

One of my courses for the Spring 2007 semester is “Warrior Chants and Unquiet Spirits.” It focuses on the Christian protest tradition in historical and contemporary contexts through autobiographies, sermons, and essays of men and women who have used their voices and actions to address and to make significant differences in church and society. Analysis of personal descriptions and basic commitments for social justice form the framework for integrating spirituality with social witness. We study the relationship of the work of such movements within and beyond church structures.

This semester, there are 24 students registered for the class. There are 18 women and 6 men. Six students are African American, 2 students are Afro-British, 17 students are White. No one has mentioned ethnicity. The various degree programs: undergraduate (1-religious studies major), M.A.R.,(5) M.Div.(17), and Ph.D. (1) were represented in the class.

There are five objectives for this course:

1. To reflect upon spirituality and social witness in the lives of selected historic and contemporary figures of strong Christian commitment primarily through studying their autobiographies and other writings.
2. To analyze ways in which spirituality and social witness were/are integrated in their lives.
3. To determine how these persons understand/stood the nature of the church and the world and their relationship to institutional religion and wider society.
4. To consider ways in which their experiences and commitments to spirituality and social witness speak to us personally today and ways in which our faith can be deepened through this dialogue.
5. To discern ways in which their expressions of Christian commitment(s) address us as we practice ministry within church and society today.

The requirements include active participation and punctual attendance, inclusivity, one question for the day, chapel attendance (suggested only), 4 course papers—one for the four figures we study, and a group presentation based on one of the figures. The requirements are structured to help the students (and me) develop their skills of social analysis and action for transformation in their ministries and scholarship by self-consciously exploring the interrelationship of spirituality and social witness/social justice. My bias in the course is that we begin to think about spirituality as social witness/social justice. This asks all of us in the class to think through how our lives are formed and shaped by the world around us that is sacred. This sacredness demands of us acts of faithfulness and justice-making.

To approach the multilayered task pedagogically, I employ several strategies in the class. First, the use of autobiographies is an intentional choice versus biographies. Autobiographies can hold a mirror up for us in ways that biographies cannot as we encounter the reflections of the person on her or his life. Christian spiritual protest autobiographies such as the ones we consider in the course (this semester: Reinhold Niebuhr, James Cone, Pauli Murray, and Mab Segrest), by folk who are not interested in creating a narrative of success, but a testament of seeking to do the work of justice, are instructive for students as they explore their own spirituality and attempts at justice-making and doing.

Second, the Question for the Day requires students to develop a question (without contextualization) from the reading. This proves difficult for most students as I find that students often are not taught the fine art and strategic importance of being able to ask

questions that get to the heart of the matter. I then respond to each question with a one sentence answer that often takes me a good while to sort through in order to get to the heart of the response that their question calls for. The question and response is designed to get at concrete strategies of social engagement for the student where they place themselves in dialogue with the others.

Third, in the last 30 minutes of the first class we deal with a figure, I place the students in their groups. Usually, I assign them a passage or event in the autobiography to reflect on and develop a question they would like to discuss based on the passage. I then use the four questions from the groups as the framework for the lecture for the next week.

Finally, the four course papers are no more than four double-spaced pages. They are designed to help the students think through the faith stance and ecclesiology of each person. In each paper, they end by addressing the following:

What is one act you will commit to doing in response to the challenge *or* comfort the author presents you. Name the steps you will take to do so. For this final part, be explicit and concrete.

As it has turned out over the several times I have taught this course, this is the hardest part of the assignment. First, students are often tempted to list more than one thing. Some are not aware that they have switched to another topic in doing so. Many struggle with naming concrete actions and prefer to stay in theories or discuss why they struggle so much with what the author has raised. Still others cannot figure out how to enact what they name and we spend some time in my office or over email working on this. A rare few dig in their heels and simply refuse to engage.

An interesting dynamic emerged in the class this spring—an ongoing conversation and requests for classroom time to discuss strategies that will help them develop accountability with each other and build solidarity with each other across the many differences in the classroom. The majority of the time, it concerned racial solidarity. But, there have been times when it has involved issues of sexism and sexual orientation, age, and militarism (several students have friends and/or relatives who are in the military and a few noted the impact of the Initiative on Religion and Politics at Yale sponsoring an “Imaging War” series during the fall semester). These conversations seem to be primed by the questions of the day (I noticed this pattern somewhat into the semester when I sat down to read the questions and respond) and the challenge/comfort folks were naming in their papers.

This has been a bonus for us in the classroom and I have sometimes found myself scrambling to help students remain engaged with the hard work they have decided to do with each other in a class that is fairly large to try to do this kind of (sometimes intense) conversation. It is helpful to be able to return again and again to the notion of spirituality as social witness to help all of us remember why we are engaged in the class.

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