

# **Multiplying Conversation Partners and Intercultural Translators Teaching Theology and Expressing Personal Faith in the Undergraduate Classroom**

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Even as religious studies scholars and theologians debate the meaning, utility, and integrity of the category of “religion,” says a recent call for papers for the Journal of the American Academy of Religion, religion is nonetheless emphatically back, pervasive in public discourse and prominent in a range of academic disciplines. This shift has been accompanied by “a new attention to theology”—including attention from scholars representing an apparently unlikely array of disciplines, many of whom are not themselves theologians, but who think theologically and engage with theological arguments.<sup>[1]</sup> This attention to theology may in some cases intersect with another issue raised in a recent article in Religious Studies News, “The Place of Personal Faith in the Classroom.” John D. Barbour, professor of religion at St. Olaf College, argues that it can be as appropriate and pedagogically valuable for a professor of religion, observing certain limits and conditions, to express her personal stance on matters of faith (whatever that stance may be) as it is “for a political scientist to explain her political opinions, an art historian to justify his assessments of works of art, or a scientist to espouse a particular energy or environmental policy.”<sup>[2]</sup> While Barbour acknowledges that the challenges, boundaries, and opportunities will differ at state universities, private schools related to a religious tradition, and other types of institutions, the underlying issues, he maintains, are the same. If Barbour is right, and if theology continues to figure significantly across a range of disciplines, then professors at institutions as different as private church-related colleges and secular public universities may have more reason than one may have imagined to talk with each other about fruitful ways of teaching theology and handling personal faith in the classroom.

Goshen College, where I teach in the Peace, Justice, and Conflict Studies department, is an institution of the Mennonite Church. The connection is far from nominal: the college cooperates closely with the church-wide Mennonite Educational Association; bylaws call

for 80 percent of our faculty to be Mennonite and the remainder Christians of other denominations; 60 percent of our students are Mennonites and many of the other 40 percent are Christian as well. Students are required to take two Bible or religion courses as part of the general education program, professors are free to incorporate faith considerations in the classroom as appropriate, and the close relationships encouraged between professors and students can readily take on a pastoral aspect. Most of my peace studies courses involve some religious or theological element, usually central to the course, and students, critical as they may be, rarely approach that element in a dispassionate or disinterested way.

That snapshot of religion at Goshen College might suggest that teaching theology and dealing with personal faith in the classroom would be straightforward matters. They are not. My students tend to come with sensors finely tuned to identify fraudulent piety, theology that seems exclusive, arcane, or merely other-worldly, or the faintest trace of a coercive approach to religion. Above all, they are aware of Christianity's numerous sins, historical and contemporary, especially sins of collaborating with forms of domination and violence, and they are passionately determined—as much the large majority of students who identify as Christian (whatever their reservations) as the minority who profess no faith—to reject any aspect of the Christian faith that seems implicated.

My course on the Dynamics and Theology of Reconciliation is among those that illustrate the challenges. While theological themes are present from the beginning of the course, of the first three main texts—Martha Minow's *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*, Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, and Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*—only Wiesenthal's deals directly with theological implications, and that is not his main concern. In the second half of the course, however, we give close attention to the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. It is an intensely theological work, in its origins a reflection on the implications, as the former Yugoslavia fell apart during the early 1990s, of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, and is grounded in reflection on the doctrines of the cross and the trinity. While Volf searches across many disciplines for conversation partners, and sparring partners, there is hardly a page on which the reader is not aware that she is reading theology.

Students consistently give two main initial responses to Volf's theological reflection. Some

are readily drawn in, any hesitations overcome by Volf's "singular talent" for expressing "the radical nature of the Christian message," as one student put it this past semester, by his thoughtful anticipation of their concerns, and by the compelling logic of his proposals. Others are not so easily won over. Volf's theological approach and rationales seem suited only to Christians. How can it "have any validity," wrote one thoughtful student in an intellectually and emotionally honest assessment, "if it can't be sold to a nonreligious audience as well? ... Reading Volf, I found myself ... irked by the unapologetically religious under and overtones. ... Ugh, where is the breathing room? ... As soon as religious dialogue is brought up explicitly, [especially as the rationale for pursuing reconciliation, justice, and other social goods,] it makes my throat grow tight and I want to run from it. Not because I have a bad relationship with the Church, or religion, but because of the many people whom I know that run as soon as religion is hinted at. And so, the question of a lifetime I suppose is how do we be religiously motivated peacemakers with credibility in the secular world?" As another student pondered, appreciative but perplexed, "I am always left with the question of how to ... translate these ideals to a non-Christian community. Is it at all possible to take God out?"

This impulse to communicate in ways accessible to everyone is commendable, so the challenge is how best to accomplish that. Take God out? Possibly. But if Volf might have gained by writing in another conceptual language for another audience, he would also have lost some of the particular possibilities that arise from writing theologically. The starting point for writing accessibly must surely be to recognize that no text comes from nowhere and every text comes from somewhere. There is no stance from which Volf might have written a work equally compelling to all.

Widely accessible communication will have to be pursued by means other than a universal language then, and I know of no other method than multiplying the number of people capable of being intercultural conversation partners and translators. The intercultural skills necessary will include, first, learning to read texts from other traditions with understanding and profit and, second, to assist in translating ideas and perspectives between cultures. These are complex skills and perhaps never more necessary for peace than in the present age, characterized by a mobility of ethnic and religious groups that creates cultural intersections of unprecedented variety and quantity. Intercultural conversation partners and translators can play an important role in making these intersections constructive rather than

destructive, and the case of Exclusion and Embrace illustrates the importance of their work. It is by some margin the most sophisticated account of the dynamics of reconciliation that I know of, and an academic setting in which Exclusion and Embrace could not be taught because of the conceptual language in which Volf wrote it would be impoverished by that impossibility. Working in a classroom on a text like Exclusion and Embrace illustrates what is necessary and possible for readers coming from any perspective if they are to become effective translators.

For Christians studying Exclusion and Embrace, mastering Volf's theological account offers the opportunity to become more at home with and sophisticated in working with their primary cultural language. This is not necessarily easy work. Sometimes we find it more interesting and illuminating to listen patiently and attentively to the unfamiliar language of a very different culture than to deal once again with the overly familiar—we know this set of flaws and hypocrisies all too well. It is necessary work, however. An effective translator, after all, must be thoroughly at home with his own language before he can competently translate to it or from it. For students from other faiths or of a secular perspective, reading Volf provides an equal, if converse, opportunity: to better understand the internal logic of Christianity, how Christians employ their sacred texts, how they reason about issues of concern to all. This is necessary work for all of our students if they are to become skilled as intercultural conversation partners and translators.

A classroom of students representing diverse, even conflicting, traditions working together to read a text from a particular tradition is not then an impediment to developing shared moral, religious, or political language, or a diversion along the way. It is the necessary foundation for it. Those who aspire to work as intercultural conversation partners and translators will need to participate in many such experiences, in classrooms and elsewhere, entered into sometimes as an insider, sometimes as an outsider. And such exchanges will always be relevant. Even as elements of shared language develop across cultures, it will complement those cultures' primary languages, not replace them.

Whether it is cause for anxiety or anticipation, a feature of entering a deep encounter with another's cultural language and inner logic is that even if we can identify some of the likely results of such an encounter, we cannot know what we will experience in this particular situation. At one extreme is conversion: this new language is so beautiful, so powerful, that I must make it my own; I find that it is making me its own, and the place I have come from

seems impoverished by comparison. Or perhaps I will experience a kind of conversion without rejection, so that I am left with the knotty problems and creative possibilities of attempting to stand somehow in two traditions at once. A simple choice seems simply false. Or maybe the thought of conversion will never arise, but I find things that I can borrow, I must borrow, perhaps quite directly, perhaps by a complex act of cultural translation. Maybe the encounter with another tradition will open my eyes to possibilities in my own that were previously hidden from me. Perhaps the gains will simply be a deeper understanding of how that other culture works and therefore the possibility of improved relationships, with conversion or borrowing never arising as issues. And of course at the other extreme lies revulsion: I am glad that I understand better, but having understood, I am alarmed. Peaceable relationships need not be impossible, but they become much more challenging.

These disparate possible outcomes are not unique to studying theology, of course. They are versions of what may happen when students commit themselves to any course that deals with important matters. What matters is that professors not treat theology differently from other ways of working by subjecting it to a blanket ban from the classroom, thereby losing the special possibilities that arise for all their students from thoughtful exploration of theological texts. The text appropriate to the course and taught well by the professor can provide an excellent opportunity to equip students to work as intercultural conversation partners and translators.

1. 1. JAAR Call for Papers, "The Return of Religion after 'Religion': Consequences for Theology and Religious Studies," Religious Studies News 24, no.3 (May 2009), 16. Available as a PDF file at <http://www.aarweb.org/Publications/RSN/index.asp> (accessed 15 June 2009).
2. 2. John D. Barbour, "The Place of Personal Faith in the Classroom," Religious Studies News 24, no. 2 (March 2009), 21. Available as a PDF file at <http://www.aarweb.org/Publications/RSN/index.asp> (accessed 15 June 2009).