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Tales from the Religious Studies Classroom

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Jesus H. Christ: Be Aware of What Students Hear

I was walking into the Den at Le Moyne College when I was accosted by a colleague in the English department. He asked, “What the hell are you teaching in your religion classes?” While I often ask myself this same question, I decided to ask what he meant. He told me that a young woman in his class was also in my Introduction to Religion class. The students in his class were discussing Coleridge’s “Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement,” and they came across this line:

Sweet is the tear that from some Howard’s eye
Drops on the cheek of one he lifts from earth

He asked the students what they thought Coleridge meant. The student we shared in our classes was quick to say she thought it was an allusion to Christ. Intrigued, my colleague asked her how she came upon that idea. She replied that Professor Glennon had said Jesus’ middle name was Howard and that Coleridge was talking about the comfort Jesus continues to give to us from heaven.

I chuckled. I told my colleague that this notion came up in a discussion on the Gospel of Mark when Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Of course, the question of identity is often related to one’s name and one’s family. With tongue-in-cheek I asked the

students what Jesus's last name was. While many admitted they didn't know, others said it was Christ. I suggested that, while it is true that title, "Christ," is connected to Jesus's identity as his disciple blurted out, it was not really his last name. It is more likely that his last name was Joseph, son of Joseph.

But I pressed them further. I asked if any of them had ever heard their parents or grandparents, in a moment of anger or frustration, say "Jesus H. Christ"? Many students had. So I asked, "What does the H. stand for?" As you might imagine, no one knew. I decided to enlighten them and told them that the H. stood for Howard. Warily, they asked how I knew that. I responded that it was right at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, who art in heaven, Howard be thy name."

Obviously, most students recognized that this was a joke. In case you are wondering, the actual prayer says, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." But somehow this young woman didn't catch on and took me seriously. She stored this "fact" in the back of her mind. When a few weeks later her English class discussed Coleridge's reflection, she was delighted by the insight she could offer; the tear came from Howard's eye because he was the one who lifts those who die from earth.

The student and I, and even her mother, laughed about this for the rest of her time at the school. She learned that it is always good to check the information she received for its reliability and trustworthiness. I learned to be sure that whenever I tell this joke in class, which I do at times, that after I reveal the middle name, I look to make sure the students know it is a joke, just in case.

Driving the Bus: What is Hell Like?

In my classes, I want to make sure that the religious and ethical questions students bring to the classroom find their way into our discussion. I use a strategy I call the Question Bag. The students' first homework assignment is to anonymously write any religious or ethical question they have that they would like us to talk about during the semester on a sheet of paper. At the beginning of the second class, I collect the questions in a paper bag. Periodically, we draw a question from the bag to discuss at the beginning of the class period. The discussion can take a few minutes or even the entire class period depending on how important the question is to the class.

In one introduction to religion class, the question we pulled from the bag was "What is hell like?" I asked students to say out loud what their responses were. Some had obviously read Dante's *Inferno* and so talked about the terrible suffering sinners could expect at the hands of Satan's minions. Others, feeling a bit more enlightened, said it was the experience of forever being apart from the presence of God. Still others suggested hell didn't exist. When you die, you die.

At this point I interjected a few thoughts into the conversation. A few times during the semester, I had referenced the adage, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions." I noted

that some people who had religious and ethical disagreements with me declared that I was heading down that road; in fact, I was probably driving the bus. I mused that some people even say that we are living hell on earth. If so, I pondered aloud, is this really a terrible road to be on? After all, I was a tenured, full professor. I lived a relatively comfortable life, making more than enough money. As a department chair, I only taught two classes per semester with plenty of flexibility and free time. I even had four months a year to do the other things I wanted to do: travel, write, volunteer. I say things in class and people actually write them down!

One student in the class, Becca, was a physically challenged and bound to a wheelchair. Although she had overcome many obstacles to get to where she was at the time, she faced them with courage, perseverance, and a good bit of humor. She was a young woman with deep faith and hope in the God she followed. She told the class that this was her question and she blurted out, "Fred, can I ride the bus with you?" Most students smiled but some eyes filled with tears. The students were very supportive of Becca within and without the class, and I would often see them talking with her, eating lunch with her, and encouraging her. Le Moyne students overall are really kind. They knew the challenges she faced and they offered help whenever she asked for it which, given her independent spirit, was very seldom.

A year later, Becca decided to have surgery that, if successful, would allow her to become even more independent. She knew the risks, but she insisted on going through with it. Becca died on the operating table.

When I think of her, which is often, I recall that classroom conversation and her response. A part of me wishes I had never come across as glib about this life being "hell on earth." While we all have challenges in our lives, mine could never compare to hers. I never confronted what she did daily, nor have I faced the risk she chose with her surgery. Her faith in herself and in God was strong; I wish I had a fraction of the courage she showed.

But one thought continues to give me hope. If the Christian understanding of God, Becca's God, is a God of love and the promise of abundant life beyond death is true, I am certain that Becca is now living eternal life to the fullest, hopefully driving a bus down that heavenly road welcoming all on board. And, when my time comes, I hope to be waiting at the bus stop as she pulls up so I can ask, "Becca, can I ride the bus with you?"

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