support knowledge of other religions or to support critical thinking.

- **Students chose values and spiritual/religious development much more frequently than faculty.** Even in public and private non-sectarian institutions, more than half the students ranked their own values (54 percent) and religious/spiritual development (51 percent) as “essential” or “very important” course goals. In religiously-affiliated institutions, that number rises to almost three-fourths: 73 percent chose values and 70 percent chose religious/spiritual development. Faculty in both types of institution were much less likely than their students to choose those items as learning goals.

- **One-third or more (32-42 percent) of faculty in religiously-affiliated institutions did not choose “values” or “spiritual/religious development” as a course goal:** The “personal values” item on IDEA is the only one that even remotely addresses the spiritual/religious issues, yet nearly one-third (32 percent) of the faculty in religiously-affiliated introductory theology/religion courses did not choose it as an essential or important course goal. On the list of 8 discipline-specific faculty goals, which adds the words “moral and ethical” to the “values” item, and includes two additional items specifically on religious/spiritual development, nearly half (48 percent) of the faculty at religiously-affiliated institutions did not choose “moral and ethical values” as essential or very important. In a separate calculation not shown on the table, 42 percent of the faculty at religiously-affiliated institutions did not choose any of the three items on
values and religious development that were on the list of eight discipline-specific goals (Appendix D).

- **Two-thirds to three-fourths of faculty in public and private non-sectarian institutions did NOT choose values as a course goal:** On the multi-disciplinary IDEA survey, where "personal values" was the only item addressing values/religious/spiritual development, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of the faculty at public or private non-sectarian institutions did not choose "personal values" as "essential" or "important." On the list of eight discipline-specific faculty goals, which added "moral and ethical" to the "values" item and included two additional items specifically on religious/spiritual development, 75 percent of the public/private non-sectarian faculty did not choose the "values" item and 83–92 percent did not choose the two items on religious/spiritual development, as "essential" or "very important."

- **Faculty distinguished more sharply among different items on values/religion:** Faculty tended to make a sharper distinction than students did among the three items concerning values and religious/spiritual development. For faculty, students' development of moral and ethical values is significantly more often marked as essential or very important than consideration of a particular set of beliefs (44 percent to 26 percent). For students, that disparity is much smaller (68 percent to 57 percent).

- **Faculty valued oral/written expression:** More than three-fourths of the faculty (77 percent) chose this goal as essential or important on the IDEA survey. Though the qualitative data show that few students mention these goals, we do not have student survey data on this item.

- **Student goals were dispersed across a narrower range:** On the eight discipline-specific goals, where we have both faculty and student responses, the lowest goal for faculty has 25 percent of faculty rating it "essential" or "very important," and the highest goal has 86 percent. Student choices range from 52 percent to 76 percent. In other words, faculty as a group tend to express stronger preferences; student responses are spread more evenly across the range of possible goals, perhaps indicating their attempts to integrate various goals, their ambiguity about goals, the disparities among individual students about goals, their compliance to good-sounding goals that appear on a survey administered by their faculty member as part of a research project, or their sense that multiple goals are important.

The qualitative data show a group of students (in the minority, but not miniscule) who determinedly do not want the course to address their religious and spiritual development, as well as students who strongly do – a dichotomy that may help create the smaller spread in student responses. Further, the qualitative data suggest a strong current of ambiguity among the students.

---

**Students’ Goals**

What students meant by their goals becomes more clear upon examination of student reflections, written anonymously in the Highly-Effective classes. Students in the first two terms of data collection wrote during the course about their goals. In the third term, students wrote more extensively, to a fuller prompt, on the very first day of the course before they had seen the syllabus (Appendix G). This analysis relies on both types of writings. When the difference matters, it is indicated. Quotations from students or faculty throughout this volume indicate the Affiliation (public, private non-sectarian, Catholic, or Protestant) according to the AAR Census (2000), and the Carnegie classification (Research, Doctoral, Masters, Baccalaureate. I have used the old classifications. For more information on these classifications, including changes being implemented as this book went to press, see www.Carnegiefoundation.org).

**Students’ most prominent goal: Multi-dimensional growth**

The most prominent finding from the data is that the great majority of students want to "learn," to "grow," to "expand horizons" – words they frequently used. Students writing on the first day of class often expressed multiple goals, both intellectual and spiritual:

> While taking this course I would like to challenge and be challenged spiritually and mentally. I believe it will help me to broaden my horizons, not only in the knowledge I Obtain, but spiritually as well. (Protestant Masters, "Introduction to Sacred Scriptures")

> I am interested in learning not only about religious diversity but also about the underlying themes, origin of ritual and the force that is obviously compelling humans to seek out religion. Hopefully I will also gain a deeper understanding of my own faith and where I stand in the religious world. (Public Masters, "Exploring Religion")

> I am hoping for this course to help interpret the rather deeper meanings to the Bible and Christian life. I'm hoping this course can also help encourage me to become an even more Godly profound woman. I'm also expecting this course to introduce some of the other diverse religions worldwide. I'm looking forward to progress and growth as a student and a firm believer with this course. (Public Research, "Modern Christianities and World Cultures")
Faculty and Student Goals for Learning

The goal I have for this class is that it would deepen my understanding of Scripture. I hope that by studying the Bible in an academic context, it would improve my spiritual life as well. This course will do this by establishing more analytical habits in my daily life, so that instead of just reading the Bible, I begin studying it and deciphering its meaning and application to my life. The only way I expect to be challenged is in growth. (Protestant Masters, "Christian Scriptures")

As a Christian, it is time to learn more about the roots and heritage of religion. A class like this is certain to religiously educate a sheltered Southern Methodist as myself. (Catholic Masters, "Introduction to Biblical Studies")

My boyfriend told me that before I start getting stressed out about meeting all requirements and getting into all psychology classes to remember what college is all about, I realize that there are so many amazing classes that have nothing to do with my psychology major but that would be interesting to take.

I am Christian. I believe in a God, and in His son Jesus. I also believe in the Holy Spirit. It’s amazing though, coming to [this university] has really opened my eyes. As convinced as I am about there being a God, and there being a heaven and hell, other people are just as convinced as there not being a God or an afterlife.

What intrigues me the most is how many different beliefs are out there. I would love to explore them through this class! (Public Research, "Modern Christianities and World Cultures")

This impulse for multi-dimensional growth is an important aspect of the "Great Divide." It provides a basis for the course to help students integrate both the intellectual and the spiritual, both students’ own goals and the goals their professors hold for them. The multi-dimensionality also reflects movement typical of young adults – their move away from reliance on family and church, their need to explore various alternatives and broaden their horizons, and their eagerness to establish their own intellectual and spiritual directions.

One group of students for whom theology/religion classes may be especially complex is what I term “Secure Christians” who express no doubts in their faith. The next section of the chapter explores their goals.

**Types of students**

In the Highly-Effective group, 736 students from 25 institutions responded on the first day of their Highly-Effective classes, before they had seen the syllabus, to a prompt that asked them about their current religious/spiritual beliefs, their goals, whether they expected the course to challenge their beliefs, and how they planned to meet the challenge (Appendix G). Sixty-three percent of those students identified themselves as Christian (or Catholic, Methodist, etc.) without expressing doubts, disagreements, or non-attendance in their Christianity. I call them “Secure Christians,” realizing that the term is problematic, and that these students might have had doubts about their faith which they did not express.

Another 18 percent of students self-described as Christian but expressed doubts, disagreements, or non-attendance: e.g. I am Christian, or I was raised Christian, or my family is Christian, but I have begun to question my faith; I don’t accept all the beliefs of my church; I haven’t been to church in a year. I term these “Doubting Christians.” (The “Doubting Christian” category does not include students who explicitly named another position, e.g., I was raised a Christian but now I’m agnostic or now I have no beliefs.) Nineteen percent self-identified as atheist, agnostic, “no belief,” or adherents of other religions.

This proportion of about 80 percent Christians – both secure and doubting – held basically true for both religiously-affiliated and public institutions. Though terms are somewhat different, this 80 percent is also roughly comparable to the number of students expressing some Christian denomination as a “preference” in the Higher Education Research Institute’s “Spirituality in Higher Education” study, which surveyed 112,232 entering first-year students attending 236 diverse colleges and universities (HERI 2005, table 7).

The 18 percent doubters in the present study compares roughly to the 25 percent of first-year students in the HERI spirituality study who categorized themselves as “doubting” (10 percent) or “conflicted” (15 percent) (HERI 2005, figure 1).

In other words, one could cautiously say that the proportion of students in the Highly-Effective classes is not radically different from the proportions one would likely find across the nation, though any individual class or school might present a different balance. One implication for teachers is that a class in some public institutions may contain as many Christian students as a class in a religiously-affiliated institution.

**Secure Christians expecting challenge to their beliefs**

The prompt for the first day asked students whether they thought the course would “challenge your beliefs.” Students seemed to interpret this to mean that the course would present ideas that called their beliefs into question, and/or that they, themselves, would be vulnerable to having their beliefs changed.
Faculty and Student Goals for Learning

A little over 40 percent of the "secure Christian" students in both public and religiously-affiliated institutions said yes, they expected a challenge. They expressed a variety of attitudes and strategies to deal with the challenge. This next section focuses on the 40 percent of Secure Christians who expected a challenge.

Welcoming a challenge

Some Secure Christians welcome a challenge. They give two reasons: some stress they want to establish independence from the authority of church or parents and to explore new options — a common move for "young adults" as they seek autonomy, the literature suggests.

I have been attending church since I was born. Because of that, religion is in my house, instilled in my personality, and a routine. As you get to a certain point in your life you have to do something called making your faith your own. That's where this class fits in. To know why you believe what you do and why that is the "right" thing to believe, you must first know what other faiths put their beliefs in. I hope by gaining insight into other religions I can see both sides of an argument so I can have the choice of which side is right for me. (Public Masters, "Exploring Religion")

Though these students are moving away from authority-bound positions, they still reflect "dualistic" notions that there is a "right side" to an argument. That same assumption is reflected in students who believe they will become stronger in the faith through meeting challenges. They reflect a notion that an academic course can "test" one's faith and make it stronger, either because one resists the temptation to change, and/or because one uses knowledge to build a stronger basis for one's faith and to eliminate doubt. These statements lack a realization that theorists connect to later-life development — accepting that one must make choices in the face of multiple defensible truth claims and in the face of doubt.

I really hope that this does challenge my beliefs, because faith needs to be tested. (Protestant Baccalaureate, "Introduction to the Bible")

I do expect this course to challenge my beliefs since I am limited in my knowledge. But I plan to deal with these obstacles without fear and overcome them. I believe doubts in one's beliefs can be good because it allows one to study and research in order for the doubt to be eliminated,

Faculty and Student Goals for Learning

...thus making the individual (word omitted: stronger?) in his/her beliefs. (Public Research, "Modern Christianities and World Cultures")

Wanting challenge yet guidance

Though students often express a desire to come independently to their own ideas and beliefs, they also express the desire for community, connection, and mentoring — aspects that Parks (2000) highlights as typical of young adult development.

I want the chance to explore, to be challenged with what I know to be true. I don't want someone just to give me a book and say, "here, read this and interpret it for yourself." I also don't want someone to give me a book and say, "read this and it means..." I want a middle between the two, I want to interpret for myself but be able to ask questions and hear what others have to say. (Protestant Masters, "Christian Scriptures")

Many Secure Christians, then, say they welcome challenge, but for somewhat different reasons — seeking independence and choice, or believing that testing can strengthen their faith. Either position may still carry "dualistic" elements. Students may seek both challenge and guidance. The ambiguity of their positions is typical of "young adult" development.

Secure Christians' strategies for meeting challenges

Whether they welcome challenge or only expect it to happen, Secure Christians exhibit a number of strategies by which they plan to meet the challenges. The first strategies discussed below are primarily intended to ward off change and help the student "keep the faith." Next are strategies that leave open the possibility of change and even begin to envision the use of "critical thinking" in relationship to faith.

Secure Christians' strategies: Keep the faith

The first group of Secure Christian students' strategies focuses on helping students resist change by compartmentalizing the course or the intellect from any relationship to belief; by relying on authorities such as God, the Bible and family; by relying on strength of feeling; by using evidence to back up feelings; by heroic affirmation of one's faith against all challenges; and by engaging in dialogue but sticking to one's own beliefs and/or trying to convert others. The voice here is
Faculty and Student Goals for Learning

that of the Believer, sometimes cast almost as Ulysses and the Sirens, facing a world tempting but dangerous:

- **Compartmentalize**: I expect this course to be a basic study of the different types of religion throughout the world. I plan to learn what is needed to get a good grade. I am a Baptist and grew up in a land where the Baptist ways were taught. I do believe that if I do as God has planned for me and obey his words then Heaven is where I will go after death here on earth. I am sure this course will challenge my beliefs because not all religions believe the way the Baptists do. I will plan to learn the way the teacher wants to put on paper, although nothing will ever change my beliefs of God. (Public Masters, “The Nature of Religion”)

- **Rely on feelings**: I do not expect this course to challenge my beliefs, but to only strengthen them. I base my personal beliefs on faith and how it feels in my heart, not by what I can prove with evidence. (Protestant Masters, “Christian Scriptures”)

- **Rely on Bible, prayer**: My current spiritual beliefs: I am part of a non-denominational Christian Church, we have Bible study every Wednesday night and meet together Sunday mornings. I believe in living for God each day and strive to be more Christ like each day. God is very important to me. I think this course will help me to understand other religions better, what they believe, and why they believe those things, so I can look to the Bible and understand better and relate to other people. I think the course may challenge my beliefs, help me to think in a deeper way, see things in a different light. The way I would deal with that is to look to the Bible and see if it is Biblical and to definitely pray about it. (Public Masters, “Religions of the World”)

- **Rely on family, church**: I do not think this course will challenge my beliefs, but if it does I plan to talk with my family or church about any questions I will have. (Catholic Masters, “Theology 200: Ultimate Questions”)

Some students plan simply to stick with their own beliefs and keep the faith, despite anything that might appear in the teaching or dialogue of the course:

- **Stick with my beliefs**: I think my beliefs might be challenged, and I hope to stick with my beliefs. They were instilled in me as a child, so I hope they’ll hold up as an adult. (Public Masters, “Religions of the World”)

- **Keep the faith**: I think that every religion course will challenge your beliefs not challenge but pressure your beliefs. I plan to keep the faith that’s how I’m going to deal with it. (Protestant Baccalaureate, “Introduction to World Religions: The West [Judaism and Islam”)

Faculty and Student Goals for Learning

The words “open mind” are very common in students’ reflections, but may mean different things, including listening to others but holding fast to their own beliefs anyway: “I do expect to have this course challenge my beliefs and to deal with this I plan on being open minded, but stick up and follow what I believe in” (Protestant Masters, “Introduction to Sacred Scriptures”).

Several students intend a one-sided dialogue in which they try to “convert” others:

In this course I want to learn the differences in all the cultures and compare the differences to mine. I want to be able to learn the differences in Christianity. I am a Christian and my goal here on this Earth is to serve God and make disciples of all nations. I think there will be some challenges because other beliefs will be introduced to me. Although I won’t change my religion, I will have to learn how to argue that Christianity is true and that Jesus Christ died for us on the cross. Later in the future I would like to debate with my non-Christian friends to hopefully convert them to Christianity. (Public Research, “Modern Christianities and World Cultures”)

Secure Christians’ strategies: Limited kinds of “critical thinking”

So far, the various strategies Secure Christians use for meeting challenges to their beliefs have focused on protecting the student’s beliefs from change. The next group of strategies I broadly collect under the umbrella term “critical thinking.” In their anonymous in-class writings (as opposed to survey answers), only 8 percent of the students spontaneously mention any form of “critical thinking” in any context. Almost no students display a well-articulated, detailed concept of how analysis, argument, evidence, and logic might shape their faith or how critical thinking would interact with prayer, reading the Bible, listening to authority figures, or other ways of knowing. This section explores the limited ways in which students do express the intention to use “critical thinking.”

First, some students exhibit one or more of four attitudes that form a basis for critical thinking: 1) being open to change; 2) wanting to understand the opposing view; 3) wanting to “study it for myself;” and 4) wanting to ask questions. These categories emerge from the data, but are consistent with the dispositions associated with “critical thinking” (Facione 1990).

Attitudes: A basis for critical thinking

- **Open to change**: My religion is Lutheran. I am very active in my church and I am greatly influenced by it. I rely on God very much and consider it to be
an important part of my life. I hope that in this course, it will challenge my current beliefs and open my mind to other ideas and beliefs. I don’t want to be afraid of the challenges. I want to see them as ways I can grow in my religion and beliefs. (Public Masters, “Exploring Religion”)

- **Understand others**: I hope to be able to train my eyes and ears to be sensitive to my surroundings. To be able to put myself into the viewpoints of others and to try to see life from their point of view. To be able to understand the forces that influence their history, culture, and also economic and political aspects of life. (Public Masters, “The Nature of Religion”)

- **Study for myself**: I expect this course to confirm my beliefs [Christian] and teach me new things that I have not yet discovered for myself in the Bible. If something comes up that challenges my beliefs, I will study it for myself and decide if things will change. (Protestant Masters, “Christian Scriptures”)

- **Ask questions**: My own religion of Catholicism has always intrigued me. I have always asked many questions about the faith and how things began and why. Through this class I hope to discover some of the origins behind different religions and in doing so find some answers to my questions. (Public Masters, “Exploring Religion”)

Vague references to “thinking academically”

In addition to these four foundational attitudes – openness to change, understanding others’ viewpoints, thinking for oneself, and asking questions – some students envision how critical thinking strategies might change, confirm, or nourish their own religious and spiritual lives. Within the 8 percent of students who mention critical thinking processes in some way, many only hint broadly at academic processes such as “think it through,” “take an educated view,” “think academically about God,” or they may refer to “knowledge,” “analysis,” “evidence,” “reason,” and “logic,” without explaining how these intellectual activities will work.

I am a Christian and understand how Christians view God but would like to understand how others do. I have never really academically thought about God and thus it will be very interesting to experience a different angle of God. (Private Non-Sectarian Baccalaureate, “The Experience of God”)

I am unsure in what ways this course will challenge me, but I do expect it to. When it does I will need to stay calm and work through with reason and logic as best as I can. (Protestant Masters, “Christian Scriptures”)

**Limited uses of critical thinking**

Beyond vague references, some students express more specific ways in which critical thinking might relate to their religious beliefs or help to form them. These include providing a concrete basis for belief, using evidence to back up feelings, separating fact from fiction, and using new information to expand on old. All these strategies are limited or naive in some ways. The following student looks for a “concrete basis,” again reflecting the hope expressed by an earlier student that doubt can be eliminated and faith can be cemented in place:

“I would hope this course does challenge my beliefs and that I will be able to work through those challenges. When the course is finished I think I will have a more concrete background of my belief than before” (Protestant Masters, “Introduction to Sacred Scripture”).

The next student, similarly, looks for evidence, not to shape a considered position but to back up feelings. The feelings seem to come first: “I am sure that this course will challenge my beliefs, but through this challenge I hope to become an even stronger Christian. The challenge this course will provide will force me to realize and use evidence to back up my points and feelings” (Protestant Baccalaureate College, “History of Christian Thought”).

The next student operates with two very limited and insufficient categories – fact or fiction: “I would like to understand religion more and help differ from fact and fiction” (Public Masters, “Religions of the World”).

A final student faces “relativism” (everyone has their own opinions), and plans not to reason about other views, but to “fall back on what I know,” though the statement then goes on to suggest using new information to expand. The student ends with the belief cited earlier, that challenge makes faith stronger, but this time the words are “learn” and “grow” – a more open view:

I hope that this course will challenge my beliefs. I know that everyone has their own opinions about religion and the Bible. To deal with the challenge I plan to fall back on what I know and use the new information to expand on that. I think everyone’s beliefs should be challenged. That is how you learn more about them and grow spiritually. (Protestant Masters, “Introduction to Sacred Scripture”)

The positions outlined so far – exhibiting the four attitudes basic to critical thinking, and envisioning limited modes of critical thinking – are predominant among the small proportion of students who mention critical thinking at all. Primarily, this is what a faculty member can expect to see in a classroom. There do appear in the data, however, a few students who exhibit more robust notions of critical thinking and its relation to religious and spiritual development. The
data do not allow identification of the age of each responding student, but several of these students reveal biographical facts that indicate they are older than the usual 18-year-old college entrant.

More robust uses of critical thinking

These few students mention strategies for critical thinking that are closer to the definitions and goals of the faculty. The first student articulates a classic view of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Operating within a faith which is “the defining feature of my life,” the student intends to “think critically” to understand the Bible better, define terms, and find “biblically-based” answers to replace “opinions”:

I am entering this class in a different context than most of the other students, so my goals may (or may not) look different from the other students. I entered this institution as a Freshman, but took a few years off to get married and have a baby, so one of the main goals is to re-introduce my mind to the world of academic thinking, of thinking critically, as opposed to the instructive thought of motherhood. I believe that there is nothing more important than the ability to think critically, backed by knowledge, about one’s faith, and even after two decades of being a Christian, I hope to come away from this class with a better understanding of the Bible and more richly define words we Christians so often throw around and a clear biblically-based answer to some of my stronger opinions – which really are then just opinions – regarding issues with the church.

I am looking forward to the class and expecting a challenge, both spiritually and practically. But since my faith is, as it should be, the defining feature of my life, I’m ready. (Protestant Masters, “Christian Scriptures”)

One of the most interesting statements comes from this student who begins to envision a complex way of using critical thinking, hoping the course will provide “tools/options with which to negotiate my personal beliefs.”

My religion is Catholicism. I’m constantly on the search for answers to unanswerable questions and often times run into personal beliefs that seemingly contradict my religion. I enjoy and hope to continue reconciling the two. This course will help me think about much of what I’ve been taught about religion in a new way and give me more tools/options with which to negotiate my personal beliefs. I most definitely expect the course to challenge my beliefs. I plan to deal with it open-mindedly and enthusiastically. (Private Non-Sectarian Baccalaureate, “The Experience of God”)

Conclusions about students

What can the faculty member expect to find as learning goals for students in his or her classroom? I’ve not treated here those few students who only say they just want to get a good grade or fulfill a requirement. The data suggest that that’s part of the motivation for many students, but most students in the sample said, or also said, that they expected to grow and learn. Students may appear silent, even withdrawn, or they may focus on grades, but the data reveal that students are thinking and learning: “there’s a lot going on beneath the surface,” as one faculty member said. Students’ desire to learn and grow is the most important fact for the faculty member to keep in mind.

One type of student for whom the class might be problematic was Secure Christian students who expected the course to challenge their beliefs. This discussion has devoted special attention to that group. Secure Christians, whether they welcomed challenge or not, had strategies to meet the challenge, including strategies to allow them to “keep the faith,” strategies that indicated readiness for critical thinking, strategies that envisioned limited types of critical thinking, and, for a very few students, more robust notions of how critical thinking might help to shape their religious and spiritual development. One can speculate about the influences that lie behind these limited understandings of critical thinking and students’ failure, for the most part, to even mention critical thinking in their open-ended in-class writings. Influences surely include contemporary US culture’s emphasis on religion as an individual, emotional experience; the culture’s anti-intellectualism and its suspicion of the academy; in some cases, students’ religious communities’ emphasis on faith as contrary to intellect, and their fear that questioning is wrong; the fact-focused emphasis of their previous schooling; and their own developmental need to let the self learn to speak without reference to external tools or frames.

In addition to Secure Christians in all their diversity, most classrooms, even at religiously-affiliated institutions, also had Doubting Christians, students who said they had “no beliefs,” Muslims, atheists, agnostics, and more, all going in their various directions. The presence in a single classroom of all these students coming from different worlds, traveling in different directions, and speaking with many voices, challenges the faculty member to be thoughtful and purposeful about articulating goals for student development. The next section will examine the learning goals formulated by Highly-Effective faculty in the study.
Faculty Goals

Table 1.1 presented the survey data on goals for faculty in both the Data Base and Highly Effective groups. This section draws on the qualitative data for the Highly-Effective faculty, who reflected in more detail upon their goals. Though goals were affected by the faculty member’s own background, by disciplinary frame (e.g., theology, religious studies), by course title, and by institutional type, some common themes emerged.

Common themes

Highly-Effective faculty were characterized by:

1. careful articulation of goals;
2. attempts to understand student goals and to discuss goals with students;
3. a concern for students, keen observation about students’ situations and needs;
4. a commitment to nurture students’ development beyond mere acquisition of factual knowledge, though faculty took different degrees of responsibility and different approaches for nurturing students’ spiritual and religious journeys;
5. a commitment not to force students into any particular belief or practice, but to invite questions and provide tools to explore the questions;
6. a view of themselves, their students, and religious practices as developing and evolving, not static;
7. a desire for students to engage actively with the course material, their peers, and the faculty member (when faculty were asked an open-ended question about what traits of their students they liked least [Appendix D], they nearly always mentioned students who were disengaged, not students who failed to learn X or Y); and
8. an emphasis on what this study broadly calls “critical thinking.”

“Critical thinking”

This chapter earlier defined “critical thinking,” referencing statements of national consensus and using the survey items from this study. Qualitative data reveal more detail about how teachers of introductory theology and religion describe the collection of intellectual tasks I term “critical thinking.” These intellectual tasks include:

- analysis of the cultural, historical, economic, sociological, political, ideological, linguistic, literary, symbolic, and other aspects of religious beliefs, texts, and practices;
- use of evidence and reason to reach conclusions and to formulate and critique arguments;
- use of multiple perspectives to understand an issue; and
- the achievement of interpretive distance from their own autobiographies and communities.

Attitudes, dispositions, and habits of mind that accompany these activities are:

- the belief that it is desirable, not disloyal or dangerous, to question, critique, and change one’s own former beliefs and assumptions, whether religious and/or intellectual;
- a respectful recognition that positions other than one’s own may contain truth, and that “truth” itself is highly complex;
- abandonment of simplistic, stereotypical views of those different from oneself;
- a view of religions, societies, and their own spiritual/intellectual lives as not static but developing and changing; and
- reliance on one’s self, in addition to authorities such as parents, church, and others, to determine one’s beliefs and commitments.

“Sub rosa” goals and “let it happen” goals

Sometimes, course goals that concerned changes in students’ attitudes were not stated formally, but revealed by the faculty in their journals or conversations. Here is part of the journal of a faculty member teaching “Introduction to Biblical Literature” at a public research university:

> While I have specific academic goals in mind for my students . . . of greater importance to me is a goal I don’t explicitly state but underlies my pedagogy: I want students to gain a sense of the Bible as the product of specific cultures and eras—ones far different from ours—so that . . . they will be less inclined to use the Bible as an absolute standard to hold over another person or as a tool to bend their will to their own agenda.

On the survey of eight discipline-specific goals, this faculty member marked “Take or be inclined to take action for a better world” as “very important,” and
Faculty and Student Goals for Learning

wrote in the margin “Not an explicitly-stated goal, but is an aim in my teaching via ideological critique of biblical texts.”

Such “sub rosa” goals appear in both public and religiously-affiliated institutions. They typically express the hope that students will:

- not merely use critical thinking in an academic way, but act on what they learn;
- not necessarily adopt, but at least consider, a particular world-view (this might be the Enlightenment world-view of the critical thinker, and/or, at religiously-affiliated institutions, a particular set of religious beliefs and practices);
- recognize the complexity of all “truth” claims;
- transcend what faculty call “bias,” “stereotypes,” or “prejudice” – unidimensional, simplistic, often negative views of cultures or religions;
- acknowledge the situatedness of religious beliefs, practices, and texts; and
- respect and consider points of view with which they may disagree.

“Let it happen” goals are similar to “sub rosa” goals in that they are not stated formally in the syllabus. They are actually not even goals. They are outcomes the faculty members are content, even happy, to see realized, but from which they deliberately keep hands off. One faculty member who teaches “The Nature of Religion” at a public masters institution circles the survey goal statements that address religious beliefs, values, and taking action for a better world (items c, f, g, and h on survey, Appendix D). To explain, the faculty member writes:

May all happen and would be a plus – e.g., understanding and appreciation of a variety of religions probably would increase one’s own appreciation for one’s own religion. [These goals] would all probably happen from any well taught course in literature, history, sociology, etc. But I am not a pastor and I do not have the spiritual growth of my students directly in mind as I prepare and teach a course. A course in religious studies may increase “faith and commitment” in a particular student and/or it may decrease or destroy faith and commitment. Either outcome would be valid and perhaps desirable for that given student.

The existence of “sub rosa” and “let it happen” goals suggests that the “Great Divide” between students who want to work on their religious and spiritual lives, and faculty who do not choose that aspect as a goal, is complex. It’s not so much that there are clearly defined camps, but that, for faculty, goals related to students’ spiritual and religious development are complex, multi-layered, not well-defined, and perhaps uncomfortable to formally articulate. Yet, as Chapter

3 will show, faculty often arrange their pedagogical practices to create spaces for these goals to be addressed and for students to achieve their own goals for spiritual and religious development. It’s a complicated picture.

Allowing some goals to operate at the “sub rosa” and “let it happen” levels serves several purposes for faculty: it manages a faculty member’s concern about where the line is between inviting students to explore new worlds and unduly pressuring them. It keeps possibly controversial goals out of the line of anyone’s fire. It provides a private space where developing goals and thoughts can be worked out. It brings otherwise unarticulated assumptions and motives into consciousness. It keeps the stated, formal course goals relatively simple, concentrating on critical thinking tools and attitudes that are widely accepted in the academy.

However, some faculty in the study recognize the situated nature of those widely accepted critical-thinking goals, too.

Critical thinking as a situated goal

Here are two faculty musing about the situatedness of all classroom goals, including the principles of “critical thinking,” which the faculty member identifies with the Enlightenment:

Why are we so sure or secure in Enlightenment principles? Shouldn’t our prejudices be critically looked at? This seems to be the elephant in the room. It is so big and so prevalent, it must be right. I’m not sure. Particularly because it is hard to define (sign of ideological muddling); it is taken for granted (sign of political power); it assumes a professional class that is taken care of (sign of acute privilege); it also tends to question group allegiances (sign of indifference to political affiliations, sign of a leisureed class). Trust me, I like all the privileges of my class, but shouldn’t these be questioned, and why are we trying to reproduce our prejudices with such equanimity and pride! (Public Research, “Introduction to World Religions”)

Of course, ironically for a person who tries really hard to check his own biases at the classroom door, all of these goals are my own biases coming home to roost. The goals are ultimately about what is important, what is “real” for me. So I, like my students, have to do quite a lot of meta-thinking in order to nosce meipsum, and constantly check that my goals for them are in their best interest (as best I am able to surmise what is best for them). It is a daunting and exceedingly rewarding responsibility. (Public Doctoral, “Introduction to World Religions”)
Faculty and Student Goals for Learning

I don’t think it’s necessarily bad to have several levels of goals, at both formal and informal levels. I don’t think it’s bad that different faculty have diverse goals. I don’t think critical thinking is a bad goal—just situated and complicated like all goals. I think that the religion/theology faculty in this study are doing an admirable job of trying to articulate learning goals in an academy deeply conflicted about how to address students’ religious and spiritual development. The answer to this complexity, I believe, is “quite a lot of meta-thinking” about one’s goals—their underlying assumptions and values, and one’s reasons for choosing them—as well as conversation with one’s students about learning goals. Those who educate future faculty, who hold workshops for faculty, who mentor faculty, or who organize conversations about higher education’s role in students’ religious and spiritual development can help faculty members to articulate all their goals, to analyze the assumptions and agendas behind those goals, to share them with other faculty, and to plan effective classroom conversations about goals. A resource especially helpful in examining assumptions behind goals and pedagogy is Brookfield (1995).

Cases: Constructing Goals, Discussing them with Students

This section uses three case studies to explore with greater specificity the issues of faculty goals: their rhetorical framing, their content, and faculty members’ ways of conducting conversations with student about goals. These cases are useful for several purposes:

- providing concrete examples and illustrations of the general findings about goals that emerged from the other data; and
- modeling how faculty members can subject their own goals to careful analysis and can plan conversations with students about goals.

To highlight differences in goals among faculty even in similar disciplinary frames, I have chosen three faculty who teach “Bible” courses—one in a public research university, one in a Catholic masters-level university, and one in a Protestant baccalaureate college. The cases demonstrate how each teacher shapes goals and engages students in dialogue about goals.

The issue of “voice” is an ongoing theme in this study. In the following cases, and in the chapters on pedagogy, frequent questions will be: What “voice” does the student bring to the classroom—the voice of the dutiful memorizer, the believer, the seeker? What voices does the faculty member encourage—the critical thinker? The believer who uses critical thinking? What voices are present in the classroom? Which voices are privileged? How does the faculty member create structures and spaces for these various voices and for the integration of critical thinking with students’ own values and their religious and spiritual development?

Case 1: Prof. Sorrell: “Biblical Literature” in a Public Research university

Prof. Sorrell [a pseudonym] teaches “Biblical Literature” focusing on the “Hebrew Bible” in a public research university. He has received high honors in his department and university-wide for the quality of his teaching in the introductory course.

Goals

In a written reflection, he reveals how his thinking about the course has grown and changed over time, as he wrestles with how to help his students relate to these ancient texts.

After graduating from seminary in 1977, I harbored a desire to deepen my understanding of how the Bible came into existence, the cultures in which it is rooted, and the languages in which it is written. Even as a pastor I was concerned with helping my congregation(s) understand the Bible within those contexts, and thereby help delineate in what ways its writings could be utilized by people of faith today... When I began teaching “Introduction to Biblical Literature” in the fall semester of 1991, I saw my role as helping students gain exposure to conclusions biblical scholars draw about the origins of the literature of the Hebrew Bible and its cultural-historical environment. While that remains central to my work in this class, I have also seen the need to help students understand the literary shape of the Bible. By that I mean, not simply to help them understand how a piece of biblical literature evolved over time, but also to what effect. What is gained for the reader by knowing, for instance, that P expanded J’s narrative in Genesis? How is the reader affected by realizing that v. 7 in Amos 3 was supplied by an editor/redactor?

Since first teaching the course, I have also become convinced of the need to acknowledge critical differences in perspective between our day and that of the author(s) and first recipients of this literature. For instance, how does our reading of the patriarchal narratives from the concerns of feminism highlight concerns that would not have been uppermost to the author(s)? How do our convictions about abuse of children affect our reading of the sacrifice of Isaac?
clear about how they believe their institutions and their classrooms can help students develop as whole persons, bringing together their intellectual and spiritual worlds.

Specifically, faculty members in their own classes can ask themselves, or share in discussion with their colleagues, questions such as:

1. What are my goals for student learning?
2. Do I have "sub rosa" and/or "let it happen" goals? What are they? Am I content to leave them in that state, or would it be better to state them more formally?
3. How will students understand the goals I state on my syllabus? Will they get the meanings I intend?
4. What are the ideological and political implications of the goals I have adopted?
5. What does "critical thinking" mean to me, and how do I believe students can use critical thinking to shape their own religious and spiritual practices and beliefs?
6. How do I want to structure the conversation with the students about my goals and their goals? In what forum should their goals be elicited? Anonymous or not? As goals, concerns, hopes/apprehensions, or some other frame? How will I handle student goals the course cannot address?
7. What voices for students do my goals imply?

Appendix H presents suggestions for those planning workshops, study groups, or teaching seminars in which present or future faculty work on their own courses.
Student suggestions

Three students' suggestions focus on clarity: more Powerpoint, "tie extraneous thoughts to the topic," and "more relation to the text that we are reading."

Prof. Bhattacharyya has a gift for creative classroom exercises that stimulate discussion. Students believe the discussion helps them understand and apply the course material, think critically, and "figure out what they were trying to say." At one point in her journal, she considered that the clarity issues might be addressed if she put her typed notes (outlines) on-line for students' reference. In subsequent semesters, she has continued posting the outlines, which students appreciate. The challenge is to figure out what elements are critical to her unique classroom style, and to student learning, and keep those, while taking steps that reduce the amount of grading she has to do on the portfolios.

The next faculty member, Prof. Jones, is teaching "Introduction to Religion" - a bit different frame than Simmons or Bhattacharyya. Jones, like the others, though, brings student voices into the classroom in a significant way, and, like Bhattacharyya, she spends a great deal of time responding to student writing, but she puts all this together in a different way. Especially different is her way of bringing student writing into the classroom as the focus of discussion, and making students responsible for leading class discussion.

Prof. Jones

"Introduction to religion," protestant baccalaureate institution, 25 students

Prof. Katherine Jancic Jones [her real name] was teaching at Transylvania University at the time of this study (she has since moved to Wofford College). Transylvania's mission statement lists its "affiliation" with the "Christian Church (Disciplines of Christ), whose ideals of tolerance and freedom of inquiry the College shares," but the statement does not otherwise mention Christianity (www.transy.edu/about/content/mission.asp).

She focuses her course on the question "What is religion?" using four books that address that issue in complex and provocative ways. She uses student essays as a major forum for conversation, not only responding to them in writing but integrating them very closely into the class sessions. She also makes student groups responsible for leading class discussion.

She writes in a statement submitted for a campus teaching award, "The clearest change [in my teaching over the years] is that I have given up some of the control of the class. Inspired by Jane Tompkins' A Life in School: What the Teacher
Small Classes in World Religions, Introduction to Religion

Learned, I now turn things over to the students more often, trying to give them more responsibility for, and a feeling of ownership of, the material. As we will see, this class is anything but out of control. Rather, I would say that the control of the classroom is being exercised in a different way, with extensive but structured expectations for student contribution and leadership. I focus here on her use of student work, together with the student-led discussions, and her ways of integrating critical thinking with personal reflection.

Course goals

Goals are listed in the syllabus:

- Familiarity with the basic lexicon of the discipline of religious studies.
- Familiarity with some of the methodologies and theoretical models employed in the discipline.
- An enhanced ability to think through and articulate the meaning and implications of religious claims.
- An increased understanding of some of the problems inherent in studying religion(s) comparatively and/or cross-culturally.

Assignments; use of class time

The assignments in this class are so tightly interwoven with class time that the two must be explained together as a unit.

The focus of the course is to define "religion." Students read and discuss four texts, in this order: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion; Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion; Martin Buber, I and Thou; and Myla Goldberg, Bee Season.

The first paper is due on the second day of class -- a definition of "religion."

These are the instructions:

Write on the following (minimum of one page, typed, double-spaced):

What does the term religion mean? You may define the term yourself or use a dictionary. If you choose to do the latter, be sure to cite the dictionary you use, state whether or not you agree with the definition, and explain why. If you define the term yourself, explain why you are defining it that way. Then, please address the following: Do you consider yourself to be a religious person? Why or why not?

Personal disclosure is here related to academic inquiry -- a pattern that will be repeated, as we will see below.

The first six weeks are devoted to reading and discussing Wilfred Cantwell Smith's book -- a discussion led by Jones in a way that prepares her students to lead discussion later on. She typically asks students to write something, either in-class or outside, which becomes the starting point. Here is her report of two class sessions in the Cantwell Smith portion of the class:

Sept. 12: In Chapter 2 of The Meaning and End of Religion, Smith tries to discern what the term religion has meant by looking at the use of the term religio by many, many authors in Western (European) Christendom. This is a really tough, potentially mind-numbing chapter. So, I tell them to read for the forest rather than the trees; that I will not test them on the specifics of what each thinker talks about. They do need to read the whole chapter (but just keep going if something seems irredeemably opaque -- just mark it and we'll talk about it), but what I ask them to do is be responsible for one thinker (and I assign these in [the previous] class). They will be asked to explain, in class, what Smith says about how that thinker used the term religio. This, I think, makes it less intimidating, and it allows us to do a close reading of the text without my lecturing for two days straight and putting everyone to sleep, including myself. It seems that this exercise also empowers them a little, because they're usually impressed with what they're able to figure out. And I try to make each person's contribution sound really good, if I can, even if it's like wringing water from a stone. I also tell them it's okay to say, "I have no idea what he's talking about here."

This book, really, can make or break the entire semester. I spend a lot of time telling them that this is a ridiculously hard book, and that I read it for my qualifying exams in graduate school, but that I will walk them through it. I don't expect them to get every little detail. Once they get over the fear, they generally do a fantastic job with the book, and it's great to watch them sort of take possession of the book. Chapter 2, though, is the "make or break" chapter in terms of class morale, I think. So, this task of going through each of the thinkers generally takes two class periods. I sit down with them in the class circle, rather than standing as I usually do. When we get through with it, I often congratulate them like they've just come through boot camp, and tell them that the worst is over.

Notice here that students are being asked to make reports, in class, on a small portion of the Cantwell Smith chapter -- a preparation for their larger responsibilities later, when groups of students will lead class discussion of a portion of a different book. Note, too, that student preparation has been enforced, students
have had to talk, but no paper-grading has been generated – one way to address the paper load issues that a strategy like Bhattacharyya’s portfolio generates. Students in this class are being asked to be persistent readers of difficult philosophical material.

In a later class, students are asked to conduct philosophical thinking themselves, this time working from a paper they write before class, which Prof. Jones does grade, and on which she makes a short final comment, and perhaps a few marginal notes.

October 5: This was one of those days that makes all the bad, frustrating days seem worthwhile. It was fantastic. It’s generally in this chapter (“Is the concept adequate”) that things start to come together, and this is also the chapter that contains some of my favorite passages. They just got it . . . The class’ writing assignment for today (it was a take-home assignment) was the following prompt: “On p. 142, Smith writes, ‘For us, words and concepts are to be defined, while things cannot be.’ Then on p. 146, he discusses his ‘contention that one cannot define what exists.’ What in the world is he talking about? Does this make any sense? Explain what you take him to mean from within the context of this chapter.”

Sample student paper

When I read the material needed to respond to this prompt, I was perplexed. It seemed as if Smith contradicted himself constantly. Yet as paradoxical as all his claims seem to be initially, they become more logical when the reader deduces the statements’ opposite claims. A good example can be found in his statement, “We may define anything at all, provided only that it doesn’t exist.” This baffled me at first, as did all his other arguments, but for adequate comprehension, it helps if the reader reverses it by saying that if it doesn’t exist, we can define it and if it does exist, we can’t define it. Simplifying the statements that are confusing really helps. However, applying these standards to the concept of religion can prove to add to the confusion initiated by the earlier statement. Taking into account a second statement Smith makes provides a great example of this way of comprehending the text. It also helped me understand the statement given on the prompt and formulate my response. My response, however, branches away from the statement on the prompt, touching on it but expanding on it as well (I hope that’s okay!) [Prof writes “Of course!”]

Smith states on p. 146 that “Whatever exists mundanely cannot be defined; whatever can be defined does not exist.” At first, I took this statement to mean if whatever exists mundanely cannot be defined, then we must think of religion as a transcendental ideal rather than one of mundane nature and therefore it can be defined. But if it can be defined, according to Smith, it doesn’t exist. In light of this paradox, Smith seemed to be claiming that religion didn’t exist. However, after utilizing the method of comprehension described earlier, I drew the following conclusions on the assumptions of the statement: Religion can’t be defined specifically, in the sense that it cannot be given a concrete definition since it is interpreted in various ways according to personal experience. Therefore, it exists. Using the same statement, since it cannot be defined, it must exist mundanely.

On the other hand, this didn’t seem right to me. It seemed that it was actually false [explains why the idea seems false].

In conclusion, considering this formation of so many different religions, the conclusion that since religion exists, it must exist mundanely, seems more logical. In the same way, going back to Smith’s statement on the prompt, religion cannot be defined, therefore it must exist. And if things cannot be defined, it must exist as a thing. Things are mundane, therefore it must exist mundanely.

[Prof: Well done! You did everything you were supposed to; you followed your ideas around and used a close reading of the text to help you figure things out. Good for you.]

Professor’s journal continues

Because they had written on this question for today’s class, I was hoping the pump was primed for the following in-class exercise. I began by asking them to think for a few minutes (or they could write, but I wouldn’t be collecting their writing) on the following: “think in terms of my asking you to define another term for me, but this time, you are to insert your name. In other words, answer this question: Who are you? Define yourself.”

It worked beautifully, thank goodness, because this really could have gone either way. The first student who volunteered with her response said she started to answer in terms of adjectives, but then applied what Cantwell Smith said in the reading about needing a new rubric/method for thinking about the term religion – one that makes a distinct division between what he calls faith and what he calls cumulative tradition. I could’ve hugged her.
Small Classes in World Religions, Introduction to Religion

What came up throughout the course of the conversation was the sense that we all have the inner parts of ourselves that are the truest parts of who we are (and I talked to them about the difference between necessity and contingency - somehow this came up and seemed relevant at the time), and then the outer parts which are contingent. These parts are also "true," but don't necessarily speak to the truest parts of us. However, others tend to define us in terms of externals, while we tend to define ourselves in terms of feelings, experiences, "ineffables." But, as I pointed out, the way others perceive us often impacts how we perceive ourselves, so there develops a symbiotic relationship between others' perceptions of us and our perceptions of ourselves. In addition, that inner "truest" part of ourselves, to which only we have absolute and incontrovertible access, also changes through time (according to our changing moods, needs, etc.) - so is this part really necessary or contingent (i.e., does the idea of necessity entail unchangeability)? Or is this even the right way to think about it?

This is precisely the point Cantwell Smith is making with regard to religion and the religions: the problems with trying to find and pin down essences (in a Feuerbachian sense), e.g., "true" Christianity, the "real" Islam, etc. I read aloud the following passages, and asked them to follow along: pp. 122, 124 (and endnote 301), to 127, and then the part about God "not giving a fig about Christianity." Some of the students actually said they felt like clapping (for Smith) after I read that quotation. Another raised her hand after I read a passage from the book, and she said, "You know, as I read this, I thought, 'this is like the way I defined religion in my first paper,' and I was so surprised to find - well, that someone else thought the same way." Yahoo! . . . What a switch from my first semester teaching this course several years ago, when a student complained that I "talked too much."

This pattern - having students write about an issue or question and then studying what scholars say - is basic to the course.

"Doc Jones" is such an intellectual and insightful person, you can’t help but learn from her. She leads many discussions in the class that also allow students to take live action in the class, such as lead a class discussion, or basically just volunteer and say what you think. This increases my learning environment by allowing myself to take a more active role, and if different people are constantly talking, you always listen because you’re never bored.

Small Classes in World Religions, Introduction to Religion

The student's voice in the paper is that of a thinker, pondering definition, categories, and arguments in the same spirit as Cantwell Smith does. Students also are asked, in this course, to make constant connections between the readings for the course and their own issues of identity or their own definitions of religion.

It's important to note, too, that Jones also attends to issues of clarity and of helping students prepare for tests. She reports using a whole class day in October to talk about the upcoming test on Cantwell Smith. She gives students a detailed study guide and some sample questions.

Student-led discussion

Beginning with the second book, in the seventh week, students in groups of two to four (usually four) are assigned to lead discussion: three groups on Eliade (each group covering a section of the book), one on Buber (a particular section), and two on Goldberg (two sections). Here are the instructions for the groups:

Each person in the group will need to email a list of reading-related questions to me and to the others in your group twenty-four hours in advance of the class to which you are assigned. I will then respond to these questions, perhaps by suggesting one that you should focus on in class. Others in the group should also feel free to respond, via email, to the questions suggested by your peers. You are required to meet with your group prior to class to go over the questions you’d like to bring up and the general format you’d like to follow for class discussion. (You are also welcome to meet with me as a group; just let me know as soon as you can so we can schedule an appointment.)

The group scheduled to lead discussion of pages 138-59 of Eliade on Friday, November 4, submitted to the professor the following “Draft of Discussion Plan.” One of the students in the group had brought in, from another class, material on Spinoza, as described by James Carroll’s Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews, chapter 40, “Spinoza: From Rabbis to Revolution.” Here is the student group’s discussion plan:

1 Read bottom of page 146-7 - about the sacralization of orgies, and sex. What has happened to sex now? . . . What happened to humans that made us change? What happened to society to cause this shift? Holiness of orgies - evil of sex. Duality of human being - we can see how life is profane and sacred. Sex is profane and sacred. Sacred time - if it doesn’t occur in sacred time and sacred space, is it still sacred? Does it become profane? Different societies’ ideas of what sacred sex is.
I think of all my classes this semester this one has affected me the most. It was totally different from what I had expected— but different in a really good way. It has made me think about my own religion on a much deeper level. But not only my religion— religion as a whole. Discussion throughout the semester over readings or different prompts is what has most influenced me. Getting a chance to hear other peoples’ opinions on a topic that is open to interpretation. The books have been so unique unto themselves— yet all related— and in understanding those connections you kind of have that “Oh, this all makes sense” moment. I wouldn’t say that this course has challenged my beliefs— more than it has allowed me to gain a better understanding and expand my knowledge of what exactly “religion” is. It has made me want to learn more, causing me to now major in religion. It is a topic that excites me now that I’m beginning to understand it.

This course has been an awesome class. I have learned so much over the last 10 weeks. It has opened my eyes to different aspects of religion and different ways to understand it. I am still undecided about my religion but I have learned many things that I can relate back to. My class discussions were very helpful and insightful. We had different opinions and views on many subjects and that made an interesting class. What I did for myself was reading all the books. Usually I wouldn’t read them but the book by [William Cantwell] Smith really got my interest in the class going. I might not know a lot about religion but I do know a lot about life that I didn’t before.

Class discussions proved very thought-provoking. I loved carrying those conversations on into lunch or the dorms with my classmates. Everybody seemed to contribute, and if I did not agree with what they said, my brain would begin thinking through the why’s of my thoughts.

This course has been my favorite class all semester. It makes me want to forego my dreams of being a veterinarian to pursue a degree in religion. It has so greatly expanded my mind and challenged and changed my modes of thinking about the world. I wouldn’t say that I’m a different person because of it, but it has definitely impacted me deep down. I will never look at the world the same way again.

A major example of how it has expanded my mind is in the fact that my perception of religion has changed dramatically. Rather than see it as a thing, it’s more of a concept to me now. I try to avoid institutionalizing it and making it concrete, since it’s so not.
Also, I used to be very caught up in what was the right true religion. I've come to realize that it's a personal decision and there is no right religion. This has not challenged my beliefs at all; rather, it has made me more secure in them. The books we have read throughout the semester have been so insightful and have helped me along this path very much.

My classmates have helped this along as well. By presenting so many comments, questions (and answers), and suggestions, they have as well challenged my mode of thinking and inspired me to dig deeper and to interpret the information we are reading on a more profound level. The instructor was amazing as well. She was so well-versed and made so many connections and presented so many thought-provoking comments that it was difficult to not be almost awestruck. If I could major in religion, she is who I'd aspire to be.

In all, this course was amazing. It was like no other class I've ever taken and I'm extremely sad to see it end.

Student suggestions for change

There were no suggestions for change.

Prof. Jones evokes a high level of student engagement, both by her own personal style and her way of responding fully to student work, and by her structures for student leadership of discussion. She says she gives up control of the classroom, and I earlier disagreed with that frame, but she does pay a price for her method, which is that when students are not prepared or do not effectively frame the discussion for their peers, the class suffers. One of the findings of this study as a whole is how few students complete the assigned readings before class. A class plan can minimize the effect of that pattern, requiring students to perform only at intervals, for which they typically study hard, or the class plan can hang the whole course on student participation, as Prof. Jones does, and fight that battle by a strategic combination of daily student writing and student responsibility for leading discussion.

Conclusions

The three classes in this chapter illustrate quite different modes of clarity and conversation, though each is marked by the intensity of the professor's care for the subject matter and the students. Prof. Simmons brings a rich array of outside voices to his students through his extensive videos and his classroom visitors. He is skillful at classroom interaction that integrates critical thinking and students' own experiences. He makes no explicit daily reading assignments, and students report lower-than-average completion of the assignments before class. The videos and the site visit play a central role—the course is not so much about reading, though reading is important, but about observing religious practices. The speakers and videos, observed during the class hour, in common with other students and the teacher, become in large part the "text" of the class and the subject of discussion within the community created by the class.

The other two classes in this chapter are smaller, and are taught in very different ways. Prof. Bhattacharyya's intensive, daily portfolio writings create very high levels of student daily preparation and student interaction in the classroom, as this small, intimate group of students interacts with a dynamic teacher who demands and structures their daily class participation. Like Simmons, her class asks students to observe and analyze various religious practices unfamiliar to most of them.

Prof. Jones gives her class a different task—to define "religion" itself. Unlike Prof. Simmons, where the videos are central, and observation of practice is the main activity, Prof. Jones' class brings in, not primarily the voices of different religious practitioners, but the voices of scholars and artists asking "what is religion?" Reading and discussing the texts is the primary activity. Prof. Jones, like Bhattacharyya, uses daily preparatory writings, and she structures many interactive tasks for students in her 23-person class. Like Bhattacharyya, she gets high rates of preparation. Both she and Bhattacharyya face significant workload issues. Jones' unique strategy, though, is to structure student-led discussions, casting major responsibility to students in a teacher-like role as facilitators of discussion.

The next chapter treats another set of small classes, but with different topics— not world religions or "religion" per se, but "Bible," "theology," or "Christian formation."