

Teaching “The Christian Tradition” and “Global History”  
An Interdisciplinary Journey Towards Religious Literacy

By

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Colloquial Paper Intended for Academic Faculty

Several years ago when I began teaching in the religion program at LaSalle University in Philadelphia, there was a student in my first year Christian Tradition course who was also enrolled in a Global History course. One day she commented that the Christian Tradition course should be taught as a “double.” A double is a pair of linked courses. Each double offering at LaSalle University consists of the two courses, intentionally paired together. The same group of twenty students is enrolled in each of the two courses; the professors of the two courses teach in such a manner as to enable the students to develop skills in making interdisciplinary relationships between elements in the curricula of the two courses.

The young woman who suggested that Christian Tradition be doubled or linked with Global History was also enrolled in a Global History course in which the students asked frequent questions about Christianity. The history professor and the students alike were turning to the student in my Christian Tradition course who, it developed, was well equipped to respond because she was taking the Christian Tradition course.

As a result of this student’s suggestion, the Christian Tradition-Global History double became a reality a few semesters later; it is currently being taught at LaSalle University for the

seventh semester. While initially the double comprised "The Christian Tradition" and "Global History to the Reformation" courses, in recent semesters the linked courses have been "Christian Tradition" and "Global History from the Reformation to the Present."

When History Professor Jeffrey La Monica and I met for the first time in order to explore how we would link the two courses, we discovered that each of us utilizes primary source writings in the course of our teaching. Together we selected readings which had significance both in the Christian Tradition and in Global History. We assigned the presentation of critical spoken and written group reports to the students as the expression of their joint work in fulfillment of the double requirement.

This paper portrays the goals and methodology through which our first year university students endeavor to develop the art and skills of rhetoric (reading, thinking, writing, speaking) in their work with primary sources dating from the Reformation to the present. Emphasis is upon developing literacy in religion and history, and utilizing critical thinking skills to probe relationships between religious and historical perspectives on key ideas and events during the past five hundred years. It should be stressed that the primary purpose of this paper is to illustrate specific forms of pedagogy and written assignments which have been developed to strengthen students' critical thinking processes. In addition, impressions gleaned by the religion professor from recent teaching and research experiences are incorporated into the paper; these impressions have led to an enhanced approach to the curriculum. A secondary purpose of the paper is to explore two components of an enhanced approach: Problem-Based Learning as a means of inquiry and faith formation in the academic curriculum.

## Goals

In general, the goals of the Christian Tradition course in the LaSalle University Doubles Program include the following: first, to develop background knowledge with respect to the Christian Tradition during the past 500 years; second, to foster skills of rhetoric (reading, thinking, writing, speaking) with respect to primary source readings in the Christian Tradition and in Global History; third, to teach first year university students to engage in critical thinking and writing, and to thereby make interdisciplinary connections between religion and history; fourth, to respond to students' expressed desires to know more about their Christian faith background; and fifth, to contribute indirectly to young adult faith formation.

In particular, this paper depicts efforts towards the implementation of goals two and three above. It describes classroom and research forms of pedagogy geared towards critical analysis of primary source readings. It also portrays forms of pedagogy aimed to enable students to articulate relationships between the disciplines of religion and history through the use of specific primary source texts. A kind of "religious and historical literacy" is one of the ultimate goals.

The final section of the paper treats of recent revisions which are currently being incorporated into the religion course syllabus. The revisions are being added in view of reflection upon the praxis of critical forms of pedagogy. These revisions address goals four and five above and aim to incorporate the contextual background of students into the structure of the course.

The paper also aims to contribute to the literature on linked courses which are solely "content-based." This addresses a lacuna due to the fact that the greater part of the literature on linked courses is directed towards a combination which is "content-based" and "application-based,"

for example, religion and writing or history and speech. Furthermore, very little, if any, of the literature on linked courses discusses content or forms of pedagogy utilized in religion.<sup>1</sup>

### Methodology

With respect to content, initially, students complete an introductory unit in each course: Religion in Jesus' Time in Christian Tradition, and Islam and the Western World in Global History. These two units are taught separately in order to enable the instructors to insert material which they consider to be pre-requisite to understanding the remainder of each course. A review of religion in Jesus' time is deemed essential to a course in the Christian Tradition. In addition, the two separate units provide students with a common foundation for each course, as an individual course, as distinct from the double or linked course. The remaining three units, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Modern Era, are taught in each course: Christian Tradition and Global History.

This paper focuses upon the Reformation and Martin Luther (one of several key Reformation leaders), as a means of illustrating the critical thinking processes and the writing assignment. What is written applies equally to the Enlightenment and the Modern Era, as well as to important figures within each of the three religious and historical periods.

From the perspective of the Christian Tradition course, in the case of the Reformation, students are often interested in the reasons why different denominations exist within the Christian Tradition and how they came to be. At the same time they tend to bring a rather naïve uncritical sense to their reading of the different theologians. This is perhaps understandable given

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<sup>1</sup> Luebke, Steven R. Using Linked Courses in the General Education Curriculum. *Academic Writing*.

[http://aw.colostate.edu/articles/luebke\\_2002.htm](http://aw.colostate.edu/articles/luebke_2002.htm) Publication date: May 7, 2002. Retrieved October 7, 2002.

the fact that they are first year university students. They tend to view the collective contribution of the reformers, both Protestant and Catholic, with little awareness that in fact, the reformers often disagreed with one another in their respective interpretations of Christian teaching and belief. Furthermore students do not usually grasp that there was often strong feeling about the differing interpretations, so that one reformer did not necessarily accept the ideas and reforms put forth by another. Through work with the primary source readings, the professors aim to have the students clarify their concepts about the Reformation.

In teaching the Reformation, both Protestant and Catholic, the religion instructor has two major goals in mind for the students. The students should become acquainted with some of the reformers as human persons with qualities of leadership and genuine human struggles. They should also develop a sense of "the church," an institution which embodies and teaches Christian beliefs and principles, and yet is comprised of human persons who bring both strengths and limitations to their roles as leaders. Among the primary source readings used by students in the unit on The Reformation are excerpts from: Martin Luther's *Table Talk*, The Council of Trent's *Decrees*, John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, and John and Charles Wesley's *Collection of Hymns*.<sup>2</sup> In addition to these readings which comprise the Reformation focus of the Christian Tradition-Global History link, other primary source readings are also utilized in the Christian Tradition course in order to broaden students' understanding of some of the personalities and issues of the Reformation era. Among these are

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<sup>2</sup> Andrea, Alfred, and Overfield, James. The Human Record: Sources of Global History. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005. 72-75, 76-79.

Harrington, Joel. A Cloud of Witnesses: Readings in the History of Western Christianity. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 249-254, 273-277, 330-332.

Martin Luther's account of how he came to realize the importance of justification by faith alone<sup>3</sup>, and Ignatius Loyola's *Discernment of Spirits* as found in his *Spiritual Exercises*<sup>4</sup>. In reading and discussing these additional sources, the instructor wants students to understand that each reforming person or body brought a unique life experience and perspective to the question of reform. Another of the instructor's goals for the students is that they understand that each reformer saw the need for reform in a unique manner.

Martin Luther, for example, is introduced during the Christian Tradition course, as a young man who, in frightening circumstances early in his lifetime, made a decision to become an Augustinian monk. Students have an opportunity to reflect upon the circumstances in which important decisions are made and the role of freedom in decision-making and in making commitments. Students ordinarily do not perceive Luther as related to much of their previous knowledge, except perhaps to the Lutheran denomination of the Christian Tradition. It is important that they note Luther's connection with Augustine, and hence, the fact that he was well educated in moral and biblical theology. Students read a short piece, written later in Luther's life, in which he recalls how he came to the dramatic realization that one is justified by faith alone.<sup>5</sup> Luther is also given considerable attention in the history course, as his life and work had significant impact upon the development of western civilization.

While the entire class becomes familiar with Luther in each course, one study group of students reads his *Table Talk* and develops its presentation. While the reading is just a few pages

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<sup>3</sup> Luther, Martin. "Discovery of the Righteousness of God." In McGrath, Alister E. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. The Christian Theology Reader. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001, 418-420.

<sup>4</sup> Fleming, David L., ed., The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978. 203-213.

<sup>5</sup> Luther, 418-420.

long, it contains a number of examples in which Luther points to irony and contradiction in the church. Most first year university students tend not to notice the subtlety in Luther's thinking. The critical thinking tools contained in the classroom process for the Christian Tradition - Global History link help to direct students towards an understanding of the criticism implied in Luther's words. The critical thinking tools discussed below provide the professors with a language through which they can encourage students to think deeply about what they are reading in relation to what they are currently learning in both the religion and the history courses. Some students will, then, grasp the deeper significance of Luther's words.

With respect to critical thinking processes, generally speaking, students present their findings more extensively and with greater confidence when they are given a structure upon which to base their presentations. The main purpose of this paper is to illustrate the sculpting of forms through which students develop processes of critical thinking. The structure for the presentations, designed and honed over the course of nearly seven semesters of experience, is derived from literature on co-operative learning, team development and critical thinking.<sup>3</sup>

During the first week of the semester, the students are arbitrarily divided into five study groups of four students each. Ordinarily, membership of the groups remains consistent throughout the semester.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, David, Johnson, Roger, and Smith, Karl. Active Learning: Cooperative Learning in the College Classroom. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co., 1991.

Katzenbach, Jon R. The Wisdom of Teams. New York: Harper Business, 1994.

Paul, Richard, and Elder, Linda. Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2001.

Each student within a given group is assigned a specific role in preparing for the group presentation. One student investigates the author of the reading; highlights of the author's biography are presented along with his/her seeming purpose in writing the piece. A second student explores the context in which the reading was developed, and then provides a summary of its content.

A third student notes significant concepts. Often the significant concepts relate directly to one or both courses. In addition, the third presenter draws attention to assumptions, which may be inherent in the reading, and explains why the reading is important. Identification of significant concepts, seeking assumptions and explaining the importance of the reading involve more abstract thinking than exploration of author, purpose, context and content.

The fourth student draws inferences from the reading and notes the connections, both explicit and implicit between the reading and one or both of the courses; he or she may also draw connections to other areas of knowledge, recent events, and other areas of interest. Abstract thinking is continued through the development of inferences and connections.

Students are encouraged to assume different roles in presenting each report, so that during the course of the semester each student has the opportunity to approach a primary source from a different vantage point. Such rotation of responsibilities allows students to think about the source material in different ways. Further, a student who has had a little experience with one intellectual perspective is in a good position to teach another who may be trying the particular critical thinking skill for the first time in a formal setting. Students indicate that occasionally the primary source readings are incomprehensible; however, when each member of the group communicates his or her particular findings about the reading to the others, the combined knowledge results in the ability to grasp and interpret the reading and its relevance for one or

both courses. This co-operative, team-based, critically structured approach provides students with tools for learning and enables them to become agents in their own education. They become more proficient as the semester progresses. In addition, they develop a collaborative style and sometimes ease in working together.

Evaluation of the content of presentations is based upon the students' ability to demonstrate the eight above-mentioned critical thinking skills: author, purpose, and context of the reading, summary of content, significant concepts and assumptions, importance of the reading, inferences and connections. Evaluation of the communication style is based upon: organization of the presentation, voice projection, pronunciation and enunciation of words, eye contact, and ability to speak in an engaged manner to the listeners. Each instructor provides an evaluation of each student's work; ordinarily the students in a given study group receive the same grade, except when it is apparent that a particular student's contribution should be evaluated differently.

Each instructor then develops a writing assignment pertinent to each study group's primary source reading. Members of a given group each complete the two writing assignments independently, although any individual may draw upon common knowledge, sources and understandings derived through collaborative work on the reading. Thus, using the same primary source reading, each student in a given group develops two short pieces of critically reflective writing, one related to religion and the other related to history.

In the case of Martin Luther's *Table Talk*, a writing assignment in religion such as the following might be given:

Luther believed in the importance of faith in God's love and grace, particularly as demonstrated by the life, death and saving love of Jesus. He spoke out against

many examples of what he considered to be false teachings and ways of living in the church. As you reflect upon *Table Talk*, select one example of Luther's criticism of the church. Explain what Luther seems to be saying and describe how the context of the times in which he was living sheds light on the deeper meaning of his comments.

Do you think that Luther was simply calling for a return to the simple direct faith Jesus taught his first followers to follow? Or, on the other hand, do you think that Luther's criticism is unduly strident and perhaps out of order? Perhaps your thinking lies in the midst of these two extremes. Explain your reasons. Conclude your paper by describing how working on it has helped you to understand the Reformation. The paper is to be between 2-3 pages long and according to the usual format as described in the course syllabus.

Upon completion of critical reading and writing related to the Reformation, students should have begun to conceive of the Reformation from an interdisciplinary perspective. They should be able to:

Note the theme of reform in the *New Testament* and come to understand the nature and necessity of reform from time to time in the church.

Identify and explain some of the specific significant Protestant and Catholic reform efforts towards reform.

Grasp differing theological perspectives on the Eucharist, developed during the Reformation.

Note different styles of reform and the differing concepts of the role of authority during a time of reform.

Understand the differing approaches to authority within Catholicism and Protestantism, and explain the origins of these differences.

In a more concrete realm, students should have a deeper understanding of approaches to the Christian Tradition which differ from their own. In addition, students should be able to explain how a religious perspective on events illumines the historical, and similarly, how the historical perspective grounds the religious. Finally, students should be able to propose models for reformation, which could be implemented in contemporary times.

The refinement of the critical thinking processes detailed above represents a synthesis of considerable collaboration, thought, reading, experimentation, and development over the course of seven semesters. Both professors have taken appropriate pride in their students because they have indeed developed academic skills and thereby learned course content at a grounded cognitive level during their first year in the university.

However, there came a point when, this religion professor, began to realize that something was amiss in the religion course. Students were not taking the same delight in their use of critical skills in the study of religion and religious texts as the professor was taking for them. Were they too young as scholars in religion? Did they have a mindset about religion that no amount of critical study could possibly alter? Some responses to these questions had to be found!

The clues which eventually became evident led to the religion professor's deepened conviction as to the importance of the critical thinking approach. At the same time, the importance of designing the syllabus with greater emphasis upon course goals four and five above also became apparent. Previously, the particular Christian faith background of individual students and their young adult faith formation were areas believed to be outside the realm of an

academic course. Students had stated these goals; they were heard but not acted upon by the professor. Nevertheless, it had been sincerely hoped that students would derive material from the academic course which would indirectly address their expressed interests in particular denominational backgrounds and religious formation. It now became time to revisit this point of view. A pedagogical conversion was in the making.

### An Enhanced Approach

During the fall semester of 2004, critical thinking and writing processes were becoming more finely tuned. At that time, students and professor had the good fortune to participate in "Teaching Introductory Theology and Religion: Lessons from the Practices of Fifty Effective Teachers," a nationwide nondenominational study co-sponsored by the Wabash Center and Notre Dame University. While the study is currently in progress, it became the occasion for the professor to reflect through a course journal at the end of each class session and to have extended conversations with other faculty also involved in the study. In addition, Dr. Barbara Walvoord, the principal researcher in the Wabash-Notre Dame study, made reference to *what the best college teachers do* (2004) by Ken Bain. As a result a decision was made to act upon students' desires to understand their unique faith backgrounds and to help them attend, through the course, to their own faith formation.

In order to address the students' desires to learn more about their particular faith traditions, (course goal four above) Problem-Based Learning is being incorporated into classroom practice.<sup>6</sup> Students have, for example, the opportunity to learn more about the

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<sup>6</sup> White, Harold B. III, "A PBL Course That Uses Research Articles as Problems." In Duch, Barbara J., Groh, Susan E., and Allen, Deborah E. The Power of Problem Based Learning. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 131-140.

Curators of University of Missouri-Columbia. Center for Religions, the Professions and the Public, General Honors 1030, Religion and the Professions, Problem-Based Learning. Copyright 2005. Accessed 17 October 2005.

contemporary Lutheran denomination and its approach to the Christian Tradition. They engage in self-generated questions and research with supervision and mentoring from their religion professor. There is heightened interest and enthusiasm. One can observe that the Problem-Based Learning approach supports the projects undertaken by students in fulfillment of the double course work. A professional learning environment, student confidence and greater spontaneity characterize the class sessions.

Related to student faith formation (goal five above), Bain documents the significance of providing opportunities for personal development related to course content in the classroom setting across disciplines. Highly acclaimed graduate and undergraduate professors in a variety of subject areas intentionally incorporate opportunities for developing students' vocations in the field of the subject matter being studied. For example, a medical student might acquire clinical reasoning skills, and yet find it extremely difficult to confront the emotions arising around grave illness and death. The instructor might then build some opportunities to acquire grief-counseling skills into the course. At the same time the instructor develops alternate ways to present course material, so that the syllabus is, in fact, enriched rather than depleted.<sup>7</sup>

How does one provide opportunities for personal development in the field of religion in the university classroom? It was decided to ask the students' consent to experiment with a form of simple meditation practiced in some interdenominational settings where both Christian and non-Christian traditions are embraced, and to adapt the practice as needed.<sup>8</sup> After two months,

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<<http://rpp.missouri.edu/religious/gh1030-pbl.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> Bain, Ken. what the best college teachers do. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. 89-97.

<sup>8</sup>The Cloud of Unknowing. Ed. William Johnston. New York: Doubleday, 1973.

Goldstein, Joseph. The Experience of Insight: A Simple and Direct Guide to Buddhist Meditation. Boulder, CO:

while students are realistic about some of the limitations of such an approach, they are unanimous in their desire to continue. Anonymously written comments demonstrate the students' hunger to embark upon the personal religious journey, and their desires and abilities to reflect upon their experience. They are able to allow others space to do likewise, and they demonstrate a capacity to think in religious language appropriate to the geography of spiritual growth. With the passing of time a deepened sense of respect and reverence has begun to be evident in the religion classroom. Students are not only learning about religion; they seem to be experiencing it in some way.

### Conclusion

The primary goal of this paper is to articulate how a linked course in the Christian Tradition and Global History can be a means towards fostering literacy with respect to religious texts. Special attention is given to the development of critical thinking processes which are central to such an endeavor.

The secondary focus results from listening to students both in the classroom setting and in the literature of recent studies. Hence, a new emphasis is placed upon Problem-Based Learning as means of exploring the nature of the specific faith traditions of students enrolled in the course and upon the cultivation of a space for student faith formation.

The critical thinking processes as developed are serving their purpose well. At the same time, response and feedback from other colleagues is most welcome. Problem-Based Learning provides a rich enjoyable style for pursuing individual questions regarding religion; the dynamic fuels student motivation. In addition, brief periodic experiences of solitude seem to offer a momentary point of stability to students, and this is appreciated.

The disciplines of religion and history provide a dual perspective from which to explore their respective curricula. Each perspective informs the other and opens up the possibility of seeing and understanding from multiple perspectives so as to acquire a greater sense of the whole.

It is the focus of this paper to explicate forms of pedagogy aimed towards developing an interdisciplinary perspective in the first year university religion course. The paper also demonstrates the value of incorporating students' individual, and sometimes personal, questions about religion into the curriculum. Further, the paper draws attention to the importance students place upon their religion course as a means of assisting them in their respective "religious journeys."

To allow scope for students' questions about religion and for exploration of their desires for faith formation is to create an environment in which students feel somewhat secure in their study of religion. Such an atmosphere offers a strong support and source of encouragement in the critical study of religion.