

TEACHING
as
BELIEVING

Faith
IN THE UNIVERSITY



CHRIS ANDERSON

STUDIES IN RELIGION AND HIGHER EDUCATION 2

Teaching as Believing

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CHRIS ANDERSON



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Introduction

On Holy Saturday, Barb and I and the kids went hiking in the old growth forest of the Drift Creek Wilderness, not far from Waldport. It was a wonderful day, a day of healing. The fir and the spruce were as huge as we longed for, bigger around than two of us could reach, and they stretched out as far as the eye could see. There was that sense you get in both forests and cathedrals of height and breadth and depth, of the eye being led into deeper and deeper shadow, of intricacy and complexity, and yet, at the same time, of dignity. The sun broke through the branches just like in a poster, shafts of light extending ever further back.

We saw it and it was good. There was mystery and there was order. And it was dazzling, like the two dazzling men who speak to the women at the tomb in Luke's account of the resurrection (24:1–12). To walk in the light of those ancient trees was to feel all at once as if the stone had been rolled away from our lives.

So I report my experience, as the women reported theirs, fully prepared to be doubted, as they were doubted, as I doubt it myself much of the time.

I fall asleep and dream that I'm opening a door to a room that I didn't know was there and inside it there's a forest, a beautiful forest. When I wake up in the morning something has shifted inside of me. Somehow I feel light as a feather, tender, alert. I sit down at the computer and my writing gives way and the words come pouring out. I stop at the New Morning Bakery for a cinnamon roll and there's a friend I haven't seen for months. We sit and talk and I feel such pleasure in the presence of this person, in the sound of his voice, in the way he tells his story. Later in class everybody's excited about the reading, unexpectedly,

as if suddenly we're all a part of a story, with a plot and a movement and the hope of resolution.

Or maybe it's summer and the light is in the trees and I'm throwing the Frisbee with the kids, the dogs running around and barking. I stand back and fling that Frisbee as far as I can, and it glides through the air, hovering at the end, and the kids are rolling in the grass, laughing, and all at once I realize I've been praying. All morning I've been praying and I didn't know it.

I believe that the world is charged with the grandeur of God.

I believe that our hearts are restless until they rest in God.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the way to this God—the way, the truth, and the life.

How then do I teach the Bible at Oregon State University, and Augustine, and Dante, and the other Christian classics? How do any of us who are Christians teach what we teach, in whatever field, at the public university, or at any university, even religious universities—the American university, the postmodern university, the university where it sometimes seems that everyone is welcome except believers?¹

It's not that there's necessarily a conflict, because as Christians we also love our teaching and our writing. We are devoted to the intellectual life. We care deeply about our students. We respect and admire our colleagues, who are people, too, after all, with their own spiritual struggles and joys. The problem exists more in the culture of the university than in our own heads, though sometimes it's in our heads, too, and our hearts. There are days when the university seems to want to drain all of us of our humanity. To use Parker Palmer's terms in *The Courage to Teach*, his landmark study of the spirituality of education, how do we live in "integrity" as academics if our "identity" is also as believing Christians?

By being ourselves. By professing who we are.

By professing who we are while also respecting the good and necessary boundaries—boundaries that are good and necessary *for us*, as Christians. These are our boundaries, too. The university honors the many ways and truths and lives of human experience. So do we. The university insists that the grandeur of the world is difficult to read and that no single reading suffices. So do we. The university believes that the human heart should be restless, that the mind should always be open and searching. So do we. Christianity doesn't deny the methods of the intellect but moves beyond them, to a greater level of particularity, and what's important for us and our colleagues is that we always keep this in mind, both the commonality and the difference.

Thus: the way to be a good Christian is by being a good professor, and the way to be a good professor is by being a good Christian. But it's more than that, too. There's a greater urgency: we *need* the university, and the university needs us.

This is my argument in the book that follows, a book that is part teaching memoir, part argument and analysis; a book that dramatizes my own experience teaching a particular course at a particular place and time; a book that interprets this experience as representative for other Christian faculty.

Palmer says in *The Courage to Teach* that we should all tell each other stories, describing two kinds of moments, moments when we knew we were born to be teachers and moments when we wished we'd never been born. Technique is of "marginal utility," the advice of experts of little help (141). To grow as teachers and live "divided no more," we must first turn inward, exploring our own inner lives, then come back together and share what we've found (166). It's from these stories and from nowhere else, Palmer believes, that we learn the most about the complexity and the challenges of teaching. It's through these stories that we form "communities of congruence" within the larger institution, communities that can reform the university, slowly and incrementally, by giving us the strength to stay healthy within it (172).

I am not a biblical scholar. I am not a theologian, and the theology I know is Catholic, grounded in my training and experience as a Catholic deacon, though I am in the process of learning about a new postmodern evangelical and Protestant theology that has much in common with my own tradition.² I write as an amateur in all the disciplines I draw on, as a generalist, an essayist. My observations about faith and the Bible will be obvious to anyone with much experience—what I say about literature is what I say to sophomores. What follows in the next six chapters are simply some of my own stories and the inferences I make from them, inferences about the nature of education and the role of faith in the intellectual life. My hope is that by sharing these experiences I will encourage you to share your own. My hope is that for a moment we will draw together into our own brief community of congruence, or what Palmer's late friend Henri Nouwen would have called a "community of resistance" (*Seeds of Hope* 176).

Here in the introduction I map out my argument in more detail and explain its underlying assumptions, drawing in particular on the theory of Paul Ricoeur. I also tell the first of my stories, the larger, framing story of the last ten years of my life, since what I have to say grows out of this experience of retreat and return, conversion and reengagement. This is my most important assumption—the assumption underneath Palmer's

call for stories, the assumption that Ricouer helps us better understand: that ideas always grow out of experience, that what we think is grounded in who we are.

The issues take shape for me during a sabbatical year, when I leave the university to teach at a Catholic seminary. They come to a head when I return, the first day of the Literature of Western Civilization, the sophomore survey course that I enact in the chapters that follow. By this point, inspired by my experience at the seminary, I have gone on to be ordained myself, and it's in the tension between these two vocations, as a minister and a teacher, that I come to understand the line that we are always crossing and that we have to cross.

A Teaching Moment

The first day of fall term. Leaves are turning. Students are filing into the room, a long line of backpacks and caps, and I'm standing at the door, handing out the syllabus for the class, a sophomore survey course called "The Literature of Western Civilization." Most public universities offer a course like this, a survey of the great books from Homer to the Bible to Dante to the moderns, and mine is much the same. I use an anthology. I assign journals and papers. I break the class up into discussion groups. There are as many nonmajors as majors in the course, good, smart engineering and forestry students without much experience reading literature.

People sit down and the room grows quiet. As the stragglers keep coming in I start explaining how the course will work, the reading and the assignments. Maybe leaf blowers are already going out in the quad. Maybe the rain has already started, students sitting in their desks with wet hair and soggy Polartecs. First days are important. Impressions are made, an atmosphere set. Usually I ask the students to do a freewriting exercise recording their expectations, the first of many freewrites in and out of class over the term, bursts of raw, unedited writing good for warming up and capturing what people are really thinking.

And when I'm done with the requirements and the reading and the grading, I always tell these classes that I am a deacon.

I am a full-time English professor, I say, but I am also an ordained minister for the Catholic Church and active in both parish and campus ministry. Deacons are usually married men and usually work full time in their own secular professions, but they are called out of these professions, as I have been, to baptize babies and witness marriages and preside at funerals and communion services and to proclaim the gospel at Mass and to give the homily, a reflection on the Scripture for that day.

I joke that students should come to Mass now and then—at least if they want a good grade—then, seriously, that of course atheists can get

A's, Catholics F's. Most of my students are unchurched, without a lot of background in organized religion, and it's tricky to talk about religion right away, particularly Catholicism, which even now, in my part of the country, draws out an instinctive anti-Catholic bias. I always feel a little nervous, as if I've brought up something risky and personal, which of course I have. Universities, even public universities, in America as in Europe, were established jointly by both church and state, no strict separation assumed. Clergymen were the first teachers of literature as of everything else, but that sense of the relation between faith and reason has long since pulled apart into all our current pluralisms. The extreme religious right has captured the public discussion, the newspapers reduce the issues to easy oppositions, and the average person assumes that faith must be merely a private matter, not a subject for discussion in Moreland Hall, Oregon State University, or any other public place.

Like all faculty of faith I of course understand the real boundaries: no preaching. In a classroom at a state university I must be open to all points of view, to all faiths and varieties of doubt, as I am, and I must teach as "objectively" as possible, which of course I never do. No teacher can. Objectivity isn't possible or desirable, in the teaching of the Bible or in the teaching of any other subject, and that's the reason I talk about my own situatedness as a reader. Partly, I'm trying to be honest. Partly, since our focus will be the Christian classics, I'm hoping to suggest a kind of personal competence, on the same principle that an engineering class should be taught by an engineer—or appropriateness, as in a woman teaching women's literature, an African American teaching African American literature.

But deeper than that what I'm trying to do on that first day is to begin the process of complicating how my students understand the nature of meaning and of truth. That's what I take to be the purpose of the university: to complicate, to show that there's more than meets the eye, that the world is a much bigger and more interesting place than we often assume it is. Not everyone thinks as we think, not everyone takes for granted what we take for granted, and coming to know this is the beginning of humility and so of wisdom. What we know is rooted in who we are. Knowledge is always grounded in faith, in belief, of one kind or another, and by talking about mine I am inviting students to think about theirs.

I talk about my faith in the classroom both the first day and throughout the term—talk about it, not urge it on anyone else, not try to convert—because I want to help students think past the assumptions implied in the following response from Will, a freewrite from several weeks later in the term. I had asked the class, in light of our discussions to that point, to return to the first day and to think about why I had confessed to my

own faith. Should I have talked about being a deacon? Should I refer to my faith as I often do?

Will responds:

What I really want from you is an objective look at the reading. I understand that the Bible has played a large role in your life, which I consider personally admirable. But I do not think that you should express how much effect the book has had on you as much as you do in class. I think we would all be able to think clearly about it if we could further detach from the religious implications of what we are reading. I think you should supply as many multiple interpretations of the Bible as you can, even if they are negative.

This is an intelligent and courteous paragraph written by an intelligent and courteous student, a student who did well in the class. Its views are not uninformed and neither are they unrepresentative. Many good people would agree. Which is the point. What this freewrite expresses so clearly are the unexpressed assumptions of many in the university, assumptions that students learn from teachers and classmates, that they take in both through what their classes are teaching and how they are taught: that knowledge is true knowledge only when it's "detached," that effective reading is reading that never shows the "personal effect" of the text on the reader. What this freewriting expresses are the apparent assumptions of many students and colleagues about religion an religious life, that a faithful reading of the Bible isn't "multiple" but singular and dogmatic, that a faithful reading of the Bible never engages anything negative or complicated or fully and really human—that religion is both one dimensional and unrealistic—that the only mode of religious discourse is preaching and that this preaching must be pushy and narrow, a knock on the door and a tract shoved in the face—that faith is divorced from reason, that religious life and religious texts can't be seen as in any way related to the intellectual life of the university.

The History of This Moment

The first day of the term is not of course the first day of the university but one of a long line of days, and it's important to have a sense of this history:³ how the university began in the Middle Ages in the monasteries, the learning of Greek and Latin literature seen as a means to the end of reading the Bible and understanding the Mass; how this system of education expanded beyond the monasteries to parish schools and then further into the larger community, including more and more of the laity, until the establishment of the great medieval universities in Bologna and Paris and Oxford and Cambridge; how for centuries faith and the

university were seen not as opponents but as allies, as necessarily inter-dependent.

From the beginning there was tension, and this is key. A tension is inherent. Rather than “ally” it might be more accurate to see reason as the servant of faith, but a servant that more and more begins to resist the master, getting stronger and stronger in the Renaissance, under the influence of science and technology and the rise of the middle class, until finally, in Modernism, the servant breaks away and becomes the master. The church is then in the subordinate position, still involved if less influential, until finally it is excluded altogether, pushed to the boundaries.

This process of reversal has taken place more gradually than we might expect, even in this country, even given the first amendment. But it has taken place, as my student Will demonstrated. The founders never intended the separation of church and state to become the wall that it has become in the last fifty years of American law and politics. Harvard and Yale were founded on a Protestant ideal of the church serving the state and the state the church. Even into the twentieth century land grant colleges like Oregon State required chapel attendance and offered courses in the Bible, not as literature, but as a moral guide for citizens. Campus ministries have only recently been pushed outside the university and across the street. For two centuries there was an assumed, often unconscious alliance of Protestantism and democratic values in this country—but an alliance that gradually drained religion of any but its most generic moral qualities, until finally even those qualities were drained away. Led by John Dewey and other reformers, American education set out to eliminate the irrational influence of religion.

For a moment, as Christianity began to lose its influence, university professors became conveyors of general spiritual values, liberal education a substitute for catechism and creed, before the German model of professionalism broke up the disciplines into pseudo-scientific specialties more and more removed from real life concerns. Now, in the twenty-first century, the paradigm for the university has become the global economy, students reduced to customers and education to product, regulated not by values but by profit.

A tradition of important books critiques and resists these movements and forces, a tradition that extends from Cardinal John Henry Newman’s seminal *The Idea of the University*, written in the nineteenth century but reflecting the high medieval synthesis; to Walter Moberly’s *The Crisis of the University*, actually written by a group of English clergy after the Second World War and reflecting a modernist approach to Christianity; to David Tracy’s *Plurality and Ambiguity*,⁴ a defense of Christianity in the terms of postmodernism, building on the theory of Paul Ricoeur. My argument is theirs, and before them, Augustine’s, who is at the heart of

this tradition as he is at the heart of Christianity. What Newman and Moberly and Tracy do in their own terms is to work out Augustine's first intuitions, in the *Confessions* and later in *On Christian Doctrine* and the *City of God*, about the relation of reason and faith, education and conversion. Augustine is at the heart of this book: his longing for God, his sense of the otherness of God, his struggle to understand the logic of the incarnation. His joy.

Those who argue for a return to some uncomplicated union of intellect and belief are arguing for something that never existed and wouldn't be healthy anyway, true either to the university or to the moral life, least of all in twenty-first-century America. Yes, it's silly that Christianity is the only "ism" excluded from public discussion on campus. Yes, it's silly that even the name "Christian" can make colleagues uncomfortable. The creative tension between faith and reason has been reduced to an easy opposition, the reversal of the binary has gone much too far, and in response there is now a powerful and healthy movement in this country, led by Palmer, to restore the place of spirituality in the lives of faculty and in the intellectual life of the campus—spirituality in appropriately general and inclusive terms.

But like Palmer, I am not arguing that one set of values be made dominant again, in the university or in the country.⁵ Campus ministries are right where they should be, on the boundaries, separate and distinct, because however recent a development, however American, such a distancing and separation is in keeping with the aims of Christianity at its origins. It circles back to the deepest nature of faith, which is to be prophetic, which is to exist in a creative and complicated opposition to power, a role that was understood even when the universities were the handmaid of the church, a role that defined what it meant to be a handmaid.

Whatever their time and place, Christians at their best have always professed the radical humility of faith. Augustine was postmodern sixteen centuries ago. "Since it is God we are speaking of," he says, "you do not understand it. If you could understand it, it would not be God" (Wills xii).⁶ I rely heavily on Newman's *The Idea of the University* in the chapters that follow, reflecting on its claims in my own context. I rely heavily on Ricouer and on Tracy, in their insistence on the limits of knowledge. But underneath their thinking for me is always Augustine's clear and pervasive sense both of God's inexplicability and of his searching love.

Orthodoxy is the insistence on the limits of our knowledge and our language and our traditions. What is infallible is not human judgment or creativity, but the mystery of God. Thus our need for pluralism. Thus our necessary respect for people of other faiths and variety of doubt.

The Controlling Metaphor: Crossing the Line

My argument, then, depends on paradox.

Christian faculty too often feel discounted and excluded by the university. That's been my own experience as a professor of English who is also a Catholic deacon: The university either ignores my faith or sees it as a potential problem. But this is wrong. Faith isn't irrelevant to the intellectual life. Faith isn't a threat to pluralism. In fact, Christian faculty are necessary to the public university, central to its mission, because they call the intellect to humility.

Intellectuals too often feel discounted and excluded by the church. That's been my own experience as a Catholic deacon who is also a professor of English: The church either ignores my profession or sees it as a potential problem. But this is wrong. The intellectual life isn't irrelevant to faith. Pluralism isn't a threat. In fact, the university is necessary for the church, central to its mission, because it calls faith to humility.

The tension underneath these two parallel claims is the tension that defines Christianity, the creative and redeeming tension, and to represent that tension in the structure of this book I've used the central image of Christian faith, the cross itself, organizing the six central chapters into a chiasmic design.

On another level these chapters progress as readings of certain central texts in turn. My conceit is to dramatize my teaching of the Literature of Western Civilization—Genesis, Mark, and Homer in the fall, Augustine in the winter, Dante and the resurrection in the spring (though I don't necessarily teach these texts in this order, and of course I teach more texts than this—*Oedipus*, for example, and later *Don Quixote*, *The Prelude*, others—not focusing as much on the Bible as I do here). My concerns are first the concerns of pedagogy and of literary study, centered on the teaching of literature and writing.

But I believe that what's true for the teaching of literature and writing is also true for teaching in other disciplines, not just in the humanities but also in the sciences. What applies to the critical reading of Genesis or Homer applies to the reading of a culture, or a forest, and deeper than that, applies to an understanding of what it means to be a believer, what it means to come to a faith. By recreating my own teaching of the Bible as Literature and these other great literary texts I mean to establish ideas that can lead both to a theory of higher education and an understanding of faith.

This is where the chiasmic structure comes into play. The image of the cross can help us understand the creative tension between faith and reason not just in the reading of literature but in all reading, all living.

Think of the three parts of any cross: the horizontal beam, the vertical beam, and the place where the two come together.

Chapters 1 and 2, under the heading *The Way of the University*, work along the broad horizontal beam of that cross. Here I reflect on my experience teaching Genesis and Mark as a way of talking about the secular work of the public university in any department, in the sciences or the humanities. This line is “horizontal” in the sense of being earthly and everyday, without benefit of meaning that might come from “above.”

Chapters 5 and 6, under the heading *The Way of Faith*, work along the vertical shaft of the cross, the beam of commitment and of love, ours for God and God’s for us. Here I reflect on my experience in the classroom and in the church as a believing Christian, experience that is “vertical” in the sense that it has to do with meaning that does come from “above” or “beyond” the everyday work that we do in universities.

In between, in the two chapters I include under the heading *Intersections*, I describe several moments in the fall and winter term of the course, when in discussions of Homer’s *Odyssey* and Augustine’s *Confessions* my faith seemed to intersect my life in the classroom, to cut right through it—startling moments, challenging moments—moments when the way of the university and the way of faith didn’t seem at odds but somehow, scandalously, in harmony.

The image of the cross serves as a powerful way of thinking, suggesting both limit and connection, intersection and divergence, and using a passage from Newman’s *The Idea of the University* in the beginning of each of the six chapters, I keep returning to its possibilities. The metaphor isn’t static. The six chapters shouldn’t be read out of order, as I’ve described them above, with *Intersections* emphasized last. The book has a plot and a plot that builds, moving from one through six in a sequence based on Ricouer’s idea that “mystery gives rise to story gives rise to thought.” The work of the university is not to endorse a particular interpretation of a story but to show that any one interpretation is always provisional, one among many. This is the theoretical model that I establish in the next chapter, blending Ricouer’s heuristic into my own, and it leads through the complications of the middle chapters and then to the final claims of the fifth and sixth, and beyond, into the conclusion, a final reflection on the faith of my students. The line of faith passes through the line of the university, powerfully, but then it keeps on going, further and further, and sometimes my students, too, follow where it leads.

The endnotes consider a number of more academic and background issues, issues that I’ve wanted to keep out of the text itself, engaging in particular the history of the university and questions of postmodernism.

Faith can be the test of diversity. As Christians we should join in the multicultural and inclusive and chaotic world that has become the university in the twenty-first century. We can deepen this diversity. But at

the same time there is a limit, there is a line between church and state, however fuzzy—the line between “story” and “thought” in Ricouer’s sequence—and that line is necessary and good, for both sides. Diversity is also the test of faith. Faith and the university need each other exactly because of the tension that exists between them.

Yes, we should cross the line, I will say in the end, but not in the classroom. We should cross it by leaving the classroom, walking away from the limitations of the intellect and finding completion in what only faith can provide. This is how it is in the *Divine Comedy*, where Virgil as the symbol of reason can take Dante only as far as the Earthly Paradise, the pinnacle of human achievement. Only Beatrice, the symbol of grace, can carry him into Paradise. Even at religious schools, as Pope John Paul II says in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*—in a comment that applies to religious schools of all kinds, Catholic, Protestant, and evangelical—“emphasis is placed on how human reason in its reflection opens to increasingly broader questions, and how the complete answer to them can only come through faith” (18).⁷

What’s at stake in this crossing isn’t just the welfare of another special interest group. As Moberly put it a generation ago, Christian faculty, exactly as Christians, have an obligation to “call the university to *be* the university” (26). Our campuses are in crisis, more now than in the last century—the reversal has gone even further, intensified by the market forces of the global economy—and as Christians we have it in our power to form a “creative minority” within the institution, as Moberly says (141), a minority that sounds a lot like Palmer’s communities of congruence or Nouwen’s communities of resistance, a minority that can help renew and reform higher education. As Christians we have a separate source of strength and authority, one outside the structure of the university, and it’s exactly because of this that we can and should speak, exactly because of our distance. We have a contribution to make, a unique contribution, from the other side of the line.

The Circuitous Journey

Within the logic of this “crossing” design, I work through narrative and reflection on narrative in the chapters that follow, in the tradition of spiritual autobiography, of “confession” in Augustine’s own sense, not of confessing one’s sins but of “testifying,” as Garry Wills explains (xiv–xv), reporting all the ways in which God has been active in my life and heart and mind. Though my purpose is to make and sustain a larger argument, and though I devote the bulk of this book to that purpose, my argument begins and ends in my own experience—not because I think that my experience is unique but because I know that it isn’t, because the truths

that I am trying to understand are embodied in the concrete moment, available in their fullness only there.

Form is the shape of content. A certain style is appropriate for certain subjects. "Pride asserts, humility testifies" is how Augustine puts it (Wills xii), which is to say that for him the very perfection and mystery of God requires the humility, and edginess, and imperfection of his own rough autobiographical style, just as the Incarnation requires the telling of his own story. If God reveals himself within us, if God makes himself known in what Augustine calls "drops of time" (*Confessions* 258; 11.2), we most honor and describe him when we honor and describe our own experience, in all its particulars. *That's* where God is, in the mirror in the morning, on the street, in the green hills. As James McClendon puts it in *Biography as Theology*: "Narrative or *story* is a means of expression uniquely suited to theology or at least to Christian theology" (158). Or as novelist and memoirist Frederick Buechner says of his own writing, "if I talk about these things less as lecturer than as storyteller, more anticly than academically, more concretely than conceptually, it is not only because I can do no other but because it is also the way I believe I have heard my life talk to me if my life talks to me, the way even God talks to me if God talks to me" (*Alphabet of Grace* 12–13).

This is how it is in my own life. A personal history leads to that moment in the classroom, too, the first day of the Literature of Western Civilization. My argument grows out of a story, a story that began several years before when I took a leave from Oregon State to teach at Mount Angel, a diocesan seminary run by Benedictine monks, fifty miles northeast of town. The abbey and the abbey church rise up on a hill above the valley, among the seminary classrooms and dorms, and my wife and I would commute there every weekday, to the monastery, through the rolling fields and farms, from one world, one time, to another, back and forth. She took classes towards her Masters degree in theology and I taught introductory literature courses to small groups of seminarians in the undergraduate and pre-theology program, men from all over the world studying for the priesthood.

I leapt at the chance to escape the hiring committees and the library full of esoteric and pointless scholarship, the bickering and the quiet enmities of any English department, any institution, public or otherwise, and I was fleeing, too, a deepening clinical depression, a slow, deadly paralysis of mind and heart, though I didn't know this at first. What renewed and refreshed me about the seminary was partly its provincialism, its small scale, its ignorance of the critical debates and increasingly dispiriting theoretical discussions that have long been draining English studies of their purpose and life. I *was* the English department at Mount Angel Seminary, it was just me and *The Norton*