Shared Beliefs and Student-Centered Censorship

"This Book Offends Me"

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Dear Ms. Hawker:

I am submitting my 2002 National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention presentation entitled “Shared Beliefs and Student-Centered Censorship: ‘This Book Offends Me.’”

This presentation recognizes that our profession actively encourages and listens to multiple voices in the classroom. We readily accept diverse voices based on ethnicity, gender, culture, age, sexual orientation, class distinction, and political affiliation, yet we hesitate to consider the religious voice. In fact, students often experience discrimination and intolerance because of their religious beliefs. Therefore the purpose of this presentation is to address two central questions regarding religious tension in the English classroom:

- How can we feel more comfortable with conflicts between religion and academics?
- How can we ease religious tensions in our classrooms?

Religious issues in the English classroom do not need to be divisive, do not need to create tensions that isolate and discriminate against any student or teacher. While as teachers we may not have a lot of control over public, social, or university policy, through our own commitments to being sensitive to students’ values, through more awareness of students’ cultural and religious foundations, through understanding how evil works in literature and popular culture, and through more connections between students’ academic life and home and spiritual life, we do have the potential to contribute significantly in transforming “society’s fundamental inequities” and affect our students’ and our own lives.

I gratefully acknowledge my own students on our campus who have been my initial audience. I hope this presentation will meet the demands of the conference.

Sincerely,

Rodney D. Keller

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Abstract

We readily accept diverse voices based on ethnicity, gender, culture, age, sexual orientation, class distinction, and political affiliation, yet we hesitate to consider the religious voice. In fact, students often experience discrimination and intolerance because of their religious beliefs. Therefore the purpose of this presentation is to address two central questions regarding religious tension in the English classroom:

- How can we feel more comfortable with conflicts between religion and academics? We can bridge these conflicts by understanding religious tolerance, recognizing contributions of religious students, acknowledging that proper faith promotes responsibility, understanding faith development, identifying the role of evil in fiction, and acknowledging good and evil desires.

- How can we ease religious tensions in our classrooms? We can ease these tensions by appreciating paradox, recognizing personal oxymorons, and creating a content philosophy statement.

Religious issues in the English classroom do not need to be divisive, do not need to create tensions that isolate and discriminate against any student or teacher. While as teachers we may not have a lot of control over public, social, or university policy, through our own commitments to being sensitive to students' values, through more awareness of students' cultural and religious foundations, through understanding how evil works in literature and popular culture, and through more connections between students' academic life and home and spiritual life, we do have the potential to contribute significantly in transforming "society's fundamental inequities" and affect our students' and our own lives.

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Shared Beliefs and Student-Centered Censorship: "This Book Offends Me"

Our college president called me during the Thanksgiving break. It was my first semester teaching, and I thought how kind the president was to call a new faculty member to wish him a happy holiday. I learned then that the president had just received a phone call from a prominent state legislator who was also a high-ranking area official in the church that sponsors our college. This influential man was calling as a grandfather concerned that his grandson was reading inappropriate books at the church institution. President Hafen asked who was the teacher, what was the book, and what was inappropriate about the book. My name then surfaced with Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* which used "vulgar language."

I realized then that my one-semester college teaching career was over. I knew that I was in serious trouble with the administration and with the church. This experience soon became one of those rare, defining moments in my career. President Hafen then told this grandfather that as the president of the college he couldn't think of a more appropriate book to be taught at a religious institution. He explained that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was a significant book because it was the first book published in the Soviet Union that printed common Russian obscenities rather than superficially disguised terms (d__m). But more importantly, Solzhentisyn was able to portray the dignity of a man in an inhumane prison camp. President Hafen then said he wished all politicians and church members would have an opportunity to read the book.

President Hafen had called me to share the experience and to offer suggestions for dealing with individuals feeling uncomfortable with materials they feel are inappropriate

for a church school. (Incidentally, the student was fine with the book. Grandpa had just picked up the book to thumb through it and had seen the language.)

Aside from learning not to assign questionable novels over holiday breaks, I also learned how fortunate I was to have a well-read administrator who supported the faculty. I'm fortunate also that I have had relatively few problems with students finding the readings for my class offensive, but the few offended students I've dealt with as a teacher, as a department chair, and as a college dean do "shake the timbers." For example, Loren, a newly-wed who reads my literature assignments to his bride, asks in class why we need to read the pornography in the anthology; he wants to know if they can read from the scriptures instead. Then two returning students whose husbands are on the staff at our school want to remove Shakespeare from the curriculum and to print page numbers of literature texts that contain swear words or offensive materials so students can choose just to skip those pages.

Thankfully, these extremes, and they are extremes, are rare at our institution. However, I assume most of us, at public and private and at religious institutions also have had similar experiences where students are offended by materials, and often those materials conflict with the students' religious values and experiences. And if your experiences are like mine, I become the one whose literary values and professional choice and religious beliefs are questioned, then I become the one offended. Somehow the tables have turned. I now become the one who questions and blames the students' zealotry, and I am hurt and even mad—not very Christian of me.

Perhaps this fear of the religious extreme leads some teachers to be intolerant of students' religious beliefs. In fact, Candace DeRussy, a trustee of the State University of New York and a member of the advisory board of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, describes in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the on-going religious intolerance and discrimination at American universities. She acknowledges: "On the one hand, the academy lavishes scholarly time and legal effort on the defense of academically irrelevant or divisive categories of diversity. On the other, it has no qualms about committing coercive acts of discrimination aimed at eliminating one desirable and important type of diversity—religious diversity—from its precincts" (3).

Jessica DeCourcey describes some of the intense confrontations she has had with her literature professor at a state university in Maryland. She sees the confrontation as an example of religious persecution. She describes the situation: "

> He would quote Scripture, daring the class to even try to convince him it was true. He would ask all Christians to defend their beliefs. I was often the only one to speak up, almost always interrupted by his mocking laugh. He often got uncomfortably close to me and would call my belief in Christ stupid. I got more and more scared each time. I knew it would be easier to say nothing, but that wasn't an option. Worry consumed me before each class meeting. I tried to come up with excuses to skip and even considered dropping, but for some reason I stayed. (1).

Here we have a literature professor who is also extreme, and I hope no one of us here would ever make a student feel that uncomfortable in our classes because of their

religious beliefs. On the one hand, we have institutions and faculty who feel uncomfortable with religious topics, issues, beliefs in the classroom while on the other hand, we have students who represent "nearly two thirds of Americans [who] say religion is very important in their lives, and close to half say they attend worship services at least once a week. . . Surveys show belief in God and devotion to prayer [is] at historic highs" (Sheler 2). These same statistics apply to our own students—many of them have sincere, devout religious beliefs.

As teachers, one of our jobs is to validate students' beliefs, even religious beliefs, or to help them challenge their own views in a safe environment. If we are to help students examine or move from their value positions, we need to accept whatever their position is or wherever they are in that process of change and development. As teachers, we need to ask ourselves:

- How can we feel more comfortable with conflicts between religion and academics?
- How can we ease religious tensions in our classrooms?

How can we feel more comfortable with conflicts between religion and academics?

Understand Religious Tolerance. To feel more comfortable with these conflicts, we need first to define *religious tolerance*. Most often, educators and religious individuals define *religious tolerance* differently. Josh McDowell, a religious apologist, describes the religious approach to tolerance as "negative tolerance." "'Negative tolerance occurs when we assess the behavior or values of someone else and are willing to love them anyway. We don't have to agree with them, but we are, by volition, willing

to accept (tolerate) their choices and love them anyway" (Baker 2). In Christian terms we may say, "We love the sinner but hate the sin." However, educators more frequently lean towards what McDowell calls "positive tolerance." "'Positive tolerance' says we have to accept their choices as equal to our own. In other words, we do not have the right to reject choices which differ from our own. We cannot state a contra position or share with them our concerns or attitude toward these choices" (Baker 2-3). Tolerance for educators then is to accept all views despite our personal feelings towards those views. We have to be willing to help students to understand and explore their views without teachers judging those views. However, teachers also need to recognize that students are likely to judge our views. Being aware of both definitions of tolerance may help both teachers and students address their differences when discussing religious differences.

Recognize Contributions of Religious Students. To help teachers and student feel more comfortable with religious tension, teachers should recognize and acknowledge the positive contributions students' religiosity brings to the classroom. Generally, we desire the characteristics of religious students. For example, similar concerns with the appropriate place for religion also apply to the work place. Findings from studies published in academic business journals also apply to the English classroom. For instance, in the current issue of *Journal of Business Ethics,* Gerald Cavanagh and Mark Bandsuch state in their article "Virtue as a Benchmark for Spirituality in Business," "A person who is guided by a spirituality that results in good moral habits and virtue is also more likely to be honest, loyal, trustworthy, and possess integrity" (3). They also explain, "If a spirituality leads to the cooperation and motivation derived from good

moral habits and virtue in a person, then that spirituality can be judged as appropriate" (2). Most of us want these honest, loyal, trustworthy students of integrity.

Acknowledge that Proper Faith Promotes Responsibility. Another principle to help us feel more comfortable with religious tensions is to acknowledge that proper faith does promote responsibility. For example, earlier this year, Anthony M. Pilla, Bishop, Diocese of Cleveland, has reminded political institutions, and I'll include educational institutions, that the Church and religious people cannot "divorce [their] faith and hope from public concerns and crucial moral questions that face [them] as citizens" (3). Students cannot divorce their beliefs from their beliefs in the English classroom. Pilla continues to claim, "in a free, pluralistic society, then, the Church [and I'll add the religious student] has the right to make and to express moral judgments" (3). However, Pilla also stresses that with the right to express moral judgments comes a great responsibility and a need to recognize limits that depend "upon the quality of their contributions to the wider conversation" (3). He then calls on both people with religious values and institutions to meet the challenge of listening to the religious voice and of the need of the religious to accept responsibility for that voice (5).

Understand Faith Development. An additional way we feel more comfortable with religious conflicts it to recognize the different levels of faith development, especially how our levels may differ from our students' levels. Faculty and students should realize that individuals generally progress in their faith through various stages just as they develop intellectually according to Piaget and morally according to Kohlberg. Three major theories present faith development. LeRoy Aden's eight-stage theory of

faith develops through stages of trust, courage, obedience, assent, identity, self-surrender, caring, and unconditional faith. John H. Westerhoff, III's four-stage theory of faith progresses through experienced faith, affiliative faith, searching faith, and owned faith. And Fowler's theory has seven stages of faith development: primal faith, mythical-literal faith, intuitive-projective faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalizing faith (Cavendish 82).

We'll not discuss these in detail, but it is important for us to perhaps highlight some generalizations about the characteristics of the faith stages of adolescents and young adults—the stages our students likely fall under. The terms the theorists use for these age groups are

- Identity/Self-surrender (Aden)
- Affiliative faith/searching faith (Westerhoff)
- Synthetic-conventional faith/Individuative-reflective faith (Fowler)

To explain further, adolescence and young adulthood is clearly a time when young people not only ask "Who am I," but it is also a time when they ask, "Who am I in relation to others?" An extension of these two questions naturally becomes, "Who am I in relation to God?" Young people are seeking answers and seeking experiences while developing these individual, social, and spiritual relationships. These relationships help form their individual self-identities. These spiritual identities continue to emerge into a more mature "self-surrender" to their faith. Aden explains self-surrender: "It is an act in which the individual in the totality of his being turns toward and becomes committed to God as the final source of life and meaning. We can even describe it as the losing of life

in order to gain it, and not to negate it" (227). Our students are in the process of turning their lives over to a higher Reality. As we recognize this process, we can become more understanding of our students' emotional reactions and interpretations to what they read and of what happens in the classroom.

Our students then are developing these meaningful, sensitive relationships with spiritual leaders and with God. During this fragile time, if students perceive those relationships are challenged or criticized by others outside the faith, Nelly Ukpokodu warns that "students will engage in defensive behaviors depending on their perception of the extent to which they feel implicated by the issues or topics" (5); the students become protective of their new convictions and beliefs. For these reasons we teachers need to understand better how some students emotionally react and attack the literature or attitudes of a classroom which they mistakenly believe challenge their growing faith and values.

Identify the Role of Evil in Literature. As teachers we can help our students feel more comfortable with religious conflicts as we help them realize how evil functions in literature. Religious students sometimes react emotionally to literature because of the portrayal of evil. Because of these tender feelings of faith and limited reading experiences, students may also misunderstand the role of evil in fiction. Inexperienced literature students with strong religious beliefs may have a binary perception of good and evil. Orson Scott Card addresses this concern in his essay entitled "The Problem of Evil in Fiction." Card insists that there are three types of evil in fiction:

- Evil *depicted* in fiction.

- Evil *advocated* in fiction.
- Evil *enacted* in fiction.

Card explains that evil depicted in fiction is not wrong. Religious leaders devote considerable amounts of time speaking about evil, warning individuals to guard against evil in their lives. Literature that depicts evil portrays evil in common people's lives and how they either confront evil or how they are affected by evil. For the most part, this is the evil that is reflected in most of the literature we read.

Evil advocated in fiction may be a character or an author who advocates an evil such as "revolution, crime, cowardice, dishonesty," yet most readers simply read and make up their own mind. Yet some authors and books that advocate evil are more subtle. Card explains that "there are books that have a ring of truth to them as they teach us that an individual should forsake his commitments if they get in the way of his personal satisfaction. There are books that have the ring of truth to them as they teach us that sometimes a person just has to forget the laws and put a stop to crime himself, even if it means committing crimes to do it" (81).

But the third class of evil enacted in fiction is what Card calls dangerous, and he cites pornography as the "obvious case of fiction enacting evil: "Pornography is designed to give direct or indirect sexual gratification. The appeal of pornography is not literary; though the writer may be skilled, the effect of pornography is not aesthetic, but orgasmic" (79). Pornography is usually easily identifiable. It is aimed at a definite audience that wants it.

> The problem arises when the untrained reader finds a passage describing a sexual event or a violent one in a work of fiction that is *not* aimed at the pornography-consuming market. Unaccustomed to reading at all, this would-be [inexperienced] censor can only understand that he sees . . . a sex act and cannot see what purpose that depiction of evil might serve in the rest of the book . . . Unable to receive what the author is really trying to give, such ignorant readers are only able to receive such works as pornography. They have no perspective. (80).

Acknowledge Good and Evil Desires. What pertains to us as teachers and to our students to feel more comfortable with religious conflicts is that we become what Card calls "lover[s] of goodness and student[s] of evil." He explains:

> Because my fiction has to have the ring of truth, I must learn to write evil convincingly. I have never murdered, but I must understand the motives that can bring a man to kill. I have never committed adultery, but I must understand the motives that bring a man to break a commitment sealed not only by vows but also by years of shared experience. The terrifying thing is that I can find all those human motivations to do evil simply by looking into myself. The only solace is that I can also look into myself to find all the desires that prompt people to do good (90).

Card then uses J.R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* as a textbook example of the problem of dealing with evil. I like Card's approach because our students can easily identify with Card's explanation and example. Card explains that in *The Lord of the*

Rings, Tolkien does not deal with evil with the obviously evil, nasty, cruel, and mean Suaron the Emperor; Saruman, the Wizard of White; or the vile Orcs. In fact, Tolkien shallowly presents them and even seems to ignore their evil. Because we know they are evil, we don't have to question their evilness. Card, however, does ask:

> Where does Tolkien deal with evil well, believably, importantly? Primarily in Frodo, the protagonist. The good guy we follow from his first possession of the ring to his terrifying finale at the Cracks of Doom. Frodo, whom we weep for when he sails west with the Elves and leaves Sam Gamgee behind. Isn't it Frodo who wrestles with the temptation to throw responsibility on someone else and try to escape? Isn't it Frodo who at the end is overwhelmed by the power of the ring? Isn't it Frodo who is faced with the temptation to kill Gollum, and yet resists? Frodo's companion, Samwise Gamgee, goes through similar struggles with his evil desires. And in Gollum we find good and evil mixed, in different proportions, but still all there. These are the only complete characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is no accident that in Tolkien's strongly Christian viewpoint, it is these three weak and flawed individuals who, put together, bring the supreme good act of the story. It is no accident that these characters, with their inward struggle between righteous and evil desires, are the ones best remembered and most loved by readers.
>
> Like Frodo and Gollum, we contain within ourselves the desires for both good and evil. We children of God are not neatly divided into Elves and Orcs, some desiring only good and some desiring only evil . . . Not only does a writer

> reach into himself to discover both good and evil, but also a writer's most believable characters will have those conflicting desires. It is not because the characters do evil that we find them interesting. We identify with them because we recognize both their good and evil desires in ourselves, and through their acts we learn the consequences of our own as yet unmade decisions. (90-91).

How Can We Ease Religious Tensions in Our Classrooms?

So how do we help students feel more comfortable with religious tensions in the classroom? What are some practical activities we can do in class?

Appreciate Paradox. One thing we can do in our classroom is to appreciate paradox. Perhaps part of the tension teachers and students feel within a literature classroom results from these conflicts individuals feel within themselves. Teachers can better prepare themselves and their students to discuss these conflicts by recognizing the power of paradox in our lives. We need to learn to live effectively with paradox. Marianne Lewis and Gordon Dehler explain that "comprehending paradox begins with an understanding of contradictions. Unlike continua or either/or choices, contradictions denote opposing sides of the same coin" (3). Part of our religious tensions in the classroom stem from the feelings that the conflict is either/or, religious/academic,

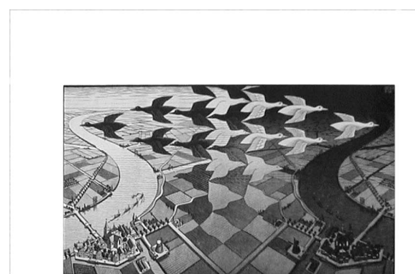

Figure 1 "Day and Night"

Figure 2 Old /Young Woman

good/evil, right/wrong. Chances are they are not opposites just different sides of the same coin—they're paradoxes. It's all a matter of how we treat paradox whether these tensions "foster or paralyze learning" (Lewis and Dehler 3).

How then can we get students to become more comfortable with tensions, with paradox to "view contradictions in a new light"? (Lewis and Dehler 2). A simple introduction to paradox could be a visual representation of seeing two different pictures within the same picture: The old woman/young woman, the bird, the folded paper, the day and night, flip/flop, and true/false. Each of these pictures illustrates the principle that opposite sides of the coin are evident in paradox and that both sides become a part of the whole—both sides/views are necessary.

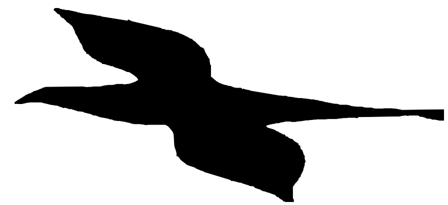

Figure 3 Flying Bird

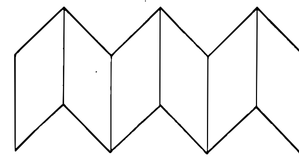

Figure 4 Folded Paper

Another activity with paradox includes having students list seemingly polarities such as independence/dependence, introversion/extroversion, masculinity/femininity. Challenge the students to examine how these polarized characteristics are evident is literary characters or popular culture. For example Fletcher and Olwyler examined "how high-performing athletes and entrepreneurs" use paradox "such as Olympic sprinter Michael

Figure 5 Flip/Flop

Johnson's ability to maximize his aggression and relaxation simultaneously during a race" (Lewis 6).

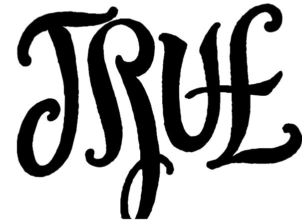

Figure 6 True/False

Recognize Personal Oxymorons. Lewis and Dehler also describe a class activity that helps students to recognize paradox in their own lives and characters. Begin by asking students to list their own most dominant characteristics by tapping through the views of someone who loves them most and someone who likes them the least to develop a diverse list. Next examine the list for contradictions, developing a list of personal oxymorons such as loveable curmudgeon, doting tyrant, spontaneous analyst, and conforming rebel. Have students explain how they swing from one end to the other. Have students select a specific predicament they are struggling with in their lives and explain how they are relating to the dilemma from both sides of the oxymoron (Lewis and Dehler 6). Supposedly, once students are able to examine the tensions of paradox in their own lives, they'll more comfortably be able to appreciate and discuss religious tensions in the classroom. They'll better understand the relationships among the paradox in their and others' lives.

Create a Content Philosophy Statement. Another singular factor that can help prevent or resolve religious tension issues because of literature content in an English classroom is a published faculty or department philosophy statement that provides guidelines concerning the selection and teaching of reading materials in the classroom. Four main categories to consider for the content philosophy statement include the

literature philosophy statement and then statements directed to students, to faculty, and to administrators explaining both the text selection and grievance process.

At our institution our policy explains that texts which contain excessive, graphic, or extraneous profanity, sex, or violence are not appropriate. We believe faculty have the responsibility to provide a context for the study of the selected works that will strengthen students' critical awareness of historical, cultural, and aesthetic movements as well as enable students to understand the larger purposes and values of studying literature that may occasionally include some potentially disturbing elements. Because of our unique stature as a church institution, certain kinds of texts ought to be avoided, even if secular academia judges such texts as having high literary quality. As teachers, as our faculty, we believe we should be sensitive to different students' levels of experience and tolerance. We should be willing to counsel with and teach without prejudice those whose opinions differ from our own and be open to negotiate alternate texts. We do support NCTE's "The Students' Right to Read" position statement in which "we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading. But for the same reason, we oppose efforts of individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others or to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large" (5).

However, we also believe that faculty with professional expertise and maturity, should make wise literary recommendations for individual students uncomfortable with course readings. Of course, alternate texts should be as academically rigorous as original text selections. We also maintain in our policy that students with grievances are first to discuss their concerns with the faculty member before going to the administration. For

the most part, the administration supports this policy and will send students to the faculty member before discussing the issue with an administrative leader. Nearly every student concern is handled individually with the student and the teacher.

Religious issues in the English classroom do not need to be divisive, do not need to create tensions that isolate and discriminate against any student or teacher. Candace DeRussy reminds us that "we need to renew our devotion to the idea of a university as a place of tolerance and diversity—two words that many of us continue to use with sincerity. It is time that these ideals become a living reality on our campuses rather than slogans used to crush dissent" (5). While as teachers we may not have a lot of control over public, social, or university policy, through our own commitments to being sensitive to students' values, through more awareness of students' cultural and religious foundations, through understanding how evil works in literature and popular culture, and through more connections between students' academic life and home and spiritual life, we do have the potential to contribute significantly in transforming "society's fundamental inequities" and affect students' and our own lives (Finley 2).

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