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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

How Do We Teach Catholic Intellectual Tradition to Gen Z Students?

Anna Lännström, *Stonehill College*

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I avoided teaching our gen ed Catholic intellectual tradition courses for years at my small Catholic college in the Northeast. I'm not a theologian. I'm not Catholic. And teaching these courses sounded challenging because our students' impressions of the Church are both negative and muddled: "The Church is hypocritical, sexist, and anti-gay." "It reads the Bible literally and it rejects evolution." "It thinks that it's bad to examine your religious beliefs." "Having faith means having no doubts, and it requires that you don't question your religion at all." Many of our students are former Catholics who suspect that these courses are intended to bring them back into the fold. And they resent that.

I told myself that this mess is not my problem. Not my fight.

I got pushed into it though, and to my surprise, the course I developed has become one of my favorites.

I decided that for the course to work, I needed to get the students' hostility and emotions out on the table from the very beginning. To make that possible, creating the right atmosphere was crucial. Otherwise, students would worry about hurting my feelings and their own grade, and they wouldn't speak openly.

To create a space for honesty, I use my non-priest and non-Catholic credentials for maximum

effect. Before I even hand out the syllabus, I explain that I'm not Catholic and that I have no interest in making them more—or less—Catholic. I tell them that I disagree with the Church's positions on LGBTQ issues and that I have feminist objections to the Church—and to a lot of organized religion.

At that point, I have their attention. Then I describe what I admire about Catholicism. The logic and intellectual rigor. The two thousand years of applying reason to religion, of brilliant theologians and philosophers wrestling with difficult questions, arguing, and disagreeing with each other. I explain that they don't have to believe a single word of any Catholic teachings, but that they do have to know what they are, think them through carefully, be as fair and openminded as possible, and then articulate their criticisms and responses clearly.

Our first reading is Jean Twenge's "Irreligious: Losing My Religion (and Spirituality)," which lays out survey data and discusses possible reasons for why so many Gen Z members are leaving organized religion. I ask if the reading resonates with them and ask them to share some of their own experiences with religion.

Then I brace myself and get out of the way.

So much anger. So much frustration. So many painful stories.

One of my students was an altar boy and his priest handed him a brochure about conversion therapy and told him to try it. Another student was kicked out of his religious education class for asking too many critical questions. A third was asked to leave his church along with his family because he has two moms.

I listen, empathize, and learn. I explain that their local priest may not have accurately represented the diversity of views and complexity of theology available in the Church. I tell them that people who teach religious education classes usually don't know as much theology as I would wish and that they sometimes badly misunderstand Church teachings. We look at the Catechism's statements on homosexuality, I explain that I know several priests who are gay and that they somehow make it work. I point them to James Martin, S.J.'s work, noting that he is a priest in good standing.

This discussion takes up a full week. During this time, I repeat that I'm fine with them being atheist, theist, or agnostic but that I want their position to be based upon good reasons and on a deep understanding of the intellectual possibilities of a theism. I don't want them to reject religion because they have only been exposed to narrow and simplistic versions.

After all that, we're ready to engage with the "real" course materials. We study the argument from design and the Church's position on evolution. We clear up misunderstandings about doubt and questioning. We read about Mother Teresa and her dark night of the soul. We tackle classical philosophical problems about suffering, miracles, pluralism, the gap between language and God, and the function and limitations of images.

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This has become one of my favorite classes to teach because it responds to a real need. My students desperately need an opportunity to explore their spirituality and religiosity (or their absence!) and to reflect on their relation to the religions around them. And they need somebody to correct some of their most cumbersome misunderstandings about religion, showing them that there is space for them to be Catholic if they want—even if they are LGBTQ and even if they like science and reason.

Will this bring them back into the fold? I doubt it—but I hope it will help them see possibilities that they didn't know were there.

Read **Race in the classroom: #3: Bringing in race in a Catholic Intellectual tradition course.**

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