



Becoming Beholders: Cultivating Sacramental Imagination and Actions in College Classrooms

Eifler, Karen E.; and Landy, Thomas M., eds.
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Book Review

Tags: Catholic higher education | faith in the classroom | teaching for transformation

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This thought-provoking, insightful collection of twenty articles is directed toward teachers at Catholic colleges, but it is applicable to anyone who teaches in higher education and who comes to that task from a faith perspective. A wide variety of disciplines are represented, including art, literature, writing, chemistry, math, economics, sociology, communication, history, Spanish, and, of course, religion. The book's title and subtitle are suggestive. The title derives from a Hopkins poem, "Hurrahing in Harvest": "These things, these things were here and but the beholder / Wanting" (xii). "Sacramental imagination" in the subtitle is described as "a deeply Catholic perspective on the world, one that sees God manifest throughout the natural, created world" (ix). This perspective is cultivated through "Actions in College Classrooms." The authors therefore discuss in detail activities in courses that they have taught that relate to the topic of the book. They often quote from students' journals or essays as a means of demonstrating student learning. They also describe activities that go on outside the classroom, such as trips to museums, personal reflection during the week, and service with nonprofit agencies as additional ways by which the sacramental imagination is cultivated.

Several of these essays have appeared elsewhere, some in publications related to Collegium, a Catholic organization that describes itself as "a colloquy on faith and intellectual life". (Indeed, the book is featured prominently on the group's webpage.) The organization, Contemplative Mind in Society, is mentioned, as is the work of Parker Palmer. One, then, could see this book as part of a larger conversation about spirituality and education. Here a Catholic perspective on higher education is brought to bear. Incidentally, two authors have Wabash connections: Angela Kim Harkins was a Wabash fellow, and Anita Houck acknowledges a Wabash colloquy. The title of their essays are both representative: Houck's "You Are Here: Engagement,

Spirituality, and Slow Teaching,” and Harkins’ “Cultivating Empathy and Mindfulness: Religious Praxis.” Other interesting titles (and topics) include economist Peter Alonzi’s “Pauses,” English professor Melissa A. Goldthwaite’s “Rhetorics of Silence: A Pedagogy of Contemplation, Empathy, and Action,” and communications professor Jonathan M. Bowman’s “Mutual Benefice: Helping Students Find God in a Research Methods Course.”

Readers of this resource might be tempted to read only the articles written by professors of theology or religious studies. That approach might be a good entry point to the book, but the treat is to see how teachers in various disciplines are cultivating sacramental imagination in their classrooms. A particularly intriguing example was Stephanie Anne Salomone’s use of a “This I Believe” essay in a geometry course, thus “Linking the Mathematical Axiomatic Method with Personal Belief Systems.”

The concluding sentence of the book was fitting and invites reflection. Jonathan M. Bowman writes, “I have reinvigorated my own experience of transcendence as I teach and mentor my undergraduate students” (313). Reading this book – and pondering its implications for our teaching – can help us too “become beholders.”

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