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In recent years, composition classes in universities across the country have focused more and more on social and political issues like race, class, and gender. At its base, this dissertation argues that prophetic religious belief should receive such a focus as well. This project also attempts to recognize the difficulties that might arise when addressing religion in the writing class and subsequently draws upon the thinking of the American Pragmatists to meet those difficulties. From this Pragmatic foundation, I explore notions of mediation, experience, habit, and certainty in the hopes of providing some orientation to a topic that is as important to our students as any other we ask them to consider.

My theoretical grounding is set out with an eye towards practical application in the classroom (as theory is little without practice, and practice little without theory). I address possible writing assignments, particular texts, and the use of current events in relation to the Pragmatic approach I describe. In sum, this dissertation is an attempt to help all of us—atheists and theists, students and teachers—broach the topic of religion in the composition class.

FAITH IN THE COMPOSITION CLASS: A PRAGMATIC
APPROACH TO COMMON GROUND

by

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CHAPTER I

RELIGIOUS BELIEF: THAT OTHER SOCIAL ISSUE

For anyone who has paid the least bit of attention to the political scene or to current events in this country over the last several years, religious belief would appear to be anything but on the periphery. We seem to have reached another high-water mark in our country's ongoing and turbulent debate over the place of religion in the public sphere, and it doesn't seem likely that this topic will slip from the headlines any time soon. As a social or political issue in this country religion has, over the last decade or so, arguably captured more national media attention than race, class, or gender (with, of course, a few major exceptions, like Katrina's visit to the Gulf Coast which momentarily fixed our eye on race and class). This attention, however, has not by any means translated into the first-year composition class, a class where social and political issues now often provide the impetus for writing instruction. For the last twenty years or so, discussions of race, gender, class, and sexual identity have been residing more and more at the heart of most composition texts and composition classrooms. In 1996 Keith Gilyard, drawing in part on the work of John Dewey and others, captured the dominate inclination towards this course in the following: "Writing is not an activity that features social responsibility as an option. Writing *is* social responsibility. When you write, you are being responsible to some social entity even if that entity is yourself. You can be irresponsible as a writer, but you cannot be non-responsible" (21). He concludes by stating, "Writing and writing

instruction are socially, not naturally, occurring phenomena. They are never heading nowhere” (27). Also from the 90s, James Laditka writes, “All teaching supposes ideology; there simply is no value free pedagogy. For these reasons my paradigm of composition is changing to one of critical literacy, a literacy of political consciousness and social action” (361). Our approach to teaching composition has continued to head in this direction, promoting a sense of civic engagement and critical literacy, a literacy that emphasizes cultural and communal dimensions of understanding and interpretation throughout the reading and writing process.

When I entered this field six years ago I was asked to teach from Carter and Gradin’s Writing as Reflective Action. I have vivid memories of teaching from this text essays like bell hooks’ “Killing Rage,” Robert Coles’ “Entitlement,” and Paula Rust’s “Sexual Identity and Bisexual Identities: The Struggle for Self-Description in a Changing Sexual Landscape” (essays I continue to teach when I can). I have since taught many other texts, like Bizzell and Herzberg’s Negotiating Difference: Cultural Case Studies for Composition, that have dealt in similar ways with such issues. This particular book is broken up into six sections, all of them cultural conflicts from America’s short history: 1) First Contacts Between Puritans and Native Americans; 2) The Debate Over Slavery and the Declaration of Independence; 3) Defining ‘Woman’s Sphere’ in Nineteenth Century American Society; 4) Wealth, Work, and Class Conflict in the Industrial Age; 5) Japanese American Internment and the Problem of Cultural Identity; 6) Policy and Protest Over the Vietnam War. Each section provides representative voices on its

respective cultural issue, together with related writing prompts and further reading lists for students to consider.

Textbooks such as these dominate the market, and they exemplify the social responsibility to which Keith Gilyard refers as well as the prominent critical literacy approach to writing instruction—they press us to be socially responsible by requiring us to analyze and write about cultural concerns like race relations, same-sex marriage, and gender roles. As a community, these concerns are important and deemed worthy of our attention. Religious belief is also, of course, a social and political issue—deeply connected to the other cultural issues we already address in the composition course—and just as important to us and worthy of our attention in that it so often drives who we are and what we do in the U. S. (whether we are among the believers or not). But while the topic of religion often avails itself in our class discussions and chosen textbooks, it nonetheless has managed to remain on the periphery of most writing texts and composition classes (with respect to my above examples, I remember avoiding John Updike’s essay “On Being a Self Forever” in Carter and Gradin’s book because of its focus on religion and glossing quickly over the religious themes that were overtly apparent in Negotiating Difference). Amy Goodburn notes, for instance, that “given the important role that religion plays within U.S. culture (with the majority of U.S. citizens describing themselves as religious in some way), it’s surprising that so few critical educators have dealt with the implications for how students’ religious identities often conflict with the assumptions upon which critical pedagogy is premised” (333). Avoiding religion in the writing classroom is easy to do, though; we fear proselytizing, we don’t

want to offend, pry, impose, or alienate. Most writing teachers simply aren't comfortable with this subject. One reason is that unlike other issues we have recently become more comfortable with, religious belief is not something we're aiming to eradicate like racism or homophobia. In short, while the call to address religious belief in the composition class has gotten a little louder in recent years, we still don't quite know what to do with it; we have yet to develop and articulate a theoretical method from which to proceed. Doing so is the primary purpose of this dissertation.

Before outlining the pragmatic method that I propose, however, I want to make a few initial comments here about my use of the term *religious belief*. It goes without saying that this term is slippery and difficult, if not impossible, to define. As William James says of religion, the fact that there are so many different precise definitions for the term proves that it "cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name" (Varieties 35). For the purposes of my argument, I am referring to organized, prophetic religious belief that holds at its core the infallibility of the prophet and the inerrancy of the sacred text. Clearly, such a definition includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, among others, and the following discussion is equally applicable to all of them. I choose for this project, however, to focus on Christianity as my example, and I do so for two principal reasons. First, of the prophecy religions, Christianity has overwhelmingly dominated public policy-making in the United States as well as our discussions concerning the relationship between church and state. Second, in my own experiences in the classroom, when students have made references to religious belief, they have almost always been to Christianity. Indeed, my interest in this project was born

from the pedagogical question, “how should I respond when my students bring up Jesus and the Bible?”

Not all of us in this profession, of course, believe that we should even be entertaining such a question in the writing class. For instance, in her 1992 article “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” Maxine Hairston argues that it’s irresponsible for us to focus on social and political subjects like race, class, and gender in the composition course. She strenuously posits that we must avoid politicizing the composition class, refrain from forcing our political positions on our students, and strive to provide a low-risk environment in which they can improve their writing (669, 670). She specifically cautions us against delving into topics that we are not particularly trained for: “We have no business getting into areas where we may have passion and conviction but no scholarly base from which to operate,” she argues. “When classes focus on complex issues such as racial discrimination, economic injustices, and inequities of class and gender, they should be taught by qualified faculty who have the depth of information and historical competence that such critical social issues warrant” (667).

But over the last fifteen years or so, Hairston’s misgivings have been soundly answered, as the current market for composition textbooks attests. Varieties of Gilyard’s contention that “writing *is* social responsibility” have been appearing with more frequency since John Dewey so thoroughly articulated his position that “education is necessarily a social institution” and “an extension of social life.” Patricia Bizzell, for instance, tells us that we must value the “non-academic cultural literacies” that all of our students bring to the writing class (662). And in Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures, James

Berlin asserts that in “teaching people to write and read, we are thus teaching them a way of experiencing the world. This realization requires that the writing classroom be dialogic. Only through articulating the disparate positions held by members of the class can different ways of understanding the world and acting in it be discovered” (102). More specifically, he notes that “differences among students organize themselves around class, race, gender, age, and other divisions, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to make certain that these differences are enunciated and examined” (102). I imagine Berlin would acknowledge that religion makes up one of those “other divisions” to which he refers—it’s telling, in fact, that it does not specifically appear in his list. Its absence may be indicative of our general feeling about enunciating or examining religion in the classroom—the feeling that it’s simply off limits. But if we embrace Berlin’s definition (or one like it) of what it means to teach people to read and write, this feeling must change.

The composition community overwhelmingly decided to “forge ahead” in spite of Hairston’s objections, and by most accounts, it appears to have been more than worth it. Our current queasiness about religious belief, however, mirrors almost exactly those concerns that Hairston voiced a decade and a half ago about race, class, and gender. As such, we have already established our basic response from pedagogical philosophers like Dewey, Bizzell, Berlin, and Gilyard. What we don’t have is a method to deal with the way in which religious belief is peculiar—for instance, as I mentioned before, it’s not something we’re aiming to eradicate like racism or misogyny, and thus we feel stymied from the outset. The pragmatic approach I propose can guide us in that its philosophy is

based not on any ultimate outcomes, but on constantly reexamining the consequences of our beliefs; i.e., it is dependant on experience rather than on a priori judgments, on mediation rather than on opposition. We thus avoid entering into a debate about whether or not God exists; i.e., whether or not theists or atheists are “right.” Rather, we focus on examining the consequences—to ourselves and to our neighbors, here and now—of our belief (or disbelief) in Him.

At the base of this dissertation is the notion that we need from the outset to let our students know that they don’t have to check their faith at the door—that it’s welcome and it’s valuable, but that like anything else they may think or write about in this course, it doesn’t simply get a free pass. The pragmatists lead us in this direction, for as James defines it, pragmatism should be “a happy harmonizer of empiricist ways of thinking with the more religious demands of human beings” (Pragmatism 33), and he notes that “the truth of ‘God’ has to run the gauntlet of all our other truths. It is on trial by them, and they on trial by it. Our *final* opinion about God can be settled only after all the truths have straightened themselves out together. Let us hope that they shall find a *modus vivendi!*” (50). Again, as a method, pragmatism depends on constantly questioning and examining the consequences of our beliefs—*all* of our beliefs. As C. S. Peirce notes, we must “be at all times ready to dump [our] whole cartload of beliefs, the moment experience is against them” (“Ideas,” 294). Such a premise, of course, is a hallmark of critical literacy.

By giving us a “way in” to religious belief, the pragmatic method not only helps us meet our social responsibility and critical literacy goals in the composition class, it also enables us to bridge an ever-widening gap between our theistic students and the

secular academic setting. Joseph Harris, for example, asks, “how does a devout Christian...find a place to speak within an aggressively skeptical and secular discourse?” (17). Likewise, Stephen Carter observes in The Culture of Disbelief that the academic setting often encourages an environment that treats religion as “an unimportant facet of human personality, one easily discarded, and one with which public-spirited citizens would not bother” (xv). In a similar vein, John Groppe suggests that “the academic setting for many students is frightening, but it is especially so for students of a strong religious background” (Abstract). Groppe goes on to quote Robert Sollod, who calls “the current curriculum of American colleges and universities ‘the hollow curriculum’ as ‘American Universities now largely ignore religion and spirituality’” (Abstract). Groppe adds that what Sollod suggests “may be the best situation many students encounter. More often what they encounter is an environment hostile to religion” (Abstract). With its focus on inclusion and mediation, the pragmatic method works to diffuse such initial feelings of hostility and provides opportunities for productive discussions about religious belief.

In Chapter One, “God in the Comp Class,” I take up the purpose of the required first-year writing course and support the contention that we would be doing a great disservice to our students and to ourselves if we continue to ignore religion. We need to talk about it for many reasons, not the least of which are that it makes up a large part of most of our students’ lives and that attempting to understand it has become more and more crucial to engaging in civic life. I also address in this chapter the fears that both students and teachers may have in approaching the subject of religion—these fears are real and substantial, but by no means insurmountable. Chapter Two, “A Pragmatic

Approach to Faith,” presents the approach that I believe can help us tremendously as we begin to broach this topic in the writing class. I set out some of the more general tenets of Pragmatism as offered by James, Pierce, and Dewey (and by other pragmatists like Richard Rorty and Cornel West), but I focus primarily on what these three writers have to say about religion and God.

Chapter Three, entitled “Practical Applications,” articulates some tangible ways in which teachers might begin to take the previous theoretical discussion and actually apply it in the writing class. I begin by reiterating the notion that our first task should be to let students know that it’s appropriate to talk about or write about their religious belief, but that rules of argument and critical thinking still apply. I suggest a number of ways in which teachers might first broach this topic and then continue to work with it—including freewriting tasks, journal prompts, literary analyses, rhetorical analyses, sample questionnaires, and current event assignments—all of which are rooted in the pragmatic method. My Conclusion, “Pragmatism and Belief in Disbelief,” extends my argument to the farthest reaches of religious belief: atheism. As religious belief and disbelief are intimately bound up together—Gianni Vattimo, for example, defines secularism and atheism as by-products of theism—I explore the way in which this minority but vital perspective is often understood and how it might operate within our pragmatic discussion of religious belief in the composition class.

CHAPTER II
GOD IN THE COMP CLASS

Rhetoric, I shall urge, should be
a study of misunderstanding and
its remedies

I. A. Richards

In 2005, writing for the Chronicle of Higher Education, Stanley Fish recounted that “when Jacques Derrida died I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion” (11). Fish, of course, was referring primarily to the world of literary theory, but his words ring true in many ways for the freshman composition class in particular and the field of Composition and Rhetoric in general. In lots of ways religion has been bubbling under the surface now for years, but as I mentioned in my Introduction, many of us are not comfortable with religion in the classroom and not convinced (maybe not convinced *because* we’re not comfortable) that it is a suitable topic for this arena. By briefly reviewing the purpose of the first-year writing class and by connecting that purpose to the impact religion has had on our public policy in recent years, this chapter works initially to support my claim that we must begin examining the consequences of religious belief in the writing class. At the heart of this discussion lies the public/private controversy regarding the role of religion,

or, put another way, the Jeffersonian compromise which more or less relegated religion to the private sphere in exchange for religious freedom. The chapter concludes with the argument that by first acknowledging the benefits of possible chaos while at the same time articulating clear and certain guidelines for broaching this subject in the writing class, we need not fear talking about religion in the classroom.

The Purpose of the First-Year Writing Class

The purpose of the first-year composition class has been the subject of debate for some time now, and that debate has taken a number of twists and turns over the last three hundred years or so. It's safe to say, though, that a fundamental goal of this course is to help students become better writers. I'm stating the obvious, perhaps, but it's an obvious statement that often gets lost or forgotten. I remember when I first began to teach this class in 2000 at Ohio University; despite extraordinary instruction and support from those running the writing program, and despite a clear and defined university "Outcome Statement" for this particular class, I recall wondering in that first year (and, to be honest, since then) what it was precisely I was supposed to be doing in the freshman English class I was teaching. I knew my syllabus said, "English 151 Composition and Rhetoric focuses on writing, reading, and thinking processes. Students engage in informal writing, formal writing, peer critiques, revision, active reading, and group work as a means to becoming successful writers and thinkers, both within and outside the university." So there was an emphasis on the social process of writing and a focus on certain activities to

produce “successful” writers and thinkers. But what did that mean, exactly, and how were we supposed to go about doing it?

One way, of course, was through the book we were asked to use, Writing As Reflective Action, which aggressively addresses such controversial issues as race, misogyny, and homophobia. The essays in this book are, for the most part, intended to address and raise a student’s social consciousness of marginalized perspectives. I couldn’t have been happier with this agenda and this book, but a particular session of our teacher-training course serves as an example of the way in which the purpose of this first-year writing class tends to get clouded. It may have been around the sixth or seventh week of the quarter (for most of us, our first quarter of teaching) and one of my fellow new TAs was suggesting that she didn’t feel competent to teach some of the essays from our textbook because she didn’t know enough about the history or background of many of the issues these essays were addressing (one of the points that Maxine Hairston makes in arguing that such issues should not be the subject of a writing class). It turned out that in spite of the Outcome Goals and the syllabus and all the other information we had been given, many in the room were still unsure of what it was they were teaching in freshman English. I remember very clearly what our professor said at this point: “I was operating under the assumption that you were teaching writing. If that’s not what you’ve been doing, then that’s my fault.” But there was no failure on her part that I could see. She did a great job in this training course (she was, in fact, one of the reasons I entered the field of Composition and Rhetoric). It’s simply the nature of the beast—what seems to be a relatively straight-forward task is anything but. We’re here to teach writing. But often as

we go about this job it's easy to lose sight of that original goal when the course revolves around sensitive issues that are relevant to the real world and to the real lives of the people in the room. Opening the door to religion might appear to muddy the waters even more. But we have not for some time now been in the habit of ignoring such difficult issues for a simple and formulaic approach to better writing that we know usually doesn't, in fact, lead to better writing. As teachers we must constantly remind ourselves that in this class the aim is to *teach writing* and to do the hard work of embracing the often slippery, scary, and chaotic means that we think most effectively lead to that goal.

One of those means for teaching better writing has been to focus on social and political issues, issues we hope are somewhat meaningful to our students and thus prompt them to become more engaged thinkers and writers. This focus is by no means a recent phenomenon. Social consciousness has had a long-standing relationship with the introductory composition class in the United States. The early version of this class was being taught for years before the Revolutionary War at places like Harvard, Yale, and William and Mary where rhetoricians were primarily responsible for teaching it (but improving students' writing was viewed as the responsibility of all faculty, a notion we continue to struggle with today). The class was required of all students, much as it is now, and, also like today, the content of the course focused a great deal on the students' morality, or their social consciousness. Sharon Crowley writes that the contemporary first-year writing course

retains more than its institutional position: it still performs the sort of moral surveillance on students that [James Morgan] Hart claims was the

task of the entire traditional college curriculum. Introductory composition is the only required course in which students are still asked, repeatedly, to express their opinions on a variety of topics not generated by their study of a field or subject matter. Rhetoric teachers in classical colleges felt no compunction about evaluating the quality of the moral or civic sentiments expressed by their students; indeed, they felt that doing so was their duty. (Composition 57)

Teaching writing has long been associated by many with teaching morality, or character—an association that still exists today and one that makes sense in that rhetoricians have usually taught this class, and one of the most influential rhetorical educators, Quintilian, argued for the “good man speaking well” and felt that an effective education should include all aspects of the student’s life, “for there is nothing which may not crop up in a cause, or appear as a question for discussion”(II.21.22).

What we know today as the required freshman English class may be said to have most directly sprung from the work of Harvard’s A.S. Hill in the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1880s Hill, a Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard, bemoaned what he saw as woefully inadequate writing from his freshman students. In response, Hill established an entrance examination and proposed an “English A” writing course that would later be adopted by other colleges and universities as the required freshman English class. Hill felt this course should emphasize correctness before all else. Indeed, in his 1892 textbook Foundations of Rhetoric, the first words of his Preface assert that “for practical purposes there is no better definition of a good style than Swift’s— Proper Words in Proper Places.” Likewise, in the introduction of the 1895 edition of his Principals of Rhetoric, he posits that “the foundations of Rhetoric rest upon grammar; for

grammatical purity is a requisite of good writing” (1). Also, however, like the traditional rhetoric teachers, Hill associated this freshman writing class with moral character: “Harvard’s teachers regularly characterized their responses to student writing in moral language. The most important duty of a composition teacher, Hill thought, was ‘to prevent the young men and women under his eye from running to extremes’” (Crowley, Composition 76). Thus, an emphasis on correctness and character largely constituted the first required freshman English course.

As one can guess, however, the purpose of this class did not evolve seamlessly. At the turn of the 19th century and shortly thereafter, the course itself received an enormous amount of criticism. Many literature professors saw it as mind-numbing drudgery and of no real value: “My own experiences with these courses,” North Carolina professor George Strong notes, “was profitless. It was, in fact, enough to discourage me from continuing the study of English. I failed to derive any benefit whatever from them” (Connors, “Abolition” 51). Many professors, as we can see from Strong’s comments, simply didn’t want to teach the course: it was not challenging or interesting to them. The issues of correctness, it was often argued, should be taught at the secondary level, or in preparatory schools. Indeed, the thinking of Thomas Lounsbury, who believed the course should simply be abolished, was influential during this period. He held that “the idea that expression could be taught was idiotic, the conception that college students could know anything worth writing about silly, and the position that writing teachers could respond usefully to student writing unlikely” (Connors, “Abolition” 50).

As the roaring twenties approached, though, the educational philosophy of John Dewey began to take hold. Dewey argued that the students' lived experiences were in fact a legitimate subject of study. His tenets largely rejected the focus on correctness as put forth by A.S. Hill and his followers, but in a sense Dewey retained the moral perspective by positing that social consciousness should be the foundation of all education. He put forth the basic premise that

the school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply a form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends (Philosophy 445).

And like Paulo Freire's critique of the banking method of education, Dewey suggests there are two senses of the word learning: one where "truth exists ready-made somewhere" and the student just passively draws on, defines, and interprets "what is in storage" (Democracy 335). The other sense of learning "means something which the individual *does* when he studies. It is an active, personally conducted affair" that involves inquiry, discovery, and invention (335). He argued over and over again in favor of this latter sense of learning and the notion that "learning in school should be continuous with that out of school. There should be a free interplay between the two. [But] this is possible only when there are numerous points of contact between the social interests of the one and of the other" (Democracy 358). He suggested that the focal point, in fact, of education should not be "science, nor literature, nor history, but the child's own social

activities,” his own experiences in the world (Philosophy 448). Indeed, it could be said that the contemporary market for composition texts in many ways reflects Dewey’s belief that “all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race” (Philosophy 443).

In contrast to Dewey’s thinking, however, and his influence on what has often been referred to as the General Education movement, were the notions of people such as Norman Foerster. Foerster felt that students had no idea what they needed and that it was our duty, as teachers, to provide them with this knowledge. “If people were allowed to choose what they wished to study,” Foerster contended, “they would always opt for something other than what was best for them” (Crowley, Composition 165). He believed that students were not at all inherently self-motivated and that they needed a great deal of guidance and direction. Also at this time the onset of the Great Depression precipitated an enormous increase of students entering American colleges and universities: “enrollments had almost doubled between 1920 and 1930, from 598,000 students to more than 1.1 million” (Connors, “Abolition” 52). Clearly, staffing a course required for all students during such an influx posed quite a challenge, and sentiments in favor of abolishing the first-year writing course were strong during this period. Alvin Eurich, from the University of Minnesota, suggested that teachers in several different fields collaborate with each other to enhance students’ writing abilities. This was, in fact, one of the first Writing Across the Curriculum proposals. Another, more accusatory voice, which called for the eradication of the course, came from Oscar James Campbell, who espoused a sense of literary elitism and offered that “composition cannot be taught apart from

content, that it is intellectually dishonest as well as futile. [Campbell blamed] freshman composition for teacher disaffection and for reducing the usefulness of literary education” (Connors, “Abolition” 53). Attention to the first-year writing course largely died down, however, as World War II approached and other concerns took priority.

That is not to say, though, that there was nothing interesting going on in the early to mid 40s regarding the required composition class—and if anything, the focus on social awareness and the student’s lived experiences maintained its hold. What John Heyda and others have dubbed the “turf wars” between the fields of Communications and English over the rights to Freshman Composition began to swell as the war ended. In 1945, for instance, the University of Minnesota enacted a “communications skills” program “to incorporate as many theoretical and pedagogical insights gleaned from new theories of communication as was possible” (Crowley, Composition 179). In addition to utilizing popular culture and popular media as important learning tools, “the designers of the Minnesota program assumed that communication is a socially necessary activity and that the primary function of language is to convey meaning [...]. In other words, the circulation of meaning was more important than the observance of correctness” (179). Two other programs that were operating at this time illustrate the various social and student-centered aims of these courses. At the State University of Iowa,

the purpose of the course was to help students develop study skills for college success, to help them develop writing ability in ‘expository, argumentative, and critical techniques,’ and to lead them to recognize bad arguments and bias in discourse (especially in propaganda) [...]; instruction was to be individualized, geared to ‘find out what the individual student needs and then [to] adjust his progress accordingly.’ [...]

It was to be practical, providing lessons in ‘exposition, argument, and criticism—the everyday and practical modes,’ not in belles letters, the proper concern of literature and creative writing courses. (Berlin, Reality 97)

The program offered at the University of Denver provides an interesting comparison to the one instituted at Iowa State. Denver espoused that “the skills of writing, speaking, reading and listening were offered as tools for securing ‘the best possible adjustment of the individual in the complex field of human relations’” (100). This course served primarily as therapy for students. The terms clinics and clinicians were employed; indeed, “‘work in the writing clinic [was] built upon the foundation of Rogerian nondirective counseling’” (100). Writing here was seen as a purging process of sorts—if the student was able to “write out his emotional conflicts, his difficulties with mama-papa, or his so called ‘sins,’ he [would] help rid himself of the blockage of fear which comes from inward festering” (103).

English departments, as we know, won the turf wars for the first-year writing class. While John Heyda notes that Freshman composition and the field of Composition both lost out when the field of Communications was extradited, freshman composition teachers in the 1960s began to enjoy a bit more respect as the field of Composition gained legitimacy. In addition, the civil rights movement and the political unrest that marked the 1960s spilled into many classrooms, and for a large number of freshman composition teachers, “access to higher education was a basic right because literacy and democracy were inseparable. If a student could find his or her way through the open door of the university, then he or she could, with enough patience and diligence on everyone’s part,

be taught to write” (Pullman 18). And as the 1960s progressed, as Robert Connors tells us, “students began to demand more of a college education than mere assertion and formulas. It was time for Relevance” (Composition-Rhetoric 105). In contrast to earlier views of the role of Freshman writing such as those posited by Strong, Lounsbury, Campbell, and Foerester, and more in keeping with the thinking proffered by Dewey, students in these classes

were encouraged to write about personal experiences and political issues. Style was now a matter of personal “voice.” Arrangement was organic rather than regimented, and the five paragraph theme was replaced by various genres. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar were taught, but only incidentally. Invention became the primary focus of instruction, and composition was explained as a legitimate method of knowledge creation (as epistemic, in the jargon of the time). Composition teachers were no longer editors and judges. Now they were coaches and fellow writers. (Pullman19)

Also in the 60s and the two decades that followed, seminal scholarship in the field of Composition was being produced, such as Janet Emig’s pioneer work in ethnography and Linda Flowers and John Hayes’s research into cognitive psychology’s contribution to the writing process. About this time the “importance of planning and problem solving was being discovered, as was the fact that writing is ‘recursive’ or iterative rather than linear” (20). The so-called Expressivists were finding listeners, and people like Kenneth Bruffee and Peter Elbow were articulating notions of social construction and de-centered classrooms. Elbow, in What is English, evaluated the 1987 English Coalition Conference, a gathering intended as a follow-up to the 1966 Dartmouth Conference. In his critique,

Elbow advises that perhaps what we need to do is ease up on trying so desperately to answer such questions as “What is English?” and “What is our relation to literature?” and consider that agreeing on one definition is not only improbable, but counterproductive. He suggests that “English” has many different functions and many different purposes, but perhaps it should primarily be “about making knowledge rather than about studying already existing knowledge” (118). In lots of ways, these decades brought about “a research agenda that continued to underwrite the writing-process theory of Composition and the model of Freshman Composition that it informed” (Pullman 20).

All of this is by no means to say, however, that the purpose of the first-year writing course had been settled and agreed upon. As Mina Shaughnessey outlines, new open admissions policies in the 1970s brought about a variety of discontent and criticism, including renewed calls for abolishing the class altogether. The 70s and early 80s also brought with them, as Robert Connors defines it, a strong “‘Back to Basics’ movement” which saw “progressive education as having failed” (Composition-Rhetoric 108). There remains continued debate about the role of the composition class as a “service” course and whether or not there should be some sort of common curriculum that the course should follow across the country.

But “progressive education,” as it might be called, and a pedagogical perspective rooted in the thinking of John Dewey with its focus on experience and social aims, has not only survived but has overwhelmingly become the mantra of this class in colleges and universities throughout the union. For years now, “‘Write what you know’ has been perhaps the most common advice given to writers, and the movement towards writing

assignments based in the personal has been the inevitable result of taking that dictum seriously..." (Connors, Composition-Rhetoric 325). And the personal narrative assignment, or asking students to write what they know, has often served to force students to question what they know, and many educators have suggested that we should not be shy in pressing our students to question what they know. In 1990, for instance, Patricia Bizzell criticizes James Berlin for being too timid about persuading his writing students towards his Marxist beliefs. "We must help our students," she says, "to engage in a rhetorical process that can collectively generate...knowledge and beliefs to displace the repressive ideologies an unjust social order would prescribe..." ("Beyond" 670). Likewise, Dale Bauer writes that "I would argue that political commitment—especially feminist commitment—is a legitimate classroom strategy and rhetorical imperative" (389). Calls for the inclusion of social consciousness in this class continue to be offered, and I add my voice to the claim that such an approach is precisely what the purpose of the first-year writing class should be. At the moment, however, we are ignoring one of the most pressing social and political topics of our time.

Religious Belief as a Social and Political Issue in the United States Today

If, in fact, we continue to take social responsibility and critical literacy as our purpose in the composition class, we have no choice but to begin addressing religious belief in a meaningful way. Just as there are tangible, communal consequences from our beliefs about the color of someone's skin or gender or sexual preference, so too are there

tangible and communal consequences from our belief or disbelief in God. The basic issue, of course, is not a new one. The intermingling of church and state has been the subject of debate and discussion in the U. S. for quite some time. Despite the Establishment Clause, which separates church and state, public policy in the U. S. has to some degree always been driven by faith. For more than two centuries, though, the Jeffersonian compromise—a compromise that relegated faith to the private sphere in exchange for religious freedom—together with the Establishment Clause worked to balance a very religious nation with its general desire for a secular government. References to God appear on our money, on the walls of our Supreme Court, in our anthems, ect., but this balancing act kept faith from encroaching too conspicuously into the making of public policy. While presidential candidates, to various degrees, have always had to be vocal about their faith (indeed, as Richard Rorty points out, “no uncloseted atheist is likely to get elected anywhere in the country” (Philosophy and Social Hope 169)), there was an understanding that once in office, the separation of church and state should still be observed. Such an observance, of course, has not always been strict. In recent years Ronald Reagan comes to mind, who “perceived the paroxysms in the Middle East through the lens of biblical prophecy. He went so far as to include men like Jerry Falwell and [Armageddon-advocate] Hal Lindsey in his national security briefings” (Harris, The End 153). One could argue that including a man like Falwell in national security briefings might, in some way, compromise the Jeffersonian compromise. Since the Bush administration came to power in 2000, though, the country has experienced an incredible and unprecedented influx of religious belief into all three

branches of our federal government. In the last five or six years religion in this country has driven public policy in such a way that demands our immediate attention in the socially conscious composition class.

I take as my starting point the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Bush v. Gore* in 2000. The majority opinion was written by Justice Antonin Scalia—arguably one of the greatest legal minds in the country—and it has since been almost unanimously described as having no basis whatsoever in logic, let alone in legal precedent. As Alan Dershowitz notes, there have been worse decisions rendered by this court throughout its history, but never has there been a decision so inconsistent with the legal philosophy of its authors. This case was different from the likes of *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (which held blacks were not citizens and thus had no rights), *Plessy v. Ferguson* (which outlined the discriminatory “separate but equal” doctrine), and *Bradwell v. State* (which held women had no right to be lawyers) because in this case, “the majority justices violated their own previously declared judicial principles—principles they still believe in and will apply in other cases” (174). As reprehensible as they may have been, the decisions in cases like *Dred Scott* were nonetheless in keeping with the judges’ previous legal opinions and previous interpretations of the Constitution. “In this respect,” Dershowitz argues, *Bush v. Gore* “may be ranked as the single most corrupt decision in Supreme Court history, because it is the only one that I know of where the majority justices decided as they did because of the personal identity and political affiliation of the litigants” (174).

Much has been written on why these judges decided as they did. There is no doubt that this decision did much to destroy the Court’s reputation, but there has been a lot of

speculation as to why each of the five Justices signed on. The primary author of this decision, Justice Scalia, is a devout Catholic, and the extent to which he believes his faith should propel public policy can be gleaned from the following:

The reaction of people of faith to this tendency of democracy to obscure the divine authority behind government should not be resignation to it, but the resolution to combat it as effectively as possible. We have done that in this country (and continental Europe has not) by preserving in our public life many visible reminders that—in the words of a Supreme Court opinion from the 1940s—“we are a religious people, whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being.”...All this, as I say, is most unEuropean, and helps explain why our people are more inclined to understand, as Saint Paul did, that government carries the sword as “the minister of God” to “execute wrath” upon the evildoer. (19)

One might respond to this line of thinking by arguing that contemporary Europe avoids too much religious sentiment in the public sphere because it has had much more experience than the U.S with the consequences of God and government as one unified entity. Be that as it may, it’s worth noting that Scalia’s record as a Supreme Court Justice aligns almost perfectly with his deeply-held religious beliefs. In the same speech, for example, he describes his position on the death penalty:

This is not the Old Testament, I emphasize, but St. Paul...[T]he *core* of his message is that government—however you want to limit that concept—derives its moral authority from God...Indeed, it seems to me that the more Christian a country is the *less* likely it is to regard the death penalty as immoral...I attribute that to the fact that, for the believing Christian, death is no big deal. Intentionally killing an innocent person is a big deal: it is a grave sin, which causes one to lose his soul. But losing this life, in exchange for the next?...For the nonbeliever, on the other hand, to deprive a man of his life is to end his existence. What a horrible act! (18).

In 1989 Justice Scalia wrote a majority opinion (*Stanford v. Kentucky*, 492 U S 361) which upheld as constitutional the death penalty for juvenile offenders (we are, it's worth remembering, the only industrialized western nation that still puts adult criminals to death, to say nothing of teenagers). When this decision was reversed in *Roper v. Simmons* in 2005, he wrote a scathing dissent, accusing the majority, among other things, of acknowledging the overwhelming body of international law and opinions on this matter from the rest of the western world (543 U S 551). My point here is not to agree or disagree with Scalia's approach, but simply to argue that if his faith is a clear motivation for the policy he sets, then educators have the social responsibility to explore that faith in the writing class. And with the recent additions of Justice Roberts and Justice Alito—two men who appear to hold the same faith as Scalia and perhaps the same understanding of its role in government—that responsibility is only heightened.

In the legislative branch, our majority leaders in Congress not only agree with Scalia that their religion has a right to propel public policy, but they have been vocal in arguing that the federal courts in general have become dangerously too secular and grossly offensive to people of faith. In April, 2005, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist's videotaped remarks headlined a rally entitled "Justice Sunday: Stopping the Filibuster against People of Faith." The rally, which was broadcast from a church in Kentucky and which reached approximately 61 million households, was sponsored by the Family Research Council, a conservative Christian organization that works to "shape public debate and formulate public policy..." (1). Before Frist spoke, Tony Perkins, the

president of the FRC, argued that “Democrats were using filibusters to exclude religious believers from the bench” and, holding up a Bible, added, “what we are saying tonight is that as American citizens, we should not have to choose between believing what is in this book and serving the public” (CNN.com). Frist was careful himself to avoid overtly religious language, but his message was just as clear: he and his Republican party would fight for faith in the public sphere. Frist has been consistent. Two years earlier, over the same filibuster issue, he and other high-ranking Republican Senators invited the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, the Southern Baptist Convention, and other conservative faith-based groups to Washington where, with “virtually unfettered access to the Capitol building,” they “conducted prayer circles and press conferences throughout the wee hours” (Kaplan 245). Bill Frist was among those in the Family Research Council prayer circle, from which Tony Perkins again addressed the nation: “we have volunteered to be here tonight to keep watch while most of America sleeps...we are here because there is a clear and present danger facing America—an out-of-control judiciary that is chipping away at religious liberties in this nation” (245). More recently, Frist, together with House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (who has since been arrested and forced to resign his position), spoke to evangelical leaders about how best to deal with this judiciary problem. There was serious talk about simply eliminating “troublesome” courts altogether. After Frist and Delay’s speech, James Dobson, from the California faith-based group Focus on the Family, noted that “very few people know...that the Congress can simply disenfranchise a court. They don’t have to fire anybody or impeach them or go through that battle. All they have to do is say the Ninth Circuit doesn’t exist anymore,

and it's gone" (Phillips 245-46). Along these lines, Delay had previously argued, "We set up the courts. We can unset the courts" (246).

Delay, in fact, has been less inhibited than Frist about voicing his views for a faith-based government. "God is using me all the time," he has said, "everywhere, to stand up for a Biblical world view in everything that I do and everywhere I am. He is training me" (Phillips 216). He has also specifically claimed that "Only Christianity offers a way to live in response to the realities that we find in this world. Only Christianity" (Harris 156). In reference to the Second Coming, Delay displayed a poster on his office wall which read, "This Could Be The Day" (156). As Kevin Phillips notes, it was just this perspective that left "GOP political strategists [with] no desire for a far-reaching debate on either global warming or peak oil. The religious right had its own rapture chronometers and apocalypse monitors reporting how many months, days, and hours remained" (96). I could certainly fill up a number of pages by citing the faith-based perspectives from which so many members of Congress work, but I'll defer here to an apt summation by Phillips:

...in 2004 all seven of the top Republican leaders in the U.S. Senate, starting with Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee and working down to Senator George Allen of Virginia, chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, boasted 100 percent ratings from the Christian Coalition, founded by Pat Robertson in the wake of his 1988 presidential bid. (216)

Before I move to the executive branch and into the country at large, however, I do want to touch on one of those "top seven" that Phillips refers to, Rick Santorum. Before he lost

his bid for re-election in 2006, Santorum ranked number three; had he won, he would have moved to number two. Sean Reilly, one of Santorum's aids who now works as a political consultant, has said that "Rick Santorum is a Catholic missionary... That's what he is. He's a Catholic missionary who happens to be in the Senate" (Sokolove 58). There is little doubt that he is on a mission. As Senator Susan Collins notes, "...he believes there should be more of an intertwining of government and religion, and he believes it passionately" (61). Santorum has consistently argued that "to completely separate moral views from public life... is a dangerous thing" (61). "How is it possible," he asks, "to believe in the existence of God yet refuse to express outrage when his moral code is flouted? How is it possible that there exists so little space in the public square for the standards that follow from belief in a transcendent God?" (61).

I address in my Conclusion Santorum's implication that morality must necessarily flow from a belief in God, but I want again to remind my readers now that my argument here is not for or against faith in the public sphere (this discussion as well will be raised in the last chapter), nor is it to decipher whether or not the public officials I cite are sincere about their beliefs—the fact that they proclaim them so often is the point. Faith is overtly awash in public policy-making, and thus requires our attention in the critical composition class. Having said that, I turn my attention to some of the momentum that has perhaps set in motion much of what I've described in this section so far. While there are certainly more than a few different opinions on what role faith should play at the governing level, most observers from both ends of the political spectrum agree that our country has never before seen such an intermingling of the two. As I mentioned earlier,

faith has always played some sort of role in presidential campaigns and politics at large. Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan's initial appeals to the southern religious right, as well as Pat Robertson's presidential bid in 1988, come to mind from the latter half of the century. As the millennium approached, however, despite their surge to impeach Bill Clinton, the Christian Coalition—the emblem and core of the Christian right in this country—found itself on the defensive. IRS and FEC investigations were beginning to tarnish the Coalition's image, and groups like the afore-mentioned Family Research Council had yet to make an impact on the national scene. In February, 1999, Paul Weyrich, a key inspirational figure for Jerry Fallwell's "moral majority," wrote the following in a highly publicized letter: "I no longer believe that there is a moral majority.... We got our people elected. But that did not result in the adoption of our agenda." His advice was to "drop out of this culture" which had become "an ever widening sewer" and "find places...where we can live godly, righteous, and sober lives" (Kaplan 1-2). As Esther Kaplan notes, at this point in time, with "a booming Christian home schooling movement and rising enrolment in fundamentalist Christian colleges, many saw [Weyrich's] letter as a harbinger of a new evangelical separatism, marked by a retreat from public life" (2).

As George Bush jockeyed for the Republican nomination, though, this attitude began to change. Frequent public and bold pronouncements like "I've heard the call—I believe God wants me to run for President" coupled with an unprecedented, relentless pursuit for the support of the evangelical and Christian right resulted in the following statistic: of all the votes for George Bush in 2000, 52% of them came from white

evangelicals and the “most religiously observant Catholics” in the country (Kaplan 3). Again in Kaplan’s words, “The Christian right is not just another special interest group, like the NRA. This is Bush’s *base*” (3). And this appeal to the most faithful among us only grew once Bush took office. He immediately withdrew federal funds for clinics in the developing world that had anything to do with sex education or abortion, created his executive Faith-Based and Community Initiatives which funneled millions of dollars to Pat Robertson and other prominent Christian leaders, and across the board appointed Christian activists to head Federal institutes and administrations, including NASA, the FDA, and dozens of others. Of these appointments, his choice of John Ashcroft for Attorney General was especially noteworthy. By all accounts a Pentecostal fundamentalist, and in many ways described as a “religious warrior with politics more appropriate to 17th century Salem, Mass—or late-1990s Kandahar—than to [a] secular democracy,” Ashcroft fought vociferously in Missouri to impede the Civil Rights Movement as he strongly believes that slavery and racism are not sins according to the Bible (Huberman14). He has often remarked, in the same vein as Delay, Scalia, Santorum, and so many other public officials, that “we are a nation called to defend freedom—freedom that is not the grant of any government, but is our endowment from God” (Harris 154). In his role as U.S. Attorney General, soon after the 9/11 attacks, he proposed that “Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for him. Christianity is a faith in which God sends his son to die for you” (Kaplan 19). Also after 9/11, and also in his capacity as our country’s most powerful lawyer, Ashcroft argued that our fight against global terrorism

is a defense of our freedom in the most profound sense: it is the defense of our right to make moral choices—to seek fellowship with God...it is a conflict between those who believe that God grants us choice and those who seek to impose their choices on us. It is a conflict between inspiration and imposition, the way of peace and the way of destruction and chaos. It is a conflict between good and evil. And as President Bush has reminded us, we know that God is not neutral between the two. (19)

Ashcroft proved to hold some insight regarding Bush's approach to what was now being termed as our war on terror. When Bob Woodward asked him if he had consulted his father before invading Iraq, Bush responded, "You know, he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength...there is a higher father that I appeal to" (Woodward 421). In a meeting with Israel's Ariel Sharon and Palestine's new Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, Abbas recounts that Bush said "god told me to strike at al-Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam, which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle East" (9). Jeffrey S. Siker, a highly-regarded Catholic theologian, notes that in general "we have had other 'religious' presidents...but no other president has so clearly perceived his calling in such epic biblical terms." In the same article, Siker goes on to add that Bush "sees America as a kind of new Israel called by God to be God's people on the international stage," and that through his born-again experience he "now has a clear vision of what is morally right and wrong," a vision which, not unlike Scalia's, holds that "some people simply deserve the wrathful judgment of God, and if God chooses to use him as the vehicle of punishment, so be it...whether for death row inmates in Texas or for governments such as Iraq" (1). Lt. General William Boykin, one of the more powerful emissaries of this divine vision,

attracted some attention with remarks he made at a Good Shepard Community Church in Oregon. Boykin, a deputy undersecretary of defense who Bush (and Donald Rumsfeld) placed in charge of hunting down Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, told his audience that George Bush was

in the White House because God put him there for such a time as this. God put him there to lead not only this nation but to lead the world, in such a time as this.... The enemy is a spiritual enemy. It's called the principality of darkness...the battle this nation is in is a spiritual battle, it's a battle for our soul. And the enemy is a guy called Satan...Satan wants to destroy this nation. He wants to destroy us a nation and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army. I'm here on a recruiting trip. I'm here asking you to join this army. (Kaplan 21)

In a New York Times article, Bob Herbert notes that on another occasion Boykin declared that the war could only be won “if we come at them in the name of Jesus,” and that in another speech, “referring to a Muslim fighter in Somalia, the General said, ‘Well, you know what I knew—that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol’” (Herbert A21). Boykin’s remarks drew so much media attention that eventually he was reassigned; but he was in no way reprimanded—his superiors never gave the impression that his views were really all that out of line.

The role that religion has played in the development of this Administration’s foreign policy has proved interesting as well regarding our relationship with Europe. Since he took office, George Bush has only been able to forge a strong rapport with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, a man who shares Bush’s born-again experience and who is also very public about his faith. As Bill Keller has suggested, “it is probably not

entirely irrelevant to our international relations that...Jacques Chirac of France and Gerhard Schroder of Germany are adamantly secular” (Kaplan 10). And although obviously from the other side of the isle, Tom Daschle speaks to this point more directly in his recent book Like No Other Time. Increasingly dismayed about our relations with our allies since 2000, Daschle writes that Tony Blair had recently offered “to act as an intermediary for the U.S. in shoring up our relations with our European allies. Since when, I asked, did we need a liaison with Europe? This fact alone, I asserted, spoke volumes about the effect of President Bush’s foreign policy” (100). Blair’s response to the London bombings in July of 2005, in fact, struck an all too familiar chord and served as a telling example of our own agenda abroad. In his first major speech after these attacks, Blair proclaimed that “true religious faith and true legitimate politics” were necessary to “defeat this threat.” He added that “what we are confronting here is an evil ideology,” and that “their cause is not founded on an injustice...It is founded on a belief, one whose fanaticism is such it can’t be moderated. It can’t be remedied. It has to be stood up to” (Cowell A8). These remarks are eerily similar to those that North American audiences hear from George Bush on a regular basis, and one can almost imagine these exact same words being uttered from those who have been attacked over the years by the United States and United Kingdom alike.

Making the case that we now live in a full-blown theocracy in the United States is becoming easier and easier to do. Bill Moyers, an ordained Baptist minister, recently told the Harvard medical school that “one of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe, to sit

in the seat of power in the Oval Office and in Congress. For the first time in our history, ideology and theology hold a monopoly of power in Washington” (Phillips xv).

Commenting on what this means, David Domke notes that the “Bush administration’s worldview is one grounded in religious fundamentalism—that is, it emphasizes absolutes, authority, and tradition, and a divine hand in history and upon the United States. Such a worldview is disastrous for a democratic system” (171). And these are by no means selected opinions from the “left.” Paul O’Neill, Bush’s treasury secretary for years, has recently argued that faith and ideology served as the basis for policy-making in the Bush White House. He notes that “Ideology is a lot easier, because you don’t have to know anything or search for anything...you already know the answer to everything. It’s not penetrable by facts” (Kaplan 12). Kevin Phillips, who I have cited before and who was instrumental in bringing about the southern faith-based GOP in the 1960s, has recently concluded that “the last two presidential elections mark the transformation of the GOP into the first religious party in US history” (vii). To help support this claim Phillips quotes, among hundreds of others, chief Washington representative of the Southern Baptist Convention Richard Land: “George Bush is an evangelical Christian, there is no doubt about that. The president’s evangelicalism means he believes in the truth of the Bible, with a capital T: the virgin birth, the death of Christ on the cross for our sins, the physical resurrection, and most important, a personal relationship with Jesus”(171).

Those who are looking for a Presidential bid in 2008 have of course been taking notes. During his 2000 campaign, Senator John McCain called Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson “agents of intolerance,” but in May of 2006 McCain will be the

commencement speaker at Falwell's Liberty University (a university that at the moment boasts the best college debate team in the country, for as Falwell urges, "our football program can't change the culture...our debate team can...our goal is to create an army of people who know how to make our case" (Chafets 52)). In the past Falwell has argued that Jews cannot go to heaven, that we should "blow [the terrorists] all away in the name of the Lord," and that "the pagans, the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians...the A.C.L.U....all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, 'you helped [Sept. 11] happen'" (Krugman A21).

Regarding education, Falwell has also said, "I hope to see the day when...we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be" (ReligiousTolerance.org 2). Such opinions likely fueled McCain's assertion in 2000, but he has obviously changed his tune. Paul Krugman of the New York Times notes that McCain "obviously believes that he can't get the Republican nomination without Mr. Falwell's approval" and in part he supports this comment with McCain's own words on the subject: "I believe that the Christian right has a major role to play in the Republican Party. One reason is because they're so active and they're followers are" (Krugman).

The religious pulse of the nation hasn't been completely lost on the Democrats, either. As Howard Dean was about to become chairman of the Democratic party, Anne Kornblut writes in the New York Times that he "said Democrats had the real claim on religious values because of their commitment to help the poor and the afflicted." The same article quotes Dr. Dean as saying, "when you think of the New Testament, [the

Republicans] get about 2 of the values and we get about 27” (Kornblut). Positioning herself for the Democratic nomination in 2008, Hillary Clinton has started to tap into America’s faith. In response to a recent Border Protection and Illegal Immigration bill proposed by Bill Frist in the Senate, Clinton stated that “it is certainly not in keeping with my understanding of the Scripture because this bill would literally criminalize the Good Samaritan and probably even Jesus himself” (Bernstein). The proposed bill has attracted a lot of attention, especially from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In particular, Roger Mahony, the cardinal archbishop of Los Angeles, instructed his parishioners to oppose the bill because, in part, it would “subject to five years in prison anyone who ‘assists’ an undocumented immigrant to ‘remain in the United States’” (Mahony A29). Cardinal Mahony is pushing for more comprehensive immigration reform, arguing that “providing humanitarian assistance to those in need should not be made a crime” and reminding us that “current law does not require social service agencies to obtain evidence of legal status before rendering aid, nor should it. Denying aid to a fellow human being violates a law with a higher authority than Congress—the law of God” (A29). In this particular article, Mahony makes some compelling arguments to further his cause, and concludes by saying “the church is compelled to take a stand against harmful legislation and to work towards positive change” (A29).

Whether one agrees with Frist or Clinton or Mahony on how to address our pressing need for immigration reform, there’s not much doubt that faith dictates much of the debate, and it will continue to do so in the wake of the 2006 congressional elections. Frist bowed out for a possible presidential bid, and others like Rick Santorum are no

longer there. By no means, however, does this indicate that the influence of religion upon the political scene has diminished. As David Kuo notes in his New York Times article “Putting Faith Before Politics,” the “religious right” has maintained its influence, and what we saw in November 2006 was that “its members are beginning to migrate to the Democratic party. The statistic that is exciting Democrats the most is that nearly 30% of white evangelicals, the true Republican base, voted Democrat” (1). Kuo warns that Democrats shouldn’t get overly excited as it is unclear where conservative Christians like himself will eventually commit. What is for certain, he argues, is that they will continue to be a force. Likewise, as Alan Cooperman writes in the Washington Post, whether Democrats are correct in claiming that they appealed to more people of faith or whether Republicans are correct in claiming that religious voters chose to stay home this time, either way religious faith helped produce the outcome (A01).

When I began this section I argued that faith has recently moved from the private to the public sphere in such a way that demands our attention in the writing class. I have tried to illustrate this move by highlighting a few of our prominent government officials, but theirs is by no means the only sector in which this move has taken place. With varying degrees of success, for example, public school boards across the country (most prominently in Kansas and Pennsylvania) have recently worked to include the theory of intelligent design as an option to Darwinism in biology classes. There have been a multitude of high profile and low profile contests over the display of religious scripture on government ground (whether it be in a courthouse in Alabama or in a National Park in Arizona). Not only has faith been a mainstay in the headlines, but almost every Sunday in

recent memory the topic of God or faith accounts for about one third of the New York Times Book Review weekly Best Seller list (this morning, Sunday April 9, 2006, five of the fifteen listed dealt with faith: American Theocracy, Misquoting Jesus, Left to Tell (a Rwandan genocide survivor's tale of finding God), Eat, Pray, Love, and What Jesus Meant). And on a much more local level, when I drive to school I pass a number of churches whose signs often display advice such as "bring your family to church, and bring your church to the world," or "devote yourself to the public reading of scripture 1 Timothy 4:13." There is an undeniably powerful religious current—and reaction to that current—that's "in the air" right now in this country. In fact, as Stephen Carter argues in his widely influential book The Culture of Disbelief, "the battle for the public square is already over. The rhetoric of religion is simply *there*...the question crying out most vitally for resolution, given the presence of religions in the public square, is whether and how to regulate that presence" (101). Carter appears to have struck a chord when he writes, "we often ask our citizens to split their public and private selves, telling them in effect that it is fine to be religious in private, but there is something askew when those private beliefs become the basis for public action" (8). He adds that we make a great error when "we insist that the devout keep their religious ideas—whether good or bad—to themselves" (10). Touching on this same sentiment that has resounded with millions and millions of Americans, Jim Wallis—a powerful evangelical leader who strongly opposed our war in Iraq—urges in his best-selling book God's Politics that "God is personal, but never private" (31). He argues that

if we look, really look into our biblical and other holy texts, we find a god who speaks about ‘politics’ all the time, about what believing in God means in this world (not just the next one), about faith and ‘public life’ (not just private piety), about our responsibilities for the common good (not just for our own religious experience). And here’s the big news: the politics of God calls all the rest of our politics into question. (32)

The calls of Carter and Wallis are beginning to find an audience in the world of academia as well. In his recent online article “One University Under God?” Stanley Fish writes, “In every sector of American life, religion is transgressing the boundary between private and public and demanding to be heard in precincts that only a short while ago would have politely shown it the door” (3). Fish notes that the history of religion and “courses like ‘The Bible as Literature’ and ‘The American Puritan Experience’ have been staples in the curriculum for a long time,” but that things are starting to change. “It is one thing,” he argues, “to take religion as an object of study and another to take religion seriously. To take religion seriously would be to regard it not as a phenomenon to be analyzed at arm’s length, but as a candidate for the truth” (4). Negotiating ways that we can “take religion seriously” in the writing class—something we have to start doing—is a central aim of this study.

The Fear of God...

Giving up control in the classroom is not always the easiest thing for a teacher to do—and talking about faith has all the earmarks of losing control. Inviting the unpredictable is often hard, frustrating, and stressful work. I suspect that most of us would agree, though, that while it hasn’t always gone smoothly, broaching topics like

race and gender has been a rewarding endeavor. Often the hard part is asking our students (and ourselves) to question our habits and reexamine our beliefs. It's useful to remember, though, that in the context of the writing class, initial chaos is not necessarily a bad thing. Teachers who have taught long enough, I believe, come to understand that some of the most genuine learning moments come from giving students freedom to explore, to imagine, and to question. Sometimes allowing this kind of freedom means relinquishing control, but as Ann Berthoff tells us, in many ways that's how meaning is made. "Meanings don't come out of the air," she writes, "we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and unformed" (70). Chaos, Berthoff argues, is in fact essential to the writing process: "The first use of language that a student of composition has to learn, I think, is in the generation of chaos. If we don't begin there, we falsify the composition process because composition requires choosing all along the way, and you can't choose if there are no perceived alternatives: chaos is the source of alternatives" (75). If we don't allow our students to grapple with faith from the start, we limit their ability to choose in this regard and we also hamper that initial chaotic, ambiguous moment to which Berthoff refers. "Our students cannot learn the uses of chaos," she adds, "if we continue to make assignments appropriate not to these beginnings but to the final phases of the composing process" (70). With respect to taking on religion in the writing class, Berthoff's advice couldn't be more appropriate. We must at the outset permit our students to choose from their bag of chaos—a bag which contains their faith in all of its slippery, contagious, and undefined forms—when they attempt to invent, compose, and make meaning. Later in the

process we can work with them to sculpt and define (and, I will argue, put into practice the pragmatic theory I'll outline in the next chapter). Letting go of the reins in the beginning, though, isn't easy. "Chaos is scary," Berthoff acknowledges, but what "we must realize ourselves and make dramatically evident to our students is what I. A. Richards means when he calls ambiguities 'the hinges of thought'" (71).

I. A. Richards' understanding of ambiguity is certainly useful here as well. Most of us are conditioned to see ambiguity as something to be avoided or refined. There is a premium on precision and clarity. Like Berthoff, however, Richards argues for the importance of the ambiguous: "where the old Rhetoric treated ambiguity as a fault in language, and hoped to confine or eliminate it, the new Rhetoric sees it as an inevitable consequence of the powers of language and as the indispensable means of most of our most important utterances—especially in Poetry and Religion" (40). Those of us who take a Reader Response approach to teaching reading and writing might relate this notion of ambiguity to that third space or that "live circuit set up between reader and text" where "the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings" (Rosenblatt 24). And Rosenblatt's argument suggests that emotions and feelings play as much a part in making meaning as the intellect—emotions and feelings, of course, not the intellect, are the providence of faith. As writing teachers we might prefer to focus on the intellect (it's less scary, more manageable), but Rosenblatt is not alone in arguing that it takes both our hearts as well as our minds to make meaning. John Dewey often criticized the way in which the education process separated the two, and that doing so resulted in a debilitating

lack of interest on the part of both student and teacher (Democracy, 335). Likewise, Susanne Langer stressed that our minds were equally made up of thought *and* feeling. If we take this approach to making meaning, it seems almost impossible to address emotion and feeling without considering faith.

Imagination comes into play here as well. Just as we might understand faith as rooted more in our emotions than our logic, it can also certainly be understood as an exercise in imagination. Rosenblatt tells us that what emerges from that “live circuit” or that third space between reader and text is an “imaginative experience” (24). In other words, meaning making is imaginative. In the same vein, Salman Rushdie argues that “waking as well as sleeping, our response to the world is essentially *imaginative*” (377). Regarding the writing class in particular, Ann Berthoff argues that “if we are to avail ourselves of that incomparable resource, the minds of our students, we will have to know what we’re looking for, to have some philosophically sound idea of the power the mind promises. I believe that for teachers of composition, such a philosophy of mind is best thought of as a theory of imagination” (64). In essence, she argues that we need to “reclaim imagination as the forming power of mind” because it has so often and so consistently been relegated to “the affective domain” as opposed to the “the cognitive domain” (64). Like John Dewey, Berthoff sees this dichotomy as false and destructive. Instead she suggests a more unifying and indispensable understanding of the word: “A good name for the mind in action is imagination” (74).

The words “emotion,” “feeling,” and “imagination” don’t generally send contemporary composition teachers running for the hills. On the contrary, these are

usually considered to be good things in the writing process. Religion and God, however, are not quite as welcome, although in many ways they are tied up with all three of those other words. Even though we don't know where any of these things will lead us or our students, religious belief in particular gives us the jitters because of all the dogmatic baggage it carries and because there are no clear guidelines for how to deal with this issue. We now feel relatively comfortable with race, class, and gender (and to some extent sexual identity) because they have been theorized and problematized in the context of the writing class. My project is to do the same with religious faith by outlining how the Pragmatists can help us locate strategies for making religious belief a manageable subject of inquiry in the composition class.

CHAPTER III

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS BELIEF

A philosophy is characterized more by the *formulation* of its problems than by its solution to them. Its answers establish an edifice of facts; but its questions make the frame in which its picture of facts is plotted...In our questions lie our *principles of analysis*

Susanne Langer

In this chapter, I will primarily discuss the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Much of their thinking can be traced to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose name will come up now and again, and I will also draw a bit upon the contemporary Pragmatists Cornel West and Richard Rorty. I focus, however, on Peirce, James and Dewey not only because they were the primary authors of this particular approach, but because these men were educators (especially Dewey) who spent a great deal of their energy on the issue of religion (especially James). After the Enlightenment and the thinking of philosophers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant relegated theology to a more or less emotional, aesthetic, and moral sphere apart from scientific inquiry, European theologians in the nineteenth century continued to find themselves on the sidelines and in the shadows of philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill. Such was not the case in America, however. As Cornel

West tells us, “religious concerns loomed large in the first significant American philosophical response to modernity. The first generation of American Pragmatists, especially Charles Peirce and William James, attempted not only to demythologize modern science, but also to update religion” (West, Reader 361). In fact, as West succinctly puts it, “nowhere in the modern world did philosophers take religion more seriously than in the United States between 1900 and 1940” (361). As a scientist and one of America’s most influential philosophers, Peirce wrote extensively on religion, including essays I’ll take up later like “Evolutionary Love” and “The Concept of God,” where he often placed a premium on faith by suggesting that we rely more in life on vague intuitions than on the precision of reason. In the work of James, understood by many as the “greatest psychologist of his day,” we find books such as Talks to Teachers and The Varieties of Religious Experience; as Bennett Ramsey argues, “the nature of James’ work overall...finds its whither and its whence in a developing understanding and an increasingly strong avowal of the human person as a religiously bounded self” (3). In the philosophy of John Dewey, a towering figure who for the better part of a century transformed our understanding of the education process, we find books like A Common Faith in which he grapples with the definition of religion as well as why and how we employ it. Again from Cornel West, “for American Pragmatists, religious beliefs were not simply practical postulates for moral behavior, pietistic modes of self-consciousness, pictorial representations of absolute knowledge or anxiety-ridden self-involving choices. Religious beliefs were on the same spectrum as any other beliefs—always linked to

experience” (Reader 361). In short, these educators took religion seriously, and their insights here could prove invaluable for us in the present-day writing class.

A Popular Misconception of Pragmatism

In his book The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason (a book that has been on and off the New York Times Best Seller list now for over a year), Sam Harris takes the all-too common position that Pragmatism is merely the most persuasive and prominent form of relativism. He claims that “if we ever hope to reach a global consensus on matters of ethics—if we would say, for instance, that stoning women for adultery is *really* wrong, in some absolute sense—we must find deep reasons to reject pragmatism” (179). To support this claim, Harris argues that the pragmatic method holds that “to call a statement ‘true’ is merely to praise it for how it functions in some area of discourse; it is not to say anything about how it relates to the universe at large” (179). Harris argues that there are, in fact, general truths to be known about the way the world is, and to suggest (as he sees the Pragmatists suggesting) that you can’t actually be “right” about anything and that one should only focus on the usefulness of a belief in a particular context leads, inevitably, to disastrous results—especially when it comes to faith. He offers the following example: “If a literalist reading of the Bible works for you on Sundays, while agnosticism about God is better suited to Mondays at the office, there is no reason to worry about the resulting contradictions in your worldview” (180). This is a misreading of the Pragmatists, for at its core Pragmatism works to negotiate through our contradictions rather than ignore them or accept them.

While Harris is right about their rejection of resounding universal truths, he fails to recognize a crucial step in that the aim of their method is to reconcile the consequences of *all* our particular beliefs so as to enhance human happiness. This approach is grounded in a responsibility to people, not to finding an ultimate Truth. At the heart of pragmatism lies this question: “What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?” (James, Pragmatism 23). That is, “the pragmatic method . . . is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences” (23). C.S. Peirce, often cited as the founding father of American Pragmatism, argues that in attempting to trace such consequences in order to find truth, we must understand that what we know to be true about something derives from the sum of the effects that that something has had upon us. The sole purpose of “thought,” Peirce holds, “is to produce belief,” and belief “involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or say for short, a *habit*” (Ideas 292). It’s the practical consequences of our actions and our habits that generate our beliefs, our truths, and our understanding of what works for us in our lives. But the key is that we need to square up all of our truths with all of our other truths. It’s like a system of checks and balances based on our experience in the world—flying airplanes into buildings or torturing gay men might work or be “true” from a particular theological perspective, but these actions don’t stack up against most of what else we know to be true from our experiences in this world. Or to take Harris’ example about vacillating between an inerrant interpretation of the Bible on Sunday and an agnostic approach to the world on Monday—it’s our duty, the Pragmatists argue, to examine and then reconcile the consequences and contradictions resulting from these

beliefs (in other words, each notion is only as good as our other notions permit). As James writes, “If theological ideas prove to have value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much. For how much more they are true, will depend entirely on their relations to the other truths that also have to be acknowledged” (Pragmatism 35).

In his critique of the Pragmatists, Harris singles out Richard Rorty as offering “considerable shelter to the shades of relativism” (179). Rorty has been pretty clear on this point, though. “I do not think,” he argues, “that denying that there are ‘the *correct* standards’ should lead anybody to say that *truth* (as opposed to justification) is ‘relative’ to something” (Critics 11). The only reason one would make this leap, he suggests, is if one were trying to justify to others that his beliefs were True in some universal sense. This is not Rorty’s aim, nor is it, as I outlined above, the aim of Pragmatism. For example, in response to the work of Albrecht Wellmer, Rorty says, “we agree that one reason to prefer democracies is that they enable us to construct ever bigger and better contexts of discussion. But I stop there, and Wellmer goes on. He adds that this reason is not just a justification of democracy *for us*, but ‘a justification, *period*’ (13). Rorty suggests that for a Pragmatist Wellmer’s thinking is “like trying to tell whether I think of my scalpel or my computer as ‘a good tool for this task’ or as a ‘good tool, *period*’ (13). Relativism, then, is an entirely different kind of animal than Pragmatism. Although both might be said to maintain that there are no absolute or universal truths, relativism is still beholden to an abstract “truth” even though that truth might vary from place to place or from culture to culture. As Rorty tells us, though, a Pragmatist would argue that “our

responsibility to Truth, or to Reason, must be replaced by talk about our responsibility to our fellow human beings” (Social Hope 148). We do not have a “responsibility to get things right. Rather, it is a responsibility to ourselves to make our beliefs cohere with one another, and to our fellow humans to make them cohere with theirs” (149). Examining the consequences of our beliefs in a particular context so that we put ourselves in a position to interrogate them and mediate between them does not necessarily lead to the relativistic view that, say, burning women as witches might in fact be o.k. in some cultures or in some circumstances. Pragmatism provides a method of mediation, a method of examining the consequences of *all* our beliefs, a method that has everything to do with worrying about contradictions in our worldview. As such, it is not a method of compromise, but a different approach in its own right.

The Pragmatists on Religion

I begin this section with Ralph Waldo Emerson because, as Cornel West puts it, in so many ways the work of James, Peirce, and Dewey rests “on the shoulders of Emerson” (Evasion 6). In a chapter entitled “Religion” from his book English Traits, Emerson makes the following comparison: “It is with religion as with marriage. A youth marries in haste; afterwards, when his mind is opened to the reason of the conduct of life, he is asked what he thinks of the institution of marriage and of the right relations of the sexes. ‘I should have much to say,’ he might reply, ‘if the question were open, but I have a wife and children, and all question is closed for me” (503). He reminds us that all too often we resign ourselves early on to the way in which we assume things must be and in doing so

completely ignore our real-world experiences which might, if examined, fundamentally change our beliefs. With respect to the mountain of religious dogma that is so often imparted to us from the moment we enter this world, Emerson sardonically observes that it's so much easier to more or less concede and "find some niche or crevice in this mountain of stone which religious ages have quarried and carved, wherein to bestow yourself, than attempt anything ridiculously and dangerously above your strength, like removing it" (504). Finding such a strength is imperative, though, and we must, he argues, look to our own time and our own lives to find it: "the stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed...indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology. It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was" (87). If religion is to have any use, he argues, there should be no such thing as a national or universal notion of God, faith, or church. I quote Emerson at length here because he is so eloquent on the point: "Where dwells religion? Tell me first where dwells electricity, or motion, or thought, or gesture. They do not dwell or stay at all..." Like electricity, religion is "passing, glancing, gesticular; it is a traveler, a newness, a surprise, a secret" (513).

From this perspective, it is impossible to confine religion to a single sphere. As Ann Berthoff, Susanne Langer, and others would later argue that dividing the emotional from the intellect is not only wrong but harmful, Emerson and the Pragmatists who follow him argue that separating our faith from our logical understanding of the world is equally misguided: "I look for the new teacher...[who] shall show that the Ought, that [moral and religious] Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy"

(Emerson 91). It's interesting to note as well that Henry Ward Beecher, who has been called "America's most prominent nineteenth-century liberal preacher and [...] perhaps the most powerful preacher in American history, if not in the history of the Anglo-Saxon people" (Chandler 19), was preaching more or less the same thing at exactly the same time. Like the Pragmatists, an essential aspect of Beecher's faith was his attempt to harmonize spirituality with the "real world"; he worked to dispel the assumed conflict between theological tenets and secular truths. As William McLoughlin tells us, "Beecher's great achievement was to amalgamate Romanticism, religion, and science—the epistemology of Kant, the Gospel of Jesus, the teleology of Spencer" (4). He preached "to the throbbing human heart, to reaffirm its faith in Christianity, and yet to do so without undermining the equally profound faith of Americans in science, education, and learning—in short, to harmonize religion and science not through metaphysical speculation ...but through appealing to emotional experience" (39). Beecher writes in a letter to Theodore Tilton, "I discern, arising in studies in Natural Science, a surer foothold for these [evangelical] views than they have ever had. Insofar as theology is concerned, if I have one purpose or aim, it is to secure for the truths now developing in the sphere of Natural Science a religious spirit and harmonization with all the cardinal truths of religion" (McLoughlin Pre-preface). Referring to two classical gods of philosophy, Beecher offers this following harmony: "It has been said that everybody is either a Platonist or an Aristotelian—Plato standing for ideal philosophy and Aristotle for the real and practical. Everybody tends, it is said, to follow one or the other. No; the perfect man unites them both, and is at once Aristotelian and Platonist. His feet standing

on solid fact, his head goes philosophizing, and his heart keeps the balance between them” (John Howard 158).

Like Emerson’s, Beecher’s examples were often a bit gendered (a sign of the times), but also like Emerson’s they not only illustrated his ongoing attempt to square secular and spiritual truths, but they advocated an activity that worked to repel the prevailing static nature of dogma. Emerson writes,

The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought, is transferred to the record. The poet chanting is felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforth it is settled the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant. (55)

Pushing this point, Emerson adds, “Books are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings” (57): “The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul” (56). This focus on activity, on the notion that real and useful knowledge generally comes from lived experience (“Only so much do I know, as I have lived” (59)) prompts us to understand that new experiences will inevitably challenge existing beliefs. Our beliefs, our habits, our truths must constantly change as our experiences tell us something doesn’t work anymore. On this note, Beecher suggests that too many people are alarmed “at the inevitable changes in theology and government and the conditions of the people. They want peace. Well, you can find it in the graveyard, and that is the only place. Among living men you can find no peace. Growth means disturbance; peace in any such sense as

that of no investigation, no change, means death” (Lectures 126). Just as Emerson did, Beecher offered this advice over and over: “There must be, in any healthful society, a process of absorption, or of reconstruction of its organizations...A society whose institutions are unchanging is itself ungrowing. The living body alters. Only the dead rest” (Life Thoughts 62). Taking the specific example of prayer, he instructs, “Do not come to me and tell me you are fit to join the church because you love to pray morning and night. Tell me what your praying has *done* for you; and then call your neighbors, and let me hear what they think it has done for you” (Life Thoughts 121). The habit of praying must *do* something in this world, must be useful here, for it to count as real, or as true.

It’s difficult to say how much influence Beecher’s theology had on the work of James, Pierce, and Dewey (Beecher has been rather maligned and marginalized by history—unjustly, I believe, but that’s a topic for another time). Emerson’s influence, however—which will hopefully become apparent in the following pages—is undeniable. While there are certainly distinctions to be made between the way in which James, Peirce, and Dewey approach the topic of faith, I think it’s fair to make the general claim that the Pragmatic approach to faith I set out to describe below is rooted in Emerson’s (and perhaps to some extent Beecher’s) understanding that religion should not be severed from our other experiences in this world and that a healthy faith always requires inquiry and action. In outlining what I have termed a Pragmatic approach to faith, I first look to Peirce, then to James, and finally to Dewey.

The Church Is What The Church Does

Charles Sanders Peirce is widely understood as the father of Pragmatism (a word which has its roots in a Greek term meaning action). In 1878 his essay “How to Make our Ideas Clear” proposed that in order to understand what something is, or what something means, we need to understand what that something does. To put it crudely, Force is what Force does, or Love is what Love does. As I’ve mentioned earlier, Peirce argued that our beliefs lead to habits, or rules of action, and thus we need to constantly examine the consequences of our beliefs (that is to say we need to constantly examine our habits, or our rules of action) in order to interrogate the validity of those beliefs. He writes, for example, that while “faith in the sense that one will adhere consistently to a given line of conduct, is highly necessary in affairs...if it means that you are not going to be alert for indications that the moment has come to change your tactics, I think it is ruinous in practice” (Philosophy 187). After all is said and done, he concludes that “we come down to what is tangible and conceivably practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought” (“Ideas” 292-93).

Peirce was a scientist, a mathematician, and a logician, and thus his focus on the tangible and the practical makes sense, but his “original conceptions of pragmatism—and later pragmaticism—are indebted to Emersonian sensibilities of philosophy as cultural criticism with moral purpose” (West, Evasion 43). Both Emerson and Peirce saw “science as continuous with religion—both shot through with moral purpose” (42). Peirce had a number of problems with the prevailing romantic and positivistic movements of his time, and he worked to dismantle their claims of “infallible certainty, and thus keep open

the possibility of discovering a rational reconciliation of science with religious values as expressions of human needs” (Charles 345). His attempt at this reconciliation, with its emphasis on action and human experience in a social setting, propelled the Pragmatic approach that inspired the likes of James, Dewey, Rorty, and West: “Peirce’s double consciousness of experimental inquiry and common human sentiments and his dual allegiance to scientific method and Christian faith serve as the soil upon which the seeds of American Pragmatism sprout” (West, Evasion 49). Before I get much further, though, it may be useful to set out a few definitions—namely how Peirce defines science and religion. In “The Marriage of Religion and Science” he begins by asking “What is science?” and he answers,

The Dictionary will say that it is systematized knowledge...Mere knowledge [however], though it be systematized, may be a dead memory; while by science we all habitually mean a living and growing body of truth...That which constitutes science, then, is not so much correct conclusions, as it is a correct method. But the method of science is itself a scientific result. It did not spring out of the brain of a beginner: it was a historic attainment and a scientific achievement. So that not even this method ought to be regarded as essential to the beginnings of science. That which is essential, however, is the scientific spirit, which is determined not to rest satisfied with existing opinions... (Charles 350)

In the following paragraph he asks “What is religion?” and suggests that

in each individual it is a sort of sentiment, or obscure perception, a deep recognition of a something in the circumambient All which, if he strives to express it, will clothe itself in forms more or less extravagant, more or less accidental, but ever acknowledging the first and last...as well as a relation to that Absolute of the individual’s self, as a relative being. (351)

Like Emerson, one point of friction that Peirce spends a fair amount of time trying to work out is the way in which science pushes ahead while religion—as we try to express it, grapple with it, and place ourselves in relation to it—tends to look to the past. As science grows and builds upon itself, religion has “seldom been seen so vitalized as to become more and more perfect, even as judged from its own standpoint. Like a plucked flower, its destiny is to wilt and fade” (351). What initially spawned religious sentiment “loses gradually its pristine purity and strength, till some new creed treads it down. Thus it happens quite naturally that those who are animated with the spirit of science are for hurrying forward, while those who have the interests of religion at heart are apt to press back” (351).

While arguing that *both* endeavors should be “animated by a progressive spirit” (352), Peirce offers his theory of agapism as one way to bridge the gap. A perspective intended as a response to Darwin’s proposal of evolution, agapism posits that what has moved all of us forward is not simply the blind mechanics of natural selection, but the blind mechanics of natural selection combined with chance and love. And of these three, he argues, love is the primary force. Peirce admits that this proposal “will probably shock my scientific brethren” (Philosophy 364), but he is adamant in arguing that understanding who we are and how we came to be this way cannot be understood by chance and science alone. For a scientist, he braves the waters of feeling: “if it were possible to believe in agapism without believing it warmly, that fact would be an

argument against the truth of the doctrine. At any rate, since the warmth of feeling exists, it should on every account be candidly confessed” (364).

At the heart of what drives his argument here lies a rejection of the Cartesian focus on the inner self and, in its place, an emphasis on our social web as having powered our evolution. “Everybody can see,” he argues, “that the statement of St. John is the formula of an evolutionary philosophy, which teaches that growth comes only from love, from—I will not say *self-sacrifice*, but from the ardent impulse to fulfill another’s highest impulse” (362). There is a focus on being responsible to other people around you, and this responsibility is alive and in the present, not indoctrinated in a truth from the past. To this end, he tried to demystify

the scientific method into a human affair, into a set of distinct social practices by which knowledge is produced. This role of pragmatism as cultural demystifying activity (focused on the supreme modern authority, science) permits Peirce to defend religion, not devalue or dismiss it. In fact, Peirce’s conception of scientific method as a value-laden and normative social activity not only conjoins science and ethics but also posits (and invokes) a religious telos. (West, Evasion 43-44)

In “Evolutionary Love,” Peirce writes, “As Darwin puts it on his title page, it is the struggle for existence; and he should have added for his motto: every individual for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost!” (364). He puts Darwin’s theory of evolution in his own religious and layman’s terms:

Here, then is the issue. The Gospel of Christ says that progress comes from every individual merging his individuality in sympathy with his neighbors. On the other side, the conviction of the nineteenth century is that progress takes place by virtue

of every individual's striving for himself with all his might and trampling his neighbor underfoot whenever he gets a chance to do so. This may accurately be called the Gospel of Greed. (364)

In arguing instead for a Gospel of Love based on social responsibility, Peirce appeals to what he calls the "Sensible Heart" with the church playing an indispensable role as social catalyst. Unlike Richard Rorty, but very much in accord with other contemporary writers such as Jim Wallis and Stephen Carter, Peirce suggests that without a very public, vibrant, national church, our evolution as civilized beings is all but impossible. He pressed that "religion is a great, perhaps the greatest, factor of that social life which extends beyond one's own circle of personal friends. That life is everything for elevated, and humane, and democratic civilization" (West, Evasion 48). In his essay "What is Christian Faith," he advises that

Man's highest developments are social; and religion, though it begins in a seminal individual inspiration, only comes to full flower in a great church coextensive with a civilization...Its ideal is that the whole world shall be united in the bond of a common love of God accomplished by each man's loving his neighbor. Without a church, the religion of love can have but a rudimentary existence; and a narrow, little exclusive church is almost worse than none. A great Catholic church is wanted. (Charles 355)

He believed that the "raison d'être of a church is to confer upon men a life broader than their narrow personalities" (West, Evasion 48). He chastised, "who are you, anyway, who are so zealous to keep the churches small and exclusive?" (Philosophy 357) and he

argued that “if one renounces the church, in what other way can one as satisfactorily exercise the faculty of fraternizing with all one’s neighbors?” (West, Evasion 48).

There are, I suspect, a few points one might take issue with regarding this perspective. For instance, one could argue that there are many other satisfactory ways to fraternize and connect with other members of society than through a church, and there are certainly those who would take issue with his agapistic theory of evolution (Peirce’s own friend Chauncey Wright, for example, who saw in Darwin’s theory no moral purpose whatsoever). My main point, though, is that as a scientist Peirce worked hard to reconcile the conflict between faith and science, and while some of us might disagree with a few of his particular views on the role of religion (I, admittedly, am one of them), his attempt at mediation can help us tremendously in grappling with this same conflict in a writing class that is geared toward social consciousness. He has linked, for instance, one of the central tenets of his Pragmatic method—examining the consequences of our beliefs so as to interrogate those beliefs—with the teachings of Jesus. Commenting on this primary tenet, he writes, “it has been said to be a skeptical and materialistic principal. But it is only an application of the sole principal of logic which was recommended by Jesus; ‘Ye may know them by their fruits’” (West, Evasion 50). Peirce went on to stress the social implications of this connection by reminding us that the fruit is “collective, it is the achievement of the whole people” (50). He was adamant that our advance through time has been possible only through collective action and that no single individual has ever accomplished anything alone, including Darwin: “I doubt,” he suggests, “if any of the

great discoveries ought, properly, to be considered as altogether individual achievements”

(Philosophy 374). Likewise,

religion cannot reside in its totality in a single individual. Like every species of reality, it is essentially a social, a public affair. It is the idea of a whole church, welding all its members together in one organic, systemic perception of the Glory of the Highest—an idea having a growth from generation to generation...
(Charles 351)

On the surface this may appear as a departure from Emerson’s focus on the individual, but Emerson too saw the individual as deeply connected with community. As he writes, for example, in his essay “History,” there is really only “one mind common to all men” in that we all share the same consciousness (otherwise we couldn’t even communicate). Only our particular place in history makes us unique—there is no pure originality; we quote everything; we are all interconnected. Or as he says at the outset of this essay, “I am the owner of Caesar’s hand/and Plato’s brain/of Lord Christ’s heart/and Shakespeare’s strain” (115). Peirce’s amalgamation of science and religion was very much based on such an understanding of the individual as a continuum of, and in the context of, the larger community.

So too did Peirce draw on Emerson’s principals concerning personal experience. As Emerson told us to stop looking back across the sea at what others have written but instead look to our own everyday experiences in order to form our beliefs—to “explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low,” and to understand that “life [not the library] is our dictionary”—Peirce advises as well that “the scientific spirit requires a man to be at

all times ready to dump his whole cartload of beliefs, the moment experience is against them. The desire to learn forbids him to be perfectly cocksure that he knows already. Besides, positive science can only rest on experience; and experience can never result in absolute certainty, exactitude, necessity, or universality” (West, Evasion 46). And while Peirce believed in God, quoted scripture, and, as noted above, held the church in very high esteem, he also held that the “religious spirit” must undergo a similar test:

It is easy to chop logic about matters of which you have no experience whatever. Men color blind have more than once learnedly discussed the laws of color-sensation, and have made interesting deductions from those laws. But when it comes to positive knowledge, such knowledge as a lawyer has of the practice of the courts, that can only rest on long experience, direct or indirect. So, a man may be an accomplished theologian without ever having felt the stirring of the spirit; but he cannot answer the simple question at the head of this article [“What Is Christian Faith?”] except out of his own religious experience. (Charles 353)

Peirce was optimistic that focusing on our experiences would ultimately lead us to a fuller understanding of God (more so, in fact, than either James or Dewey, who felt that our experiences could lead us in a number of possible directions); he felt it was “sufficient to go out into the air and open one’s eyes to see that the world is not governed altogether by mechanism” (348). But he also believed that for both faith and science, one can only grow “by experience continually pouring upon him ideas he has not yet acquired” (West, Evasion 50). And like Emerson, these ideas were not to come from what others have said: “I appeal,” Peirce writes, “to the typical Christian to answer out of the abundance of his spirit, without dictation from priests” (Charles 354). For, as he asks

rhetorically in his essay “The Concept of God,” “where would such an idea, say as that of God, come from, if not from direct experience?” (Philosophy 377).

In relying upon our experience as a guide for both our scientific and religious endeavors, however, Peirce cautions us to avoid precision. He suggests that “‘God’ is a vernacular word and, like all such words, but more than almost any, is *vague* (375, his italics). Peirce believed in the reality of God, but he felt that one of the greatest errors we make concerning this reality was to render him too precise. “*No* concept, not even those of mathematics, is absolutely precise; and some of the most important for everyday use are extremely vague” (376). As Kenneth Burke later called “rotten with perfection” (a term which describes our innate desire to establish perfect definitions and then cling to them indefinitely), Peirce felt that our trouble with faith was our inability to rely on ill-defined instinct and hence our wrong-headed pursuit of absolute truths. “Our instinctive beliefs involving such concepts,” he argues, “are far more trustworthy than the best established results of science, if these be precisely understood. Men who are given to defining too much inevitably run themselves into confusion” (376). Like Langer and Berthoff and Rosenblatt and Dewey who would later argue that our emotions are as important as our intellect in constituting our minds and our understanding of the world around us, Peirce argues that in fact instinct and emotion far outweigh reason and logic. Regarding the question of God, he posits,

the only guide to the answer to this question lies in the power of the passion of love which more or less overmasters every agnostic scientist and everybody who seriously and deeply considers the universe. But whatever there may be in *argument* in all this is as nothing, the merest nothing, in comparison to its force as

an appeal to one's own instinct, which is to argument what substance is to shadow, what bed-rock is to the built foundations of a cathedral. (377)

When it comes to both God and science, vague instinct—like Ann Berthoff's support for chaos and I. A. Richards' support for ambiguities—should more often than not be our guide. For example, he argues that “we all think that there is an element of order in the universe. Could any laboratory experiments render that proposition more certain than instinct or common sense leaves it?” Of course not, he suggests, and “when anybody undertakes to say *precisely* what that order consists in, he will quickly find he outruns all logical warrant” (376).

In conjunction with this preference for vague intuition as opposed to precise definition comes a sense of hybridity that Peirce says must be understood and acknowledged as well. To put it in terms that might apply to the socially motivated composition class, we need not view atheists and theists or Democrats and Republicans as polar opposites that must be either attacked or ignored by the other. “The love that God is,” Peirce argues, “is not a love of which hatred is the contrary; otherwise Satan would be a coordinate power; but it is a love which embraces hatred as an imperfect stage of it” (362). This hybrid approach to our understanding of the world, or the notion that there would be no secular approach without a religious approach and vice-versa, can help to provide a starting point for dialogue in the writing class. It can help provide a fresh and useful perspective of what is too commonly understood as “the other” by perhaps suggesting that we view science as an imperfect stage of faith and faith as an imperfect stage of science. And for Peirce, this all goes back to social responsibility, “for self-love

is no love” (362). Separate camps usually lead to what he has termed as the Gospel of Greed: he reminds us that “the movement of love is circular, at one and the same impulse projecting creations into independency and drawing them into harmony,” and that “Love is not directed to abstractions but to persons,” to our neighbors, to those we share this planet with right now (362).

Peirce also offers what he calls a Neglected Argument concerning the question of God, an argument closely connected to that of avoiding precision and embracing the vague. He promotes the notion of Pure Play, which “involves no purpose save that of casting aside all serious purpose” and which “has no rules, except this very law of liberty. It bloweth where it listeth” (Charles 360). Tapping into the value of what might be called the pleasure of instinct, he writes that it is

‘Musement’ on the whole—that I particularly recommend, because it will in time flower into the N.A. [the Neglected Argument]. One who sits down with the purpose of becoming convinced of the truth of religion...can never attain the entirety even of a physicist’s belief in electrons....But let religious meditation be allowed to grow up spontaneously out of Pure Play without any breach of continuity, and the Muser will retain the perfect candor proper to Musement. (360)

With this argument, too, he is careful to continue warning us against precision, for “if one’s observations and reflections are allowed to specialize themselves too much, the Play will be converted into scientific study,” and that will lead us awry (361). And despite his great respect for the church, Peirce continuously leads us away from the constraints of dogma—he repeats, “Adhere to the one ordinance of Play, the law of

liberty” (361). For Peirce, liberty in this context stands in stark contrast to dogma. To find God, he suggests, it’s necessary to set aside the direction we receive from priests, parents, or books, and instead “Enter your skiff of Musement, push off into the lake of thought, and leave the breath of heaven to swell your sail. With your eyes open, awake to what is about or within you, and open conversation with yourself” (362).

Peirce felt that if his advice was taken, “in the Pure Play of Musement the idea of God’s reality will be sure sooner or later to be found an attractive fancy, which the Muser will develop in various ways” (365). He believed in the reality of God, but underscored again and again that the hypothesis of God must be understood “as vague...and inevitably subject to the law of growth” (365). Growth is not only acquiring new experiences to alter and build upon our old beliefs, but the active pursuit of those new experiences as well. Faith, science, and growth are as synonyms in the sense of active forward movement. In remembering an old acquaintance, Peirce writes,

For example, I knew a scientific man who devoted his last years to reading theology in hopes of coming to a belief in God, but who never could in the least degree come to a consciousness of having the least belief of the sort, yet passionately pursued that very mistaken means of attaining his heart’s supreme desire. He, according to me, was a shining example of Faith in God. For to believe in reasoning about phenomena is to believe that they are governed by reason, that is, by God. (Charles 400)

It doesn’t matter that this man never found what he set out to find (and it might be added that according to Peirce, had he engaged in Musement or Pure Play, he would have been more successful). What matters is his passionate, reasonable pursuit. As with science, it’s

the pursuit that Peirce calls faith, not the end achievement, and he goes as far as to call reason and God the same thing when wrapped up in pursuit—that is, when wrapped up in the effort of making our beliefs conform with one another:

Every true man of science, i.e., every man belonging to a social group all the members of which sacrifice all the ordinary motives of life to their desire to make their beliefs concerning one subject conform to verified judgments of perception, together with sound reasoning, and who therefore really believes the universe to be governed by reason, or in other words by God—but who does not explicitly recognize that he believes in God—has faith in God, according to my use of the term Faith. (400)

During this inquiry, we will inevitably run into propositions that don't seem very likely. At these moments it's critical to keep an open mind, "to dismiss doubts on the matter from consideration." Dismissing doubts from the process of inquiry, however, does not mean closing off possibilities; it simply means giving the proposition at hand every opportunity. "There is a vast difference," Peirce notes, "between that and any holding of the proposition for certain. To hold a proposition for certain is to puff oneself up with the vanity of perfect knowledge. It leaves no room for Faith" (400). To pursue means to allow for the possibility of a proposition without any reservation, a perspective that allows for greater possibilities, not fewer (a perspective, in fact, much like Peter Elbow's more contemporary "Doubting and Believing" game). Anticipating criticism, Peirce offers the following example on this point: "But you may ask, don't you admit there are any delusions? Yes: I may think a thing is black, and on close examination it

may turn out to be bottle-green. But I cannot think a thing is black if there is no such thing to be seen as black” (Philosophy 378).

As we will also see with James and Dewey, the pragmatic method pushes us to imagine a greater number of possibilities, and the same standard applies for both reason and faith. Indeed, as noted above, they are often understood as the same thing. For as Peirce says elsewhere, “logic depends on a mere struggle to escape doubt, which, as it terminates in action, must begin in emotion” (West, Evasion 53). And in this struggle, in this pursuit, we must return to the underlying maxim of Peirce’s pragmatism: to consider “what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have” (49). Its practical effects define the object. In other words, Love is what Love does. Force is what Force does. And Religion is what Religion does.

You Can’t Know Till You Get There

Of the three primary Pragmatists I discuss in this Chapter, William James has the most to say about religion. In addition to his substantial Varieties of Religious Experience and influential essays such as “Will to Believe,” the topic of religion appears throughout the corpus of his work. In Pragmatism, for example, where he outlines and develops the method Peirce established, God and religion appear on nearly every other page. He notes, in fact, that “the principle of Peirce, the principle of pragmatism...lay entirely unnoticed by anyone for twenty years, until I, in an address before professor Howison’s philosophical union at the University of California, brought it forward again and made a

special application of it to religion” (24). James was constantly grappling with the way in which religious faith occupied our lives. As Bennett Ramsey notes,

I see James as absorbed, throughout most of his work, with the investigation and consideration of religious problems. More to the point, I see him attempting to broaden the definition of religion beyond the confines of theistic and supernaturalistic frameworks toward immanentist, almost naturalistic meaning. Above all, I see James as advocating a religious way of life, a way of being based not on control, but on respect for and responsibility to the immanent ties and powers that bind the self. (3)

In the following pages I hope to show that what James has to say about religion can prove invaluable to us in the contemporary composition class, and what he has to say to teachers in particular is also well worth a review. I begin with the latter, as it directly relates to the former.

In Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals, James tries to free the profession of teaching from the all-too stringent and confining regulations that defined it for so long. There is no one formula for teachers, he argues; “Psychology is a science—teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application, by use of its originality” (23-24). As Louise Rosenblatt would argue years later, meaning and understanding are made in that third space, that “intermediary inventive” space between text and reader, between teacher and pupil. “The science of logic never made a man reason rightly,” James says, “and the science of ethics (if there be such a thing) never made a man behave rightly” (24). Thus, as teachers we need to put our focus on those

“intermediate inventive minds” which, as we know, do not come uniformly packaged. As Paul Woodring notes, James wanted no “straightjacket for the teacher” (15), and his “view of teaching, and of the role of the teacher, offers a possible basis for the reconciliation of the disastrous conflict between academic scholars and professional educators that has long been a disgrace to our higher institutions” (17).

In the Preface of Talks to Teachers, James begins on the first page by advising teachers to approach their students as *whole* people. “My main desire,” he states, “has been to make [teachers] conceive, and, if possible, reproduce sympathetically in their imagination, the mental life of their pupil as the sort of active unity which he himself feels it to be. *He* doesn’t chop himself up into distinct processes and compartments” (18). From this foundation, James describes the human being as essentially an organism constantly reacting to a barrage of impressions. Education, he suggests, “*is little more than a mass of possibilities of reaction*, acquired at home, at school, or in the training of affairs. The teacher’s task is that of supervising the acquiring process” (42, his emphasis). And particularly useful to our discussion of faith in the writing class is, I believe, his notion that “*Every acquired reaction is, as a rule, either a complication grafted on a native reaction, or a substitute for a native reaction*” (42, his emphasis). James develops this notion as well in Pragmatism with a cooking metaphor, arguing that all of our new truths must be gradually “stewed down with the sauce of the old” (75). What is paramount, however, on the teacher’s part is that in attempting to graft new knowledge onto the old, or stew fresh complications down into well-worn native reactions, the teacher must attempt to have a grasp of those native reactions that have long been in

place. “The teacher’s art,” he posits, “consists in bringing about the substitution or complication, and success in the art presupposes a sympathetic acquaintance with the reactive tendencies natively there” (42). While it’s impossible, of course, to be acquainted with all the native reactive tendencies of all of our students, many of us would do well—including myself—to foster a more “sympathetic acquaintance” with the mass of religious reactions we know to be already there when we attempt to disturb it by “grafting” and “substituting.”

Central to this process that James describes is the concept of habit. As Peirce placed a great deal of importance on examining the consequences of our habits so as to continuously adjust our beliefs, so too does James emphasize our need to understand “The Laws of Habit,” as he titles Chapter Eight in Talks To Teachers. “It is very important,” he begins, “that teachers should realize the importance of habit” in that “all our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits—practical, emotional, and intellectual—systematically organized for our weal or woe...” (57). When our nervous systems are first asked to do something, James explains, it’s hard-going, but the more often the same thing is attempted, the easier it is accomplished, until we can, as they say, do it in our sleep. And over time, our

nervous systems have...*grown* to the way in which they have been exercised, just as a sheet of paper or a coat, once creased or folded, tends to fall forever afterward into the same identical folds. Habit is thus a second nature...Ninety-nine hundredths or, possibly, nine hundred and ninety-nine thousandths of our activity is purely automatic and habitual, from our rising in the morning to our lying down each night. (57)

Our responses to the world, then, become “so fixed by repetition as almost to be classed as reflex actions,” and I don’t need to rely on William James to tell us that old habits are hard to break. So hard, in fact, that James advises, “*we must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can*” (58).

With respect to these engrained habits that control nearly everything we do, James felt that religious faith had the *possibility* of becoming incredibly useful. Like Peirce, he placed a higher premium on what we feel than on what we reason: “Our judgments concerning the worth of things, big or little, depend on the *feelings* the things arouse in us. Where we judge a thing to be precious in consequence of the *idea* we frame of it, this is only because the idea is itself associated already with a feeling” (149). In his concluding Chapter in Talks To Teachers, “What Makes a Life Significant,” James quotes Tolstoy: “The more we live by our intellect, the less we understand the meaning of life” (179). Faith is important, in other words; to dismiss it, according to James, is a great mistake, whether we’re in a classroom or in a meadow. As teachers, then, our first step should be to attempt a “sympathetic acquaintance” with the native, habitual, religious reactions already in place for most of our students. For while attempting to graft or substitute new habits onto or in place of these old ones is the calling of education, it doesn’t get much more difficult than poking around in the pot of religious faith.

The pragmatic approach crafted by James can help us with this venture. His method takes a middle ground, so to speak, allowing for greater possibilities in our search for useful truths and useful actions. It is a method based on contingency, plurality, and responsibility to other people; it is a method where *every* claim to truth is held

accountable to the other things we also hold to be true. And while James strenuously argues that we must meet each other half way and allow for the possibility of conflicting perspectives, he also stresses throughout his work a basic right to believe in religious faith. James, like Peirce, was not a disingenuous secular scientist simply trying to appease “the believers” in a Godless academic setting. For example, he opens his essay “The Will to Believe” by stating in very plain terms that this essay is a “justification *of* faith, a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced” (88). Part of the genius of his method is that it appeals to “both sides” (and there is no getting around the fact that we are deeply polarized in the United States right now—there are opposing sides and religious faith rests at the heart of the flux). He is able to catch the ear of believers and non-believers alike.

James acknowledges that defining religious faith is, almost by definition, an impossible task because it has been understood in so many different ways. “In discussing the religious question,” then, he urges that “we must make it very generic and broad” (“Will” 105). As such, he describes the two primary qualities of religious faith. First, he suggests, religion argues “that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word.” Second, religion argues “that we are better off *even now* if we believe her first affirmation to be true” (105, my italics). In addition to this definition, James says that choosing between believing and not believing (and it is an active choice) is a momentous, forced option. He defines “option” as the decision one makes between two hypotheses,

and he calls this option momentous for obvious reasons—the truth about our being (where we’re from and where we’re going) is not a trivial matter. The option is also forced because we absolutely have to choose; there is no sidestepping the issue. He explains, “if I say to you: ‘choose between going out with your umbrella or without it,’ I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all....But if I say, ‘either accept this truth or go without it,’ I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside the alternative” (89). Choosing not to believe in religious faith, James argues, is as active a choice as choosing to believe. The nonbeliever “is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field” (106). Finally, and perhaps the most important ingredient here, is the distinction he makes between a living option and a dead option.

A living option is one where both hypotheses are live ones. If I say to you: ‘Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan,’ it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say, ‘Be an agnostic or be a Christian,’ it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief. (89)

You don’t need to accept a particular hypothesis as true for it to be a living choice from which to choose your option. You just need to allow for the slightest possibility that it *might* be true. And there’s the rub, practically speaking: getting each side to acknowledge the other hypothesis—the one it did not choose as its option—as a *live* hypothesis so that real dialogue is feasible. And whether or not a hypothesis is seen as live or dead depends

not on some inherent trait in the hypothesis itself, but rather on the experiences of the individual. The “deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act” (89). One is not willing to act, of course, if one does not see any possibility in the first place.

Possibility, then, is a key component to James’ Pragmatic approach to religious faith. He rejects the dogmatic absolutist as well as the agnostic and the atheist: “I cannot,” he argues, “willfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that *a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule*” (107). Religious faith, in other words, should not be defined as a belief “that you know ain’t true,” nor should it be understood as an ultimate truth above and beyond all our other truths. It should be understood as a possible hypothesis, worthy of consideration yet subject to the same critique as any of our other contending beliefs. So while “the idea of Him seems even to exert a positively paralyzing effect on the mind” of a non-believer, this effect does not render the hypothesis dead. And, for the believer, it is necessary to understand that claims to divine experiences are “like all other human experiences” in that “they too certainly share in the general liability to illusion and mistake” (85). The words “maybe” and “some” need to be entertained more by everyone, he says, as all too often “the only categories universally consistent and therefore pertinent to reality are ‘all’ and ‘none’” (Pragmatism 122). Our daily experiences necessarily guarantee “that the next turn in events can at any given moment genuinely be ambiguous, i.e., possibly this, but also possibly that” (130). Our daily experiences also allow us to

determine if there are *any* existing conditions for something or other to be true. And when “the conditions are entirely complete, it ceases to be a possibility, and turns into an actual fact” (124-25). Taking a tenet of religious faith as an example, James writes,

Let us apply this notion to the salvation of the world. What does it pragmatically mean to say that this is possible? It means that some of the conditions of the world’s deliverance do actually exist. The more of them there are existent, the fewer preventing conditions you can find, the better-grounded is the salvation’s possibility, the more *probable* does the fact of the deliverance become. (125)

How do we know that some of these conditions actually exist? And how will we know when all the necessary conditions become complete? We don’t. Imbedded in this focus on possibility is the idea that we might actually know the truth about something, but that is much different from *knowing for sure* that we know the truth about something. “To *know* is one thing, and to know for certain *that* we know is another” (“Will” 96). This doctrine cautions both sides. It warns the dogmatic absolutist that while he *may* be right, there is yet no (or at least not enough) evidence to confirm the fact. It also warns the atheistic absolutist that while she too *may* be right, the argument that there is yet no evidence to confirm the existence of God does not altogether bar his existence. For as James says, “if we believe that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell” (108). Regarding our truths, there will never be a final ringing of the bell. They will always change and grow, building upon each other as we collaboratively move into the future.

Where does this leave us, then? With a mass of infinite possibilities? The short answer is no. Our allowance for “the possible” is grounded in the idea that we must square all of our possible truths with all of our other possible truths until they work themselves out. “In other words, the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths” (Pragmatism 37). For while James counts himself as a believer in religious faith and grants such faith greater importance than logic or reason, he is clear in asserting that “My belief in the Absolute, based on the good it does me, must run the gauntlet of all my other beliefs. Grant that it may be true in giving me a moral holiday. Nevertheless, as I conceive it...it clashes with other truths of mine whose benefits I hate to give up on its account” (37). Such is his view of the Absolute, but elsewhere he goes on to add

That the Absolute has nothing but its superhumanness in common with the theistic God. On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true. Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it certainly does work, and that the problem is to build it out and determine it so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths. (131)

The trick is to find a way to get religious faith to work *along with* our other lived experiences rather than *in place of* our other lived experiences. And for a truth to successfully run the gauntlet of all our other truths, it must prove itself useful to our lives. If it fails this test, other truths will render it a dead hypothesis.

Usefulness, then, is another key component to the pragmatic method, and religious faith is not exempt from having to be useful to us, here and now. In this regard,

we can go back to the central pragmatic question as James frames it: What difference would it make to us if this notion rather than that notion were true? Do the consequences of this belief help us get along better in the world than the consequences of that belief? These questions lead us not to the impetus of a possible belief, but rather to the end result. It is not, as James puts it, “where it comes from, but what it leads to”; for a pragmatist, it makes no difference “from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true” (99). As our possible truths spar with one another for supremacy, “which may be treated as the *more* true depends altogether on the human use of it” (111). For “they have, indeed, no meaning and no reality if they have no use” (118).

And the human use of it is understood in social, communal terms. At the outset of Principles of Psychology, James’ early and perhaps most influential work, he casts his portrait of the self in individual terms for the purposes of introducing his topic. By the end of the book, however, and for the remainder of his career, the individual self is understood—must be understood—in a social context. As Bennett Ramsey notes, in the final section of the Principles James “added a background image to the primary processes; he replaced the self not just back into its nascent state but into a social world. Or rather, he replaced the self back into a socially unstable world, a world without boundaries...” (48). James was well aware that to conceive of the self in isolation “was an abstraction.” From here on the self would be set “in the world where James’ readers lived, where all sorts of selves were at work...” (48).

By the time James delivered his lectures which comprised The Varieties of Religious Experience, religious experience was not at all conceived, developed, and named from *within* an individual, but rather from *without*. Much in keeping with Lev Vygotsky's work a few years later, James proposed that unlike the Platonic description, we do not first look inward for meaning—we do not first look inward to invent—and then project out to the world; we look outward first, and develop our individual meanings and knowledge from our surroundings. And our conceptions of religious faith are no different: “religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast” in response to and in relation to its environment (Varieties 36). As Vygotsky suggests in Thought and Language that “the word is a thing in our consciousness... that is absolutely impossible for one person, but that becomes a reality for two” (256), so too does James suggest that a personal, individual relationship with God, *once articulated*, becomes crudely defined by dominate, pre-existing, public descriptions. And as “Religion was now a program of work; it was not a path of detachment and privacy but a route of radical and public commitment” (Ramsey 137), our religious responsibility became a responsibility to other people rather than to an ultimate, personal, abstract truth. We had a societal duty to constantly reexamine the consequences of religious faith. Thus, in Varieties, he introduces his topic by addressing those believers who simply accept, without active reflection, what they have been told:

I speak not now of your ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan.

His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. It would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life. We must make search rather for the original experiences which were the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct. These experiences we can only find in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather. (19)

Experience and imitation, James reminds us, are not the same thing. While the latter is often misunderstood as the former, we must be careful to draw the distinction because our experiences underlie all of our talk about squaring up truths and allowing for possibilities. In referring to the work of John Dewey and others, James emphasizes “*that ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just insofar as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience*” (Pragmatism 28). We have a natural tendency to want to find and hold on to certain absolutes that give us some sense of comfort and some sense of a grip, but as he states in “Will to Believe,” an essay that explicitly defends our right to believe in religious faith, we need to treat this tendency “as a weakness of our nature from which we must free ourselves....” He adds in the following paragraph,

Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found? I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them—I absolutely do not care which—as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude. (“Will” 97)

As we “go on experiencing and thinking over” our own experiences to better understand our lives, we must also beware of partitioning off these experiences into separate compartments like “secular” and “religious.” Although they may not appear to, all of our experiences function together; “the continuities and the discontinuities are absolutely coordinate matters of immediate feeling,” all of which “compenetrate harmoniously” (109). It’s easier to place our experiences in separate corners of separate rooms, often according to some invented hierarchy, because in doing so we’re closer to that absolute grip. This is not an honest practice, however, and it allows for little critique. An honest view of our religious experience, for example, with all its “continuities and discontinuities” taken together, forces us to see it as having caused immeasurable amounts of death and suffering *and* as having also caused immeasurable amounts of love and kindness. In this regard, James draws in Varieties the distinction between the religiously healthy-minded and the sick soul. The name of the former is purposely misleading to imply a naïve, oblivious optimism which is based on avoidance and which doesn’t offer us much we can use. It was the sick-souled individual, for whom religion was an “acute fever” rather than a “dull habit,” whose religious experiences were worth examining because they included *the whole* of experience. The sick-soul is more acutely aware of the circumstances that surround us. A touch of the morbid, in fact, is a necessary element rather than something to be shunned. The religiously healthy-minded, James argues, effectively minimize or ignore completely those experiences they find distasteful—a practice that is encouraged by the dominate religion in the United States: “The Catholic practice of confession and absolution,” he writes, is “little more than a

systematic method of keeping healthy-mindedness on top” and of continuously allowing one to start a “clean page with no old debts inscribed. Any Catholic will tell us how clean and fresh and free he feels after the purging operation” (Varieties 120). As the limitations of this approach tend to do us more harm than good in that they close off so many of our experiences, James advises,

Let us then resolutely turn our backs on...their sky-blue optimistic gospel; let us not simply cry out, in spite of all appearances, ‘Hurrah for the Universe!—God’s in His heaven, all’s right with the world.’ Let us see rather whether pity, pain, and fear, and the sentiment of human helplessness may not open a profounder view and put into our hands a more complicated key to the meaning of the situation. (126)

To find these sick-souled experiences of pity, pain, and helplessness, we need look no further than to the daily experiences that constantly occur right before our eyes. Like Emerson, who tells us that the book, if not used only as a supplement to experience, “becomes noxious” and the guide “a tyrant,” James writes that any absolute, unwavering doctrine is “but the old story, of a useful practice first becoming a method, then a habit, and finally a tyranny that defeats the end it was used for” (Pluralistic 99). Also like Emerson, who advises us to explore “the familiar, the common and the low,” James tells us at the very outset of Varieties that what “we shall find most instructive need not then be sought for in the haunts of special erudition—they lie along the beaten highway” (3). “Pragmatism,” he writes elsewhere, “is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses and to count the humblest and most personal experiences. She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives

in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find Him” (Pragmatism 38). James drew a fair amount of criticism, in fact, for practicing what he preached here. In Principles, as in most of his other work, he relied a great deal on simple, unsubstantiated testimony from lay people, drawing his conclusions more often than not from their observations as “nonprofessionals.” Many, including C.S. Peirce, felt that conclusions based on such “data” were suspect at best. Others, however, appreciated his departure from the generally accepted scientific method. John Dewey comments, for example, that James’ approach offers invaluable insight as it allows him to explore “genuine events, events that most persons are too conventional or too literal to notice at all” (Ramsey 35).

Included within the purview of these common experiences were hallucinations and abstractions. Indeed, abstractions provided the basis of our minds: “we turn towards them and from them, we seek them, hold them, hate them, bless them, just as if they were so many concrete things” (Ramsey 90). Hallucinatory experiences fell within this category, of course, and it is in these, James argues, where our religious inclinations find their impetus. In short, the hallucinatory and the abstract count as much, if not more, than the tangible and the concrete. “It is as if,” James notes,

there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call ‘something there,’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed. (90)

We had a right not only to believe in “something other” than what was tangibly before our eyes, but a duty to count it among all our experiences in sorting out our truths. In this sense it was to be *included* among our other experiences; it was not, however, a *replacement*. Nor was religious experience “miraculous.” It worked in conjunction with the rest of our lives to help broaden our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

The central focus on experience in James’ approach mandates that it is impossible to hold anything for certain *beforehand*. You must wade through experience: “You cannot enter the phenomenal world with the notion of it in your grasp, and name beforehand any detail which you are likely to meet there” (123). This, in turn, brings us back to the notion of possibility and contingency. Johan Huizinga writes, “The endeavor to democratize the idea of God goes hand in hand with pragmatism, and both arise out of the spirit of ‘This, Here, Soon.’” (West, Evasion 69). And as Peirce suggested that our religious attitude should start pointing to the future rather than the past, James saw everything as “a product of contingency and time” (Ramsey 12). We find ourselves, then, with a pluralistic view of the world, a view which allows “that there *may* be one sovereign purpose, system, kind, and story,” but that “it is rash to affirm this dogmatically without better evidence than we possess at present” (Pragmatism 65 his italics). Hence, the pragmatic method,

pending the final empirical ascertainment of just what the balance of union and disunion among things may be, must obviously arrange herself along the pluralistic side. Some day, she admits, even total union, with one knower, one origin, and a universe consolidated in every conceivable way, may turn out to be

the most acceptable of all hypotheses. Meanwhile the opposite hypothesis, of a world imperfectly unified still, and perhaps always to remain so, must be sincerely entertained. The latter hypothesis is pluralism's doctrine. (72)

Enmeshed in this pluralistic view is the notion that pragmatism, as I cited in the introduction, serves as “a happy harmonizer of empiricists ways of thinking with the more religious demands of human beings” (Pragmatism 33). At the very outset of Pragmatism, James compares two opposite types of “mental make-ups,” the Tender-Minded (which he describes in part as Idealistic, Optimistic, Religious, Free-willist, Monistic, Dogmatical) and the Tough-Minded (which he describes in part as Materialistic, Pessimistic, Irreligious, Fatalistic, Pluralistic, Skeptical) (“Will” 9). One can certainly quibble with the names he gives to each group and with their determining characteristics, but the point is that a bridge needs to be gapped between two vastly different and dominant perspectives on our place in the world. He goes on to add that both sides “have a low opinion of each other,” and that “each type believes the other to be inferior to itself” (9). In response, then, pragmatism tries to play the role of mediator so that we can uncover as many useful habits as possible. In this role, she “‘unstiffens’ our theories. She has in fact no prejudices whatsoever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid cannons as what shall count as proof. She is completely genial. She will entertain any hypothesis” (Pragmatism 38).

The polar opposites James described one hundred years ago—and the need to bridge them—haven't changed much. His pragmatism carved out a path down the middle, so to speak, between the romantic, self-assertive doctrine of worship and the

disheartening, vacant view of the positivists, infusing the vision of the latter with some vitality and purpose and the vision of the former with a grounding of sorts in the real world of experience. Likewise, while James has repeatedly suggested that the vague and the abstract are eminently important in constructing our knowledge, and that our “intellectual” ideas are in fact founded first upon our feelings about a thing, he has not discounted the importance of intelligence and factual common sense. “We are thinking beings, and we cannot exclude the intellect from participating in any of our functions” (Varieties 374). Mind and emotion must be understood together; partitioning them off is a mistake. It was this type of middle ground, this sense of intermingling, that James tried to forge with respect to religion. “If you are neither tough nor tender in an extreme and radical sense,” he writes in his concluding paragraph of Pragmatism,

but mixed as most of us are, it may seem to you that the type of pluralistic and moralistic religion that I have offered is as good a religious synthesis as you are likely to find. Between the two extremes of crude naturalism on the one hand and transcendental absolutism on the other, you may find that what I take the liberty of calling the pragmatistic or melioristic type of theism is exactly what you require (132).

Given what James has previously told us about habit, however, slipping in to this centrist, pragmatic understanding of theism is a bit more difficult than just reading a book or flipping a switch. The preliminary understanding that the pragmatic approach “is a method only” and that “it does not stand for any special results” (25) strikes an uneasy chord before one even gets started. Guaranteed results are, after all, what most of us are in the habit of striving for. Relatedly, the method asks us to give up a certain amount of

control. The pluralistic view of multiple possibilities did away with comfortable and concrete foundations; to really give yourself over to the idea that an experience tomorrow or in twenty years *might* change your entire world view takes a great amount of courage. Part of undergoing this transition was to understand that being wrong was not only inevitable, but also not the devastating disaster we make it out to be. “Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things,” he suggests. “In a world where we are so certain to incur them, in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than...excessive nervousness on their behalf” (“Will” 100). A move in this direction, however, is also necessarily humbling:

we are so subject to the philosophic tradition which treats logos or discursive thought generally as the sole avenue to truth, that to fall back on raw un verbalized life as more of a revealer...comes very hard. It is putting off our proud maturity of mind and becoming as foolish little children in the eyes of reason” (Ramsey 124).

Ultimately, making this transition takes a great act of will. Action, in fact, is absolutely required: “As long as talk continues talking, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an act” (124). In this sense, though, relinquishing one form of control allows for another; the first is based on a comfortable, passive reliance, where the second is based on an uncomfortable, vigorous search. In discussing stream of thought with respect to the self and the make-up of personal identity, James suggests that the choice of passive reliance leads to a synthesis of thinking which is “simply taken ready-made and clapped on to [the self] as expressions of her nature taken after the fact.” The choice of vigorous search, on

the other hand, leads to a self that can be “called active; might select; was responsible, and permanent in her way” (47). And on the subject of religion, James argues in “Will to Believe” that “the whole defense of religious faith hinges upon action,” for “if the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity” (108). And in this respect, James posits that religious action must be given a chance, otherwise we will never know its real value.

Ideally speaking, James would have liked everyone “to act,” to make an active transition into an uncertain pluralistic view of the world, particularly with respect to religious faith. Well aware that we don’t live in an Ideal world, however, he addressed the very real and prevalent practice of imitation. In his Talks to Teachers, or more specifically, in the last few chapters entitled “Talks to Students,” James acknowledges that in attempting change, “it is no small thing to inoculate seventy millions of people with new standards, yet, if there is to be any relief, that will have to be done.” Doing so, he says, brings us “back to the psychology of imitation.... There is only one way to improve ourselves, and that is by some of us setting an example which the others may pick up and imitate till the new fashion spreads from east to west” (142). In other words, as he argues throughout most of his work, we are charged with a sense of social responsibility.

In short, the method that James describes directs us to our daily experiences and prompts us to ask, ‘What difference would it make to our lives if this notion rather than that notion were true?’ Answering this question *requires* us to juxtapose each truth with

all of our other truths to find which is most useful. The going is admittedly slow and difficult, and we must keep in mind the power of our previously engrained habits. For as he writes in Pragmatism, “In respect of the knowledge it contains, the world does genuinely change and grow,” but for the most part “our knowledge grows in spots” (74). New thinking comes slowly, and “while these special ideas are being added, the rest of your knowledge stands still, and only gradually will you ‘line up’ your previous opinions with the novelties...and modify to some slight degree their mass” (74). Such is the process of learning, a process that is more often than not “strained, and sometimes painfully so, between its older beliefs and the novelties which experience brings along” (74). Nonetheless, it is in this way that our minds grow, James says. They

grow in spots; and like grease-spots, the spots spread. But we let them spread as little as possible, we keep unaltered as much of our old knowledge, as many of our old prejudices and beliefs as we can. We patch and tinker more than we renew...it happens relatively seldom that the new fat is added *raw*. More usually it is embedded cooked, as one might say. Or stewed down in the sauce of the old. (74-75)

Religion serves as a base for the lives of many students, a base of knowledge from which they work and to which new notions must be added slowly and with a sympathetic appreciation for the native inclinations. Religious faith must be allowed its place in the writing class, but that does not mean it gets a free pass. It competes on an equal playing field, with all of our other hypotheses, for the right to be called true; i.e., for the right to be called useful.

The Responsibility Of Religion

John Dewey's pragmatism, like the pragmatism of Peirce and James, owes a great deal to Emerson. Dewey, like James but unlike Peirce, gives Emerson his due on many occasions; in one such instance he notes that Emerson "would work, he says, by art, not by metaphysics," and that "his own preference was to be ranked with the seers rather than with the reasoners of the race" (West, Evasion 73). Dewey was inspired by the way in which Emerson "takes the distinctions and classifications which to most philosophers are true in and of and because of their systems, and makes them true of life, of the common experience" of everyday people (74). He took pains to point out Emerson's constant "reference to immediate life" and the way in which Emerson held the thinking of all the great philosophers accountable to "present and immediate experience" (74). Building as well upon James and Peirce, Dewey developed Emerson's initial notions of experience, action, and social responsibility to eventually become not only one of America's greatest philosophers but also the colossal figure who transformed our approach to education. His work spans nearly a century—he was born in 1859, two years before the civil war started, and he died in 1952, two years after the Korean war began. Taking his work as a whole, pedagogy emerges as a principle preoccupation; specifically, the way in which pedagogy can help effect democratic change on the streets of the U. S. With respect to pragmatism, Cornel West argues that after Dewey, "to be a pragmatist is to be a social critic, literary critic, or a poet—in short, a participant in cultural criticism and cultural creation" (71). West adds that "John Dewey is the culmination of the tradition of

American pragmatism” and that he “helps us see the complex and mediated ways in which philosophical problems are linked to societal crises” (71).

Social context was critical to Dewey’s philosophy, especially to his philosophy of education. He witnessed unprecedented change in his country—a rapid transformation from a primarily agricultural Republic to the first industrialized, manufacturing nation in the world. This revolution brought with it as well an overwhelming population boom that served in large part to support this new way of life. The circumstances surrounding this new way of life, however, were atrocious; working and living conditions lead, for most, to poverty, injury, and disease. In Dewey’s mind, the role of education should be first and foremost directed at improving these conditions. As I cited in the first chapter, he felt that the school was primarily “a social institution,” and that “education being a social process, the school is simply a form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing [the student] to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends (Philosophy 445). In this regard, school should always be continuous with the rest of life: Dewey was wary that as “formal teaching and training grow in extent, there is the danger of creating an undesirable split between the experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired in school” (Democracy 9). As Emerson reminds us that books are for “the scholar’s idle time,” so too does Dewey remind us “the true center of correlation on the school subjects is not science, nor literature, nor history, nor geography, but the child’s own social activities” (Philosophy 448). In other words, what we do in the classroom should have everything to do with what our students do in the world.

Like his pragmatic predecessors, experience plays an integral part in the learning process. “All genuine education comes about through experience” (507), he writes. And similar to Paulo Freire’s critique of the “banking method” of education where knowledge is simply deposited into the passive minds of students and then regurgitated, Dewey outlines “two senses of the word ‘learning.’”

On the one hand, learning is the sum total of what is known, as that is handed down by books and learned men. It is something external, an accumulation of cognitions as one might store material commodities in a warehouse. Truth exists ready-made somewhere. Study is then the process by which an individual draws on what is in storage. On the other hand, learning means something which the individual *does* when he studies. It is an active, personally conducted affair. (Democracy 334-335)

The latter sense, of course, is what we need to strive for; acquiring knowledge through an active search, a search which has a forward motion to it. Akin to this perspective is the idea that one of the best things we can do for our students is to instill in them the desire to continue learning on their own after they’ve left us. And to continue learning in the future, one must look to experience to ascertain the consequences of one’s beliefs. In Democracy and Education, Dewey draws on Peirce in arguing that “it is the characteristic use to which the thing is put, because of its specific qualities, which supplies the meaning with which it is identified” (29). Again, force is what force does. In the same vein, as he suggests that “the very word pupil has almost come to mean one who is engaged not in having fruitful experiences but in absorbing knowledge directly,” Dewey argues that the

“banking method” of education cannot lead to meaning making because most of us leave the classroom having been thoroughly divided in the following sense:

Something which is called mind or consciousness is severed from the physical organs of activity. The former is then thought to be purely intellectual and cognitive; the latter to be an irrelevant and intruding physical factor. The intimate union of activity and undergoing its consequences which leads to recognition of meaning is broken. (Philosophy 496)

Any such division of acquiring knowledge is highly suspect, including that which places science above all else. As James pressed that pragmatism would take any route to knowledge as long as the outcome proved useful, Dewey insisted that all types of experience and all kinds of means were necessary in the pursuit of useful truths. “There is something both ridiculous and disconcerting,” he writes, about the way in which we have convinced ourselves “to infer that scientific ways of thinking of objects give the inner reality of things, and that they put a mark of spuriousness upon all other ways of thinking them, and of perceiving and enjoying them” (West, Evasion 98). Dewey is critical of institutions like organized religion—more so, perhaps, than James, and certainly more than Peirce—but he is adamant that we can not summarily exclude a possible way of knowing, and, conversely, that “there is no kind of inquiry which has a monopoly of the honorable title of knowledge” (98). Referring again back to Peirce, or, more specifically, referring back to Peirce’s reference to Jesus, Dewey suggests that no matter how we arrive at possible truths, it is “by their fruits we shall know them” (98).

Dewey tries to ground our approach to science, philosophy, religion, and education by asking us to take a step back and reevaluate the questions we're asking instead of putting all of our energy into possible answers. With respect to philosophy, he argues that we need to get to a point where it "ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men" (101). With respect to education, he likewise suggests that we spend far too much time just trying to figure out how to respond to the books that we all-too often passively receive: "Where literature rather than contemporary nature and society furnishes material of study, methods must be adapted to defining, expounding, and interpreting the received material, rather than to inquiry, discovery, and invention" (Democracy 280). This vein of criticism is perhaps most persuasively put in his highly influential essay "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," first published in 1917. Dewey's principle complaint is that philosophy is mired in questions that are no longer pertinent; he begins by stating that the essay may

be looked upon as an attempt to forward the emancipation of philosophy from too intimate and exclusive attachment to traditional problems. It is not in intent a criticism of various solutions that have been offered, but raises a question *as to the genuineness, under the present conditions of science and social life, of the problems.* (21)

As Susanne Langer would later emphasize that the way in which we frame our questions dictates and limits our answers (3), Dewey asks, "Is it not time that philosophers turned from the attempt to determine the comparative merits of various replies to the questions

to a consideration of the claims of the questions?” (43). To question our questions in this sense, we return, of course, to experience. In this same essay, Dewey offers the following definition of experience:

Experience is primarily a process of undergoing: a process of standing something; of suffering and passion, of affection, in the literal sense of these words. The organism has to endure, to undergo, the consequence of its own actions. Experience, in other words, is a matter of *simultaneous* doings and sufferings....And experience is not identical with brain action; it is the entire organic agent-patient in all its interaction with the environment, natural and social. (25-26)

In addition, Dewey draws the distinction between experience and knowledge, citing experience as “ways of doing and suffering” and knowledge as “discovering what particular mode—qualitatively unique—of doing and suffering it is” (45). He also asserts that where modern philosophy does appear to champion experience, “in practice it has served ideas *forced into* experience, not *gathered from* it” (45).

Much of what Dewey says in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” about the nature of experience and the need to question our questions serves as a base for his discussion on religion in [A Common Faith](#), published almost two decades later. This little book (scarcely a book—it’s less than 90 pages) has been largely overlooked in recent scholarship on Dewey, but it is a book that every composition teacher should read. Like James’ “Will to Believe,” Dewey does not disavow religious faith; on the contrary, he tries to make it stronger. But he is often misunderstood as trivializing religious faith because his central claim in [A Common Faith](#) is that religion’s continued association with

the supernatural has, in the modern day, drained it of its power and rendered it almost useless. An argument that parallels his discussion of philosophy in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” Dewey posits here that we need to stop concerning ourselves with how to keep responding to the supernatural premise of religious belief and instead turn our focus to the premise itself. He suggests that “the religious element in life has been hampered by conceptions of the supernatural that were imbedded in those cultures wherein man had little control over outer nature and little in the way of sure inquiry and test.” Science and time have greatly changed our understanding of the world, but Dewey emphasizes that “this change is not fatal to the religious values in our common experience, however adverse its impact may be upon historic religions” (Common 56). The religious attitude, he suggests, has the possibility of doing *so much* for us, but it must be freed from its deadening baggage.

Before exploring his argument concerning the supernatural, however, it’s useful I believe to back up to the beginning for some context and definitions. Many of us might find, in fact, the very first sentence to be eerily applicable to our country and the world today: “Never before in history has mankind been so much of two minds, so divided into two camps, as it is today” (1). The entire first page, actually, speaks in terms of division and opposition. He describes one camp as those who believe that religious faith in any form must necessarily be associated with the supernatural, and he describes the other camp as those who believe that since science has discredited the supernatural aspects of religion, so too goes all of religion to the dumpster. Dewey attempts to forge a middle ground by separating religious faith from the supernatural, a middle ground he

acknowledges will irritate both sides; it will be attacked, he says, by the first group as undercutting “the vital nerve of the religious element itself” and by the second group as “a timid half-way position,” an irresponsible “concession and compromise...an emotional hangover from childhood indoctrination” (3). The rest of the book attempts (successfully, in my opinion) to assuage these misgivings. Crucial to this attempt is his initial definition of religion, and his distinction between “religion” and “religious.”

Similar to the way both Peirce and James describe religious faith, Dewey says that “we are forced to acknowledge that concretely there is no such thing as religion in the singular. There is only a multitude of religions. ‘Religion’ is a strictly collective term” (7). Any attempts to pin it down will inevitably prove to be “too much or too little” (7). Having said that, Dewey draws a sharp distinction between a Religion (as a noun) and the Religious (as an adjective). The former, he says,

always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight. In contrast, the adjective “religious” denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church. For it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. (10)

Existing “by itself” is a critical difference. A religious attitude, unencumbered by worship of the supernatural, is obligated to operate in conjunction with the rest of life. But for the most part, Dewey argues, religion as an institution separates itself from the rest of life,

and it does so in large part by relying on the supernatural. He describes this division as follows:

It is of the nature of a religion based on the supernatural to draw a line between the religious and the secular and the profane, even when it asserts the rightful authority of the Church and its religion to dominate these other interests. The conception that “religious” signifies a certain attitude and outlook, independent of the supernatural, necessitates no such division. It does not shut religious values up within a particular compartment. (66)

An example of this argument can be seen, I think, in the church’s contemporary struggle over what to do with homosexuality. The Episcopal church, for instance, recently appointed for the first time a female Presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts Schori (this in itself represents the church’s attempt to move a little closer to the “religious” attitude Dewey describes and away from “religion” as an institution associated with the supernatural—the Christian church and its various derivatives have always treated women as subordinates based primarily on the word of God). Bishop Schori’s acceptance of homosexuality and gay marriage represents a growing number of worshipers who are inclined to apply a religious attitude (as an adjective) to the topic of same-sex relationships, loosening it from the grip of religion (as a noun), which relies solely on the word and intention of God for its condemnation.

One of the main problems with religion (as a noun) and its association with the supernatural is that the resulting division described above renders it less useful to most of us in a twentieth century, and now twenty-first century, democracy. Worse than useless, this sense of division has proven harmful, for it often works to pit us against each other.

As Dewey notes, “It is impossible to ignore the fact that historic Christianity has been committed to a separation of sheep and goats; the saved and the lost; the elect and the mass” (84). Such a separation may prove useful for a select few, but the rest of us are generally out of luck. Religious endeavors that might prove useful for all shouldn’t need to validate a pre-existing condition. Religious experience doesn’t have to “prove” something other than what it’s useful for in the moment, for the task at hand. Relatedly, the meaning of a particular religious experience “is not inherent in the experience itself. It is derived from the culture with which a particular person has been imbued. A fatalist will give one name to it; a Christian Scientist another, and the one who rejects all supernatural being still another” (13). In other words, as James argues, we can’t claim to know things beforehand. And as Dewey adds, when we make such claims before undergoing the actual experience and then try to force those claims into the experience, we make a subtle and dubious shift from religious faith to intellectual certainty. “It is argued,” Dewey writes,

that the ideal is already the final reality at the heart of things that exist, and that only our senses or the corruption of our natures prevent us from apprehending its prior existential being. Starting, say, from such an idea as that justice is more than a moral ideal because it is embedded in the very make-up of the actually existent world, men have gone on to build up vast intellectual schemes, philosophies, and theologies, to prove that ideals are real not as ideals but as antecedently existing actualities. (21)

In building up such philosophies and theologies, Dewey argues that these claims no longer inhabit the world of faith, but inhabit rather the world of intellectual reason. For as

he notes, “Faith that something should be in existence as far as lies in our power *is changed* into the intellectual belief that it is already in existence” (21-22). The result is that active pursuit by the individual for an Ideal is blunted as it has already been provided as a static intellectual fact. And when actual experiences differ from these pre-existing facts, reliance on the supernatural slips seamlessly into play—it’s not for us to know, it’s beyond our grasp, ect.

When religious objects are understood in these intellectual terms, religion itself becomes a substitute for knowledge, working against rather than with the rest of our lives. Quoting John Locke, Dewey notes that in this regard, “faith is ‘assent to a proposition...on the credit of its proposer.’ Religious faith is then given to a body of propositions as true on the credit of their supernatural author, reason coming in to demonstrate the reasonableness of giving such credit” (20). Religion finds itself, then, using reason to convince us that we shouldn’t demand a better reason, resting its claims on intellectual acquiescence rather than on religious faith. Dewey argues, however,

that religious qualities and values if they are real at all are not bound up with any single item of intellectual assent, not even that of the existence of the God of theism; and that, under existing conditions, the religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature, together with the idea of peculiar avenues of access to such truths. (32-33)

Dewey suggests that the entire conflict between religion and science boils down to knowing before-hand (based upon intellectual assent to supernatural authority) and not knowing before-hand (giving in to contingency, chaos, and imagination). Further, we

don't really need to know before-hand—we don't need “dogma and doctrine” to be religious, he says, because as social beings we already have a vested stake in things like kindness and justice, and in a modern democracy we no longer need religion (as a noun) to police our actions.

Ultimately, Dewey works to distinguish the “difference between an experience having a religious force because of what it does in and to the processes of living and religious experience as a separate kind of thing...” (14). What we label as religious or religion can not be “marked off,” he says, from all of our other experiences and activities “to validate a belief in some special kind of object and also to justify some special kind of practice” (10, 11). His definition in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” that experience “is primarily a process of undergoing: a process of standing something; of suffering and passion, of affection, in the literal sense of these words” (25), rings even louder with respect to religion where people generally have a more intimate bond, and where so often “interpretations of the experience have not grown from the experience itself...they have been imported by borrowing without criticism from ideas that are current in the surrounding culture” (36). In this latter sense experience becomes stagnant and, therefore, useless. As Dewey notes in Experience and Education, not “all experiences are genuinely or equally educative,” and that any particular “experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (Philosophy 507). The value of experience is contingent, then—it must lead to “the possibilities of having richer experience in the future...” (507), for “every experience lives on in further experiences” (508). From Emerson to Dewey, the

pragmatists look ahead and argue that we must focus on the experience *itself* to draw our conclusions for the future rather than using the experience to justify a preconceived notion from the past. Dewey concludes that in order to do this, we need to disassociate religious experience from the supernatural.

Not an easy task, to say the least. As James talks of our habitual native tendencies, Dewey too recognizes that “tradition and custom, especially when emotionally charged, are a part of the habits that have become one with our very being” (Common 15). Indeed, “the emotional deposit connected with prior teaching floods the whole situation” (13). But this charge of emotion doesn’t have to be an obstacle; it can be an ally in bringing about such a change. As Dewey says that intelligence “is inherently involved in action,” he says too that,

moreover, there is no opposition between [intelligence] and emotion. There is such a thing as passionate intelligence...The whole story of man shows that there are no objects that may not deeply stir engrossing emotion. One of the few experiments in the attachment of emotion to ends that mankind has not tried is that of devotion, so intense as to be religious, to intelligence as a force in social action. (79)

As it currently stands, religion (as a noun) rejects natural intelligence and in its place manufactures an un-natural (or supernatural) intelligence to co-mingle with emotion. In “Morality is Social,” Dewey writes that in such a state, religion

has been perverted into something uniform and immutable. It has been formulated into fixed and defined beliefs expressed in required acts and ceremonies. Instead of marking the freedom and peace of the individual as a member of an infinite

whole, it has been petrified into a slavery of thought and sentiment, an intolerant superiority on the part of the few and an intolerable burden on the part of the many. (Philosophy 723)

If he sounds harsh here, and not quite within the boundaries of a “middle ground” approach, it is only because he sees the possibility of religious belief as enormously invaluable if directed at the real problems of real people. Understood as such, Dewey unequivocally emphasizes the importance of faith, for it encompasses “all that is significant in human experience...” (Common 57). And he is not arguing for what might be called a “secular” church; rather, he is arguing for a religious approach to the world that allows for worldly intellectual inquiry. In this regard, he suggests that our prospects lie in “the marriage of emotion with intelligence” (80), a marriage that can only result from redirecting religious faith back toward everyday human experience without the baggage of the otherworldly. Such a “transfer of idealizing imagination, thought, and emotion to natural human relations would not signify the destruction of churches that now exist. It would rather offer a means for a recovery of vitality” (82).

With the help of the method that Peirce, James, and Dewey provide, as writing teachers we can frame our discussion of religion in terms of negotiating the consequences of all of our beliefs. Just as we might with any other social or political issue, we may prompt our students to critically examine our habitual propensity for religious belief. In his conclusion to The Varieties of Religious Experience, James asks, “is the existence of so many religious types and sects and creeds regrettable?” To his own question he answers “‘No’ emphatically” (487), and he goes on to give his reasons why. I disagree

with his answer and his reasons, and I think that James would be just as happy that I do. It is not about finding the right solution, it's about working towards a better condition. In the classroom we can only start working towards dialogue by beginning with the premise that both "sides" offer live options: it's possible that there *might* be a God and it's possible that there *might not* be a God. The approach I outlined above can help us from there by further framing the discussion in terms of contingency, not dogma; imagination, not rules; chaos, not precision; hybridity, not separation. Such an approach can provide us a place to start talking about religious faith in the composition class.

CHAPTER IV

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Whatever inspiration is, it's born
from a continuous "I Don't Know"...
Knowledge that doesn't lead to new questions
quickly dies out. It fails to maintain the temperature
required for sustaining life.

Wisława Szymborska

In the last two chapters I have argued that we must start talking about religious faith in the composition classroom much as we talk about race, class, and gender, and I have turned to the American Pragmatists to help us begin. Many readers at this juncture, however, might be inclined to respond, "that sounds nice, but how will it really play out in *my* classroom? How, for instance, am I going to address a student's urge to proselytize? How am I going to curtail another student's derisive reaction to such proselytizing? And how should my own religious belief, or lack thereof, factor into the mix?" Part of this chapter aims to address these sorts of concerns; from the outset, however, I want to highlight one way in which discussing religion in the classroom is fundamentally different from talking about race, class, or gender. With respect to the latter, there is a basic understanding (or so we hope) that racism, classism, and sexism are necessarily bad things; we need to work together to rid society of these hurtful attitudes. Whether or not everybody in the classroom really agrees with this premise, everyone in

the classroom acknowledges that that is the assumption and, for the most part, they go along with it (either sincerely or quietly resigned). With respect to religious faith, we are not initially operating from this basic understanding. In this sense, talking about something like homophobia is easier because, while we still might not be completely comfortable with it, we are, in a Socratic kind of way through a series of questions and proddings, trying to lead them to a foregone conclusion: homophobia is bad. Do what you can to get rid of it.

While a few of us might like to lead our students to the same foregone conclusion about religious belief, this is not likely how most of us feel; nor is it an advisable means for approaching the topic; nor is it by any stretch the message of this dissertation, as I hope the pragmatic approach sketched out above makes clear. Because we are not operating from an initial understanding that religious faith is necessarily a bad thing like racism or homophobia, we need to pay particular attention to our approach. As a *method* only and not a hoped-for conclusion, pragmatism pushes us to read, write, think, and talk about religion in a way that both respects it as a possible option and includes it among our re-vision of habits from the perspective that we do not indeed know beforehand. The present chapter offers some practical tips for applying this method.

Framing the Issue

Religious faith is often referred to as a “conversation stopper,” or as something that lies just outside the boundaries of discourse precisely because folks on both sides feel deep down that they do, in fact, already “know.” One of the most challenging aspects,

then, of undertaking a pluralistic, pragmatic approach to faith in the writing class is overcoming well-entrenched allegiances to venerable claims of knowledge. It seems like an overwhelming task, but we will feel more comfortable about working with this topic when we start to address it proactively; that is, when we have a plan. We must first, however, feel secure that it is our place as educators to hold up religious faith as a subject of critical inquiry (my hope is that chapter one convincingly made this argument), and we must take care to make sure that we establish in ourselves a sympathetic inclination to this potentially explosive issue. Having oriented *ourselves* in this direction, we can frame this undertaking for our students as a project of inquiry with no preconceived conclusions. We might, in fact, liken this project to that of the Final Portfolio: the focus is on the process, on real reflection, on working through something without knowing exactly where it will lead us. Our goal at the end of the semester is to have, through a variety of means, productively interrogated and reflected upon our topic. As this goal is intentionally vague, however, we need to take extra pains in mapping out our terrain.

In God: A Biography, Jack Miles introduces his subject in a way we might be able to mimic. Miles states very clearly from the beginning, “I write here about the life of the Lord God as—and only as—the protagonist of a classic of world literature.” He adds, “I do not write about (though I certainly do not write against) the Lord God as the object of religious belief. I do not attempt, as theology does, to make an original statement about God as an extraliterary reality” (10). He also claims in his introduction that “Knowledge of God as a literary character neither precludes nor requires belief in God, and it is this kind of knowledge that the book before you attempts to mediate” (4). We are not talking

about God as a literary character, but we can circumscribe our project in a similar fashion. We might make very clear in our syllabus and on the first day of class that we are not attempting here “to make an original statement” about the reality of God; rather, we are attempting to enhance our knowledge and understanding of religious faith as a social and political player in our country and in the world. Further, aiming to enhance our knowledge and understanding in this regard “neither precludes nor requires belief in God.” We might also let our students know that we see writing and writing instruction as intimately bound up with the world in which we live, hence our writing courses often take as their themes social and political issues. We will discuss religious faith in here as just that and nothing more—a social and political issue *worthy* of our attention and discussion. To return to the difference between interrogating race, class, or gender in the writing class and interrogating religious faith, it is critical, I believe, to position faith not as something that needs our attention in the way that AIDS needs our attention, but rather something worthy of our attention because it holds the *possibility* of being such a positive force in our lives. If students feel their faith is under attack (and, by extension, that they themselves are under attack), we will have an uphill battle to say the least. We can indicate as much in the front matter of our syllabus, but there’s no substitute for a teacher’s continuous sincere and active attempt to approach this topic not as a cancer to be eradicated, but as a potential catalyst for human happiness.

Regarding the mechanics of timing, it should go without saying (but I’ll say it anyway) that we shouldn’t “surprise” our students with this topic three weeks into the semester. It can, of course, be reasonably expected that some students will not want to

write about religious faith in the classroom setting, much less talk about it in a large group discussion. Forcing the issue, I think it's safe to say, would be counter-productive. Common sense dictates that the content of the course is available for students to see before they sign up, and that the agenda is made clear on the first day of class. My guess, though, based on my own experiences, the experiences of colleagues, and the "pulse" of the nation as a whole, is that such a course won't go begging for students. As Pricilla Perkins relates with respect to writing teachers at her university in Oklahoma, "as careful as they were to cordon off all Bible talk, students still found opportunities to bring it in to their classrooms" (587). The interest is there. We just need to map out our approach.

Questioning Authority

I suspect that the elephant in the room, however, still needs to be addressed. As my brother put it to me on the phone recently while we were discussing this project, "despite your middle ground approach and these sort of careful formulations, how do you compete with a lifetime of teaching by parents and pastors?" The answer, I believe, is that we shouldn't see ourselves as having to compete. In a more academic sense, we don't have to compete because, as Santiago Zabala suggests, "after modernity, there are no more strong philosophical reasons either to be an atheist refusing religion or to be a theist refusing science; the deconstruction of metaphysics has cleared the ground for a culture without those dualisms....In this postmodern condition, faith...absorbs these dualisms without recognizing in them any reasons for conflict" (Rorty and Vattimo 2). In a less academic sense, we don't have to compete simply because the purpose stated on

our syllabus says so. The project is not set forth in terms of which “side” can prove this or that in the end. It’s set forth in terms of interrogating our habits with respect to a volatile social issue for the purpose of further reflection. In addition, we shouldn’t feel the need to compete with the dogmatic history of organized religion when we prompt our students to ask hard questions because questioning authority has never been an exclusively secular practice. Catholics and Christians have always had a strong history of “bucking the system.” In support of this contention, I’ll point to my own background first, and then to a number of different voices and scholars.

Although my parents (and subsequently my brother and sister and I) left the church when I was a teenager, we come from a strong Catholic background—most of my extended family (and being Catholic, there are about two hundred of us) still attend church on a regular basis and to varying degrees appear to be motivated by religious faith. When my grandma recently died, my aunt Jeannie read a moving piece at the funeral. At one point, she described how my grandma withdrew her membership from “Daughters of the Revolution” because this storied organization began to align itself with racist policies. My aunt relayed how sad and angry my grandma was about the whole episode—for years she was proud of her membership in this group, but she couldn’t condone nor be associated with what it had become. In many ways her membership in this group had been intimately bound up with her faith, but Jeannie quoted my grandma as saying, “being Catholic means helping people, and to help people we have to try to make things better. A lot of times that means changing what you’ve been doing, even if you’ve been doing it for a long time and you don’t really want to [change].” Most of the

Catholics I know, both family members and other acquaintances, have given me the impression that their faith is not synonymous with blind obedience. I've heard them disagree with their pastors, argue over the meaning of scripture, ect. In other words, for these people, the word of God is subject to change and interpretation.

As I was beginning to think about this topic, I came across an article in Time magazine that seemed to sum up for me much of the attitude that my relatives take to religious faith. Regarding the current sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, this issue advertises on the cover "Catholics In Revolt" in reference to its article, "Rebels In The Pews: No Matter What Their Bishops Decide, Catholic Lay People Say It Is Time For Their Voice To Be Heard." The article recounts how practitioners have formed groups across the country and called for reform, like the "'Voice of the Faithful,' which wants to turn the church into a representative democracy" (Biema 55). The article ends with a confessional entitled "Who Says The Church Can't Change?: An Anguished Catholic Argues That Loving The Church Means Reforming It" (63). Here, Andrew Sullivan articulates some of what I hear from my relatives and also some of what I hear in the pragmatic approach I described in Chapter Two. "Even when [the Church] inflicted real pain," Sullivan says, "when it callously treated women as second-class Catholics, when it wounded good people in bad marriages, when it penetrated into the souls of young gay kids and made them hate themselves, I knew that it was a human institution on a divine mission. Human institutions fail. But, I reminded myself, they can also change" (63). While James and Dewey might disagree with the reference to a "divine mission," they, as well as the Catholics I know, would certainly champion the notion that change

does not mean discarding one's faith. On the contrary. As Sullivan concludes with respect to the sexual abuse scandals, "what we have witnessed means we would be delinquent if we didn't fight for real change. We are actually being more faithful than those who want to perpetuate the conditions for further decline" (64).

While many scholars and theologians would support Sullivan's position, there persists the popular notion that iron-clad dogma dictates the behavior of all worshipers. For instance, as Mano Singham describes in his book Quest for Truth, a common perception of "religious belief structures [is that they] usually have an unchanging core...." Followers "do not probe for inconsistencies or periodically replace their old beliefs with new ones in the light of new knowledge. Indeed, the unchanging nature of core religious beliefs is considered to be one of its main virtues, a reflection of its eternal truth" (167). There are, to be sure, worshipers who understand their faith in these terms, and, to be sure, faith in these terms is more likely to make the headlines as political banter or the impetus of sensational acts. In practice, however, what Singham describes is only one part of the story. We can look first, for instance, to the Bible. As Alicia Ostriker notes, a close reading of "the Bible is to recognize that sacred writ is intrinsically no more absolute in its authority than any other writing" (61). Ostriker tells us, in fact, that

the questioning of authority, including divine authority, has been built into Judaism in several different ways. From the moment God confides to Abraham his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham is appalled and replies, 'Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justly?'—making clear that he, Abraham, thinks God has no right to harm innocent people—the right and even the duty of God's children to interrogate their father becomes a recurrent Biblical theme. (58)

In addition to the Bible, we can also look to contemporary leaders of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the issue of inflexible dogma. As Carol Jablonski notes with respect to the Church's position on gender roles, Pope John XXIII "helped to open up the Church's thinking on women by acknowledging, without disparagement, that women's roles are changing and by affirming that women can contribute to society by working outside the home" (165). In the mid 1960s, in fact, Pope John put forth a decidedly human rights agenda, asserting that "every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent" (166). In our effort to bridge the gap between the goals of a critical liberatory writing class and students who may hold fundamentalist beliefs, we may look to the work of this Pope which in large part posits that reinterpretation and critical thinking are not only possible but necessary aspects of a healthy religious faith. In framing a discussion about the institution of marriage, for instance, we might point to his statement that "human beings have the right to choose freely the state of life which they prefer" (166).

And the Pope, of course, is only one example in this regard. There are countless "high profile" and "low profile" people of faith who we can enlist to buttress our push to question what has been handed to us. Mary Daly, for instance, who, as a Catholic, worked to make God a "Verb who is the most active of all verbs" and strove to reclaim for women "the power of their own speech" within the Catholic church (Jablonski 168). The thinking of theologian Lesslie Newbigin can help us as well. In "'A Radical Conversion of the Mind': Fundamentalism, Hermeneutics, and the Metanoic Classroom,"

Priscilla Perkins argues that Newbigin “describes a Christian way of knowing that provokes comparison to the hermeneutical writing pedagogies advocated by Spellmyer, Bartholomae, Qualley, and others” (596). Perkins suggests that Newbigin calls for a “rearrangement of our mental furniture” and, Perkins argues, his new definition of the pivotal Greek term “metanoia” as a “‘radical conversion of the mind’ represents a provocative break with several centuries of Christian translation: wherever the term or its cognates appear in the Greek New Testament, English translators have replaced it with ‘repentance,’ a word that implies a remorseful turn away from disobedience, rather than an active embrace of unfamiliar possibilities” (597). Perkins argues that critical composition instructors should invoke Newbigin’s definition of the original term “metanoia” because the word “repentance” that English translators decided to insert “has no place...in a progressive writing pedagogy. Newbigin’s more faithful, more forward – looking definition of ‘metanoia,’ however, is clearly relevant to our work” (597).

As I have read for this project, I have found more and more voices of faith who align their religious beliefs with questioning authority. In “(Sacra) Mentality: *Catholic Identity in the Postmodern Classroom*,” Jeffrey Cain concludes that “the organism of religion absolutely requires doubt, without which there would be no fall from grace, no test of faith, no teleology. Doubt thus plays a positive role, since uncertainty provides a moment of flight from absolute authority, and it is in this moment that immanence unfolds itself” (179). Likewise, in a book review of Nel Noddings’ Educating for Intelligent Belief and Unbelief, Todd DeStigter writes that while “Noddings doesn’t say so explicitly, at the core of her ambitious project is the need to foster in teachers an

understanding of faith that I once heard articulated from a Presbyterian pulpit: “The opposite of faith is not doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty” (78). I could continue with such examples, but I’ll stop here. In short, what I’ve learned from my research is consistent with the “critical faith” I have seen and heard from numerous members of my own family. In their homes, at church, and on the street, I feel it safe to conclude that vast numbers of worshipers see their faith as intricately bound up with critical inquiry. It follows that we shouldn’t view it as a stretch to develop or expect such an intermingling in the contemporary critical composition class.

Activities and Texts

In this section I offer a handful of suggestions for texts, assignments, and activities that might prove useful in organizing this class. Earlier I made a brief reference to the Writing Portfolio; I believe the topic of religious belief lends itself to the way in which the Portfolio emphasizes process, revision, and reflection, so I will tailor my following suggestions around such an approach (the Final Portfolio assignment, however, is certainly not obligatory). However they are taken, all of these suggestions are rooted in and work to foster our pragmatic approach to religious belief by bringing it within the purview of analyzing our habits and a priori judgments. I break this section into four parts: Questionnaires and Freewrites, Texts, Debates and Group Presentations, and Writing Assignments.

Questionnaires and Freewrites

After spelling out precisely the purpose of this class (to develop writing and critical thinking skills by exploring religion as, and only as, a social and political issue), and after providing for them our own working definition of “religious belief” (as I outlined in my Introduction, for my purposes here it is Christianity), one of the first things we might do is offer our students a questionnaire to get their input and their assent. We might begin by simply asking them, “How would you define religious belief? How does your definition differ from the one I provided in this class? Can you accept the definition provided in this class for the purposes of our project this semester?” In this initial questionnaire, we might also ask something like the following: “Do ‘scientific knowledge’ and ‘religious knowledge’ serve different purposes? How do we judge the usefulness or value of each? Do you think, in the twenty-first century, that it’s possible for religious knowledge and scientific knowledge to compliment each other in a productive way?” These are only suggestions—the idea is to get in writing (in a contractual sort of way) that students accept the “terms” of this project and to get some of their general impressions on the topic at the very beginning of the semester. At the end of the semester, we might suggest that students look at this questionnaire again (maybe in a reflection letter for their Final Portfolio) and ask them if they would still define religious belief in the same way. Would they answer the other questions exactly the same? In other words, have any of their experiences over the last 15 weeks prompted them to rethink beliefs they hold to be true? We should be clear here, of course, that there is no penalty for reaching or *not* reaching a particular conclusion—penalty only attaches if there has

been no substantial reflection or inquiry or explication as to *why* they have arrived where they have.

Freewriting prompts can be initially used in a similar way to help orient the class as a whole. At the outset, we could tell our students who Pierce, James, and Dewey are, their distinct personal beliefs about God, and why we're basing our approach on their thinking. We can subsequently ask them at various times over the first couple of weeks to freewrite in response to prompts like the following: "C. S. Peirce suggests that religion is what religion does. What does this mean to you? Do you agree with this statement?" Or, "William James says the truth about God must run the gauntlet of all our other truths, and vice versa. Do you agree? Is this possible?" Or maybe, "John Dewey says it's possible to be a religious person without believing in a supernatural deity. Do you agree? Does this distort the term 'religious'?" We might also ask them to respond to Pierce's suggestion that God must be understood in vague terms, or to James's insistence that we have a right "to believe in religious matters," or to Dewey's distinction between "religion" as a noun and "religious" as an adjective.

In addition to Pierce, James, and Dewey, we might add some freewriting prompts by some more contemporary voices, from both sides of the "isle," to further help students enter our discussion about the place of religious faith in the public sphere. The market is saturated (although there always seems to be room for more) with books on this topic from every perspective; I recommend six that I feel teachers will find useful in this context. God's Politics by Jim Wallis, The Purpose Driven Life by Rick Warren, and the Left Behind series by Tim LaHaye advocate, to varying degrees, the necessity of

religious faith in the public and political sphere. Many of our students may already be familiar with these works as they are, especially the last two, astoundingly popular (LaHaye's series has sold 60 million copies, and Warren's book has been translated into 56 languages and has spent 174 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List for advice books). They provide almost endless possibilities for freewriting prompts. Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion, Daniel Dennett's Breaking the Spell, and Sam Harris' Letter to a Christian Nation provide, as one might guess, arguments against the usefulness of religious faith in the public realm. These too are in demand at the moment (although their combined sales can't compare to LaHaye's alone), and they offer a wealth of possible prompts. None of the books I listed offer much in the way of compromise or common ground—if they did, my guess is that they probably wouldn't be so popular in our sharply divided nation. Our job is to acknowledge and scrutinize these pervasive, polarized positions that largely represent our country, squaring them up against each other and asking what difference would it make to all of us here and now if this belief rather than that belief were true.

Students can freewrite, of course, in response to a variety of texts, current events, or class discussions, and these freewrites may often serve as a springboard for debate topics, group presentations, papers, ect. One example I like in particular draws on Ann Berthoff's Double-Entry Journal exercise. We might ask students to watch t.v., search the internet, and read the paper over the weekend and then jot down one instance where religious faith made the news (we might also add that simply noting how a church moved from one corner to another does not represent the depth of observation we're looking

for). On one side of a sheet of paper, students should write down their initial response to their observation—what happened and what was their first reaction to it? They should not look at it again until they come to class on Monday, where we allot the first ten minutes or so for them to respond to their *first* response on the other side of the same sheet of paper. Using this same exercise, we might also ask students to write about specific current events we already have in mind. For example, at the beginning of class we can ask them to freewrite on the following prompt: “Should a pharmacist (licensed by the state) have the right to refuse to fill birth control prescriptions because that pharmacist believes that to fill such prescriptions would violate his/her religious views?” At the end of class, or perhaps at the beginning of the following class, they can respond to their first response on the blank side of the page. Again, the idea is to prompt students to think about their thinking, to interrogate some of their beliefs after bringing them to the surface for a moment.

However we use them, our freewriting prompts should embody the spirit of the pragmatic *method*; in other words, they should not covertly lead our students in one direction or another. As it’s fair to say that many students will assume we want them to reach a certain conclusion (like we do with racism or sexism), we must be sure—especially during those first few days—to let them know otherwise. And how we phrase our questions, as Susanne Langer reminds us, directs the response we are likely to get. In this respect, we might do well to keep in the back of our minds Kenneth Burke’s parlor metaphor, where we can see ourselves as entering an ongoing conversation which began before we arrived and which will continue after we’re gone. We don’t enter the room

already knowing the answers—we enter the room as new participants who must listen, evaluate, reevaluate, contribute, and eventually leave. To take one example, Rick Warren, whose book The Purpose Driven Life I mentioned above, recently invited Barack Obama to speak at his mega-church in California. This invitation sparked some controversy given Obama’s views on abortion and his alliance with the Democratic party. In the spirit of entering Burke’s parlor, we might ask our students to respond to this particular invitation: “Why the controversy? What are the issues here? What would you offer to this ongoing conversation?” However we phrase them, our prompts should lead to more questions, not to foregone conclusions, in an attempt at leaving behind a parlor with a better chance at improving our collective condition.

Texts

In offering here a handful of texts that will press our students to explore the way in which faith functions as a public and political force, I draw on different genres from both academic and popular culture circles. I list and briefly describe the works, and I often suggest how they might be used together. In the following two sections, I will offer more specific assignments and activities that we may use in conjunction with these and other texts. As the possibilities for texts in a class like this are boundless, my intention is that these examples will be taken as just that—examples.

In the popular film version of John Grisham’s book A Time to Kill, starring Samuel L. Jackson, Sandra Bullock, and Matthew McConaughey, religious faith is not a dominant theme, but one sequence of scenes proves productive for our purposes. In this

movie, which takes place in the south, a young white lawyer (McConaughey) tries to defend a black man (Jackson) for murdering the two white Klansmen who raped his daughter. About half-way through the film, in the span of less than thirty seconds, we see the Klu Klux Klan members attending their church service; this scene cuts immediately to McConaughey and his family attending their church service; and this scene cuts immediately to the black family members of Jackson singing in their church. We might ask our students how these scenes invite us to react to the function of faith—are we to be repulsed by the first, relate to or feel indifference for the second, and sympathize deeply with the third? In our first week we might begin by showing this clip from a film that many students are either familiar with or can relate to on some level, and we might also ask them to interrogate their own subject positions in relation to this text. How did they respond individually to these scenes? Why? What do they think a typical audience is supposed to come away with here? Is the director pushing towards a pragmatic notion that “faith is what faith does?”

We can use this movie in conjunction with other works that deal with race to explore the role faith has played in the abolition movement or in the civil rights movement? For example, taken together, Frederick Douglass’ Narrative and his “Fourth of July” speech provide us with some interesting material. At the end of chapter 5 in his Narrative, Douglass describes his response to the “remarkable” circumstances surrounding his escape from slavery:

I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor. But I should be false to the

earliest sentiments of my soul, if I suppressed the opinion. I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than be false, and incur my own abhorrence....in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to sheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise. (56)

Seven years after writing these words, he writes the following in his famous “Fourth of July Speech”: “Albert Barnes but uttered what the common sense of every man at all observant of the actual state of the case will receive as truth, when he declared that ‘there is no power out of the church that could sustain slavery an hour, if it were not sustained in it’” (Bizzell and Herzberg 225). How might we account for these seemingly contradictory descriptions of religious belief from the same person? Did he simply change his mind during the intervening years? Might Dewey’s distinction between religion as a noun and religious as an adjective apply? How else might the pragmatic method help us reconcile these statements? “Joining the Church” by Henry Louis Gates Jr. also lends itself well to these particular questions as Gates describes the power of his faith and his experiences in the Christian church. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” leads us in a similar direction. In this letter, King describes his disappointment with the white church, details how one can be deeply disappointed only with something that one deeply loves, and offers hope that the church will rise to the challenge of reorienting itself. After a lesson on Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle, we could ask students how King establishes and works from his own ethos as a Christian in this piece and how that ethos aligns (or doesn’t align) with a pragmatic approach to religious faith. How does he go about criticizing the Church? What pathetic appeals does he make

to people of faith? We might also include here critical responses to King's method, including Will Herberg's "A Religious 'Right' to Violate the Law" and T. Olin Binkley's "Southern Baptist Seminaries." Judging these responses by the same pragmatic criteria, how might we rank their usefulness?

Sarah Grimke and Phyllis Schlafly are two authors we can turn to with respect to the role of religious faith regarding women's rights. In "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women," Grimke responds directly to a "Pastoral Letter" which, citing the Bible, argues that essentially "The power of woman is in her dependence" (Bizzell and Herzberg 305). Also working from the Bible, Grimke offers a different perspective, taking issue at one point with the popular tenet that women need to be protected by men. Referring to "the gentle appellation of *protection*," Grimke argues that more often than not what women "have leaned upon has proved a broken reed at best, and oft a spear" (325). Contemporary writer Phyllis Schlafly (author of 21 books, including Equal Pay for Unequal Work and A Choice not an Echo) disagrees with Grimke's position on protection. In her opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, Schlafly argued that the ERA "would take away the 'special protection' the 'Christian tradition of chivalry' offered women—in other words, the 'right' to be 'supported and protected' by men" (Critchlow 138). Taking these positions together, how does religious faith help to define popular beliefs about protection? If we run these beliefs through the pragmatic gauntlet of all our other truths, how do they stack up? Again, the goal is to prompt our students to question "what difference would it make" if this belief rather than that one were true. Christine De Pisan's The Book of the City of Ladies, Albert Folsom's

“Abolition Women,” Jonathan Stearns’ “Female Influence, and the True Christian Mode of its Exercise,” Judy Syfers’ “I Want a Wife,” and Adrienne Rich’s “The Domestication of Motherhood” are just a few other texts to consider on a woman’s “place” in the context of religious belief.

Exploring the public role of faith through a pragmatic lens, we might, of course, take as our impetus a number of cultural studies topics like race and gender; I’ll offer here briefly just two more examples. With respect to Native American studies, we may explore Mary Rolandson’s A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson together with pieces like A Brief History of the War with the Indians in New England by Increase Mather, Speech at the end of King Philip’s War by Waban, and Eulogy on King Philip by William Apess. These works offer distinct and compelling accounts of how God and the Bible took part in this particular context (I won’t burden my reader by reiterating possible pragmatic prompts—I trust those have become evident by now). We might also investigate the role that faith continues to play in the ongoing debate surrounding evolution. To frame our discussion we could begin with selected excerpts from Darwin’s Origin of Species and C. S. Pierce’s “Evolutionary Love.” We can then include a variety of perspectives from texts like Debby Applegate’s The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher and Stephen Jay Gould’s Evolution as Fact and Theory; we can also bring in current events like the outcomes of recent court cases in Kansas and Pennsylvania regarding the place of Intelligent Design and Darwin’s theory of evolution in public school curricula. In

addition, we might look back to H. L. Mencken's "On the Scopes Trial" as well as to various examples of public discourse on this matter from the news and the internet.

With the exception of one film, so far I have focused primarily on essays, nonfiction, and current events. I will turn now briefly to some possibilities from the genres of poetry, fiction, and drama. From the same pragmatic perspective and with the same goal of exploring the public function of religious belief, we might consider a poem like Ann Bradstreet's "The Flesh and the Spirit" as a center piece for our work with poetry. The following excerpt from this poem, in which *Spirit* replies to her sister *Flesh*, might be worth emphasizing for our purposes:

Spirit: Be still, thou unregenerate part,
Disturb no more my settled heart,
For I have vowed (and so will do)
Thee as a foe still to pursue.
And combat with thee will and must,
Until I see thee laid in th' dust.
Sisters we are, yea, twins we be,
Yet deadly feud 'twixt thee and me; (138)

From such a foundation (questioning whether or not having a "settled heart" necessarily leads to confrontation), we can consider countless other poets, such as T.S. Eliot ("The Waste Land"), Emily Dickinson ("Faith' is a fine invention," "Some Keep the Sabbath Going to Church," "I Dwell in Possibility,") Bryce Perce Shelly ("England in 1819") and Langston Hughes ("God to Hungry Child"). With respect to short fiction, we may take as our centerpiece a story like William Saroyan's "Resurrection of a Life" and emphasize, perhaps, an excerpt like this one:

...all that I know is that I am alive and glad to be, glad to be of this ugliness and this glory, somehow glad that I can remember, somehow remember the boy climbing the fig tree, unpraying but religious with joy, somehow of the earth, of the time of earth, somehow everlastingly of life, nothingness, blessed or unblessed, somehow deathless like myself, timeless, glad, insanely glad to be here, and so it is true, there is no death, somehow there is no death, and can never be. (168)

Again, from such a starting point regarding the consequences of religious belief, we might explore a myriad of short stories, such as those by Flannery O'Connor ("Good Country People," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Revelation"), Philip Roth ("Defender of the Faith"), Richard Wright ("Bright and Morning Star"), Anton Chekov ("The Student"), and Tomas Rivera ("...And the Earth did not Part").

I will also recommend a novel and a play that I have had success with in talking about the public role of religion: Bernard Malamud's The Fixer and Tony Kushner's Angels in America. In the beginning of The Fixer, set in anti-Semitic Tsarist Russia, Yakov Bok responds to his step-father's admonition "Don't forget your God!" by replying, "Who forgets who...what do I get from him from but a bang on the head and a stream of piss in my face" (17). As the novel progresses, however, Yakov's "Jewishness" is increasingly thrust upon him, and, while attempting to take up Spinoza's theology, he struggles to understand what religion has done *to* him (and others) and what it could do *for* him (and others). How Yakov and his religion are eventually portrayed as inextricably bound, and how together they are ultimately understood as both *a part of* and *a consequence of* history and politics, is also particularly appealing for our project. Kushner's play, set in the Reagan 80's and featuring Roy Cohn, a gay couple facing

AIDS, and a Mormon couple confronting drug addiction and latent homosexuality, offers a number of different characters and angles to focus upon. The social structure as well as the spiritual center of religion lies at the heart of this play, and there is an interesting theme of duality that runs throughout it, i.e., a pattern in the play whereby things usually considered as opposites are woven together, such as being both Mormon and gay, real and hallucinatory, tragic and comic, political and personal, a character and an archetype, a “sinner” seduced by angels, and so on. The way in which the play ultimately depicts a Godless heaven and a God who can be sued for abandonment also fits into this same pattern and provides us ample material to work with regarding themes of mediation and hybridity. In addition, both Malamud’s novel and Kushner’s play have been made into movies which can serve as interesting compliments.

The literary examples I listed above offer a variety of hypotheses about the nature and effect of religious faith in a social context. We can use texts like these to prompt students to think about how religious faith constructs our subjective views of the world. How might Flannery O’Connor’s religious subjectivity determine the arc of her story? How might Bernard Malamud’s religious subjectivity determine the outcome of his novel? How do our students’ religious subjectivities effect their readings of these texts? How are their readings useful to themselves and to their neighbors? How might their readings be different given a different set of religious beliefs? With respect to this last question, I’ll end this section by referring back to William James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience. By the end of this book, James seems to conclude that having a variety of religious experience in the world is, for the most part, a good thing. He writes,

“I do not see how it is possible that creatures in such different positions and with such different powers as human individuals are, should have exactly the same functions and the same duties. No two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical solutions” (419). He adds that the divine means a “group of qualities” in which “different men may all find worthy missions.” Hence, a “‘god of battles’ must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace and heaven and home, the god for another. We must frankly recognize the fact that we live in partial systems, and that parts are not interchangeable in the spiritual life” (420). While our spiritual inclinations may not be interchangeable, however, James contends optimistically that they can and do function in harmony to create a greater unity: “Each attitude being a syllable in human nature’s total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely” (420). We might ask our students to grapple with James’s conclusion here in conjunction with John Updike’s 2002 short story which bears the same title, “Varieties of Religious Experience.” Updike’s story depicts one man’s struggle with God in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks; it also focuses on two of the terrorists, one of the victims, and the passengers on the plane that ultimately crashed in Pennsylvania. This story appears to reach a different conclusion than the one James draws—having so many different religious faiths in the world might not, in fact, be such a good thing. As I’ve argued throughout, however, it’s not a particular conclusion we’re pressing in this class, it’s how we get to it.

Debates and Group Presentations

In this section, I'll first suggest a few possible debate topics for this course and then I'll offer some ways in which we can work with group presentations. The value of group work has become more and more apparent over the years, but with our particular topic and methodology, group work is likely to be indispensable. If groups are formed early, used often, and remain intact throughout the semester, a sense of solidarity and trust will most likely develop among group members; this sense of solidarity tends to breed a confidence and respect that is more difficult to foster on an individual basis in a room full of strangers. In this regard, group work enables our exploration of a sensitive topic like religious faith. As Hephzibah Roskelly notes in her book Breaking (into) the Circle, “many teachers and students have bad memories of unfortunate group experiences in their pasts” (xii); group work is often seen by both students and teachers as something to do to take a break from the real work of the class. As Roskelly argues, however, this does not have to be, nor should it be, the case. If from the outset teachers break students into permanent groups, ask each group to give themselves a name and ask students to work in their groups on a regular basis—thereby giving everyone the impression that group work is indeed part of the real work of the class—students can often develop a voice and a sense of agency they otherwise struggle to find or to use. Debates and group presentations are only two of the ways in which we can make good use of this exercise.

When I assign debates in my writing and speaking courses, I usually break the class into four groups so we can debate two different issues (two groups debate one thing, and two groups debate something else). I set aside a few class periods for all of us to

narrow down the topics (I think its important to give students a hand in choosing the topics—the debates tend to be more lively) and then let students work in their groups to develop their arguments and assign roles (everyone is required to help develop the group’s presentation and everyone must speak at least once on behalf of their group). Using the thinking of William James as a base, I make clear that the goal of each side is to persuade everyone in the room that their position should be considered as the best hypothesis we can choose. On the day of the debate, one side gets ten minutes to present its initial argument and the other side gets the same to present its opening argument. Then the first side gets seven minutes for rebuttal, and likewise for the other side. I serve as a mediator of sorts, and I ask those in the audience (the class members not debating on that day) to jot down a question or comment during the debate. I leave time at the end for the audience to pose these questions to the debaters.

With respect to religious belief as a public and political issue, I suggest a list like the following for the class as a whole to choose from (under the above format, only two topics are needed). I mentioned earlier the topic of evolution. Recently in the New York Times, Holden Thorp (chairman of the chemistry department at the University of North Carolina) wrote a brief Op-Ed article entitled “Evolution’s Bottom Line.” In this piece, Thorp argues that theories of creationism and intelligent design not only hinder our ability to improve our general condition, but they also hurt our country’s ability to compete in the global marketplace. He writes that “both sides say they are fighting for lofty goals and defending the truth. But lost in all this truth-defending are more pragmatic issues that have to do with the young people whose educations are at stake here and this

pesky fact: creationism has no commercial application. Evolution does” (A 27). He goes on to suggest that “the battle is about more than which truth is truthier, it’s about who will be allowed to innovate and where they will do it” (A27). We might ask our students to debate whether or not this is what the battle is really about? Is this what it should be about? Does creationism really have no commercial application? One group might argue as ardent Thorp supporters, and the other group might argue as ardent Thorp opposers. The thing to remember is that we are not arguing whether the creationists or the scientists are *right*. We are arguing over Thorp’s contention about their respective *usefulness* in society.

This distinction should be emphasized regarding the subsequent topic suggestions as well: 1.) The Los Angeles Times reports that “about two thirds of U.S medical schools now offer some form of training on the role of religion and spirituality in medicine,” and the same article notes that “Walter Larimore, an award-winning physician...has declared that excluding God from a consultation should be grounds for malpractice” (Sloan). Should medical schools offer this training, and should we heed Dr. Larimore’s direction? 2.) Each U.S. Supreme Court session begins with, “God save the United States and this honorable court.” Should this tradition continue? What about other religious displays on government grounds? 3.) Salman Rushdie wrote, “To respect the sacred is to be paralyzed by it. The idea of the sacred is quite simply one of the most conservative notions in any culture, because it seeks to turn other ideas—Uncertainty, Progress, Change—into crimes” (416). Argue for and against Rushdie’s proposition, and try to address the related issue of blasphemy? 4.) Should a pharmacist (licensed by the state)

have the right to refuse to fill a birth control prescription because that pharmacist believes that to fill such a prescription would violate her religious views? 5.) If we live in a representative democracy, and most of the people in this democracy believe in God, shouldn't the government reflect that belief?

At the end of each debate, I ask every student to write a response. Of the debaters, I ask, How did it go? Would you do anything differently? Did the other side surprise you with anything? Is there anything you wanted to say, but didn't get a chance to? Of the audience members, I ask, Who put forth a better argument? Why? Was it the substance of what they said, the way they presented it, or a mixture of both? Have any of your views on this topic changed because of this debate? This response can be turned in immediately after the debate and then perhaps included in a Final Portfolio. Debates are usually a lot of fun—I highly recommend them—but I'll offer two final bits of practical advice: stick to the time restraints you set and be certain the topics are clear and concise so the issues don't become muddled.

I also strongly recommend group presentations in this class. At the beginning of the course, we might give groups some quick tasks that they can informally present to the class (without even leaving their chairs). For instance, after a lesson on deductive reasoning and syllogisms, groups could come up with their own syllogisms that encapsulate a particular text, portions of a particular text, or a current event. As the semester progresses, we can ask them to present more formally at the head of the class. They might present, for instance, on the way in which they see religious belief functioning as a social entity in Anton Chekhov's "The Student." After a brief biography

on the author, they may address questions like, Is the story of Peter on the night of the Last Supper central to this tale? Why, or why not? Does this story provide a useful answer for the way in which religious faith can help us in the face of a cold and harsh world? At the end, Chekhov writes of the young theology student, “‘The past,’ he thought, ‘is linked to the present by an unbroken chain of events all flowing from one to the other.’ And it seemed to him that he had just seen both ends of the chain, and when he touched one end the other trembled” (223). Would the power of this chain metaphor work without the underlying reference to Christianity? Why, or why not? Is the student’s subsequent “unknown and secret happiness” that “took possession of him little by little” (223) inextricably linked to the story of Peter and Jesus?

Or, to take another example, we might give a little bit of background on Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses (teaching the book itself might be best, but very time consuming) and the fatwa that followed, and then prompt a group to present to the class Rushdie’s own response to this incident by exploring his essay “In Good Faith.” What are Rushdie’s primary points in this essay? What does he say his book is really about? How does his description of “two struggling worlds, pure and impure, chaste and coarse” as “juxtaposed...echoes of one another” (401) and his allusion to “the pre-Christian belief” that “God and the Devil were one and the same” (403) coincide with C. S. Peirce’s understanding of God, love, and religious faith? How does any of this thinking help us in the world? What is your general response to some of Rushdie’s overarching arguments? How might you connect Rushdie’s fatwa with more recent events like the response to

Pope Benedict's speech in Germany on September 12, 2006 or the response to twelve Danish cartoons of Muhammad published on September 30, 2005?

Book clubs, or something like them, may also serve us well by culminating in group presentations to the class. At the beginning of the course, we might offer a pool of books on religious faith in the public sphere from which each group chooses a different one (many of these texts can be found in my bibliography). Each member of the group must then get her own copy of the book and begin reading it. We can allot some class time throughout the course for groups to meet to discuss their reading and outline their roles in presenting this book to the class. One student might give a brief biography of the author and others may examine and respond to particular arguments or elements of style. At the end of the semester, after each group presents their book, ten or fifteen minutes may be allotted for questions or comments from the rest of the class. Like the debates, I also suggest a written response from both the audience members and the presenters. The audience might answer questions like, Have you heard of this author or this book before. What new ideas about our topic did you hear today? Based on this presentation, if you were to write a letter to this author, what would you say to her? If we had more time, what questions or comments would you put to this group? Presenters might comment on prompts such as, "Did this book turn out to be what you expected? Would you recommend it to a friend? Why did your group choose this particular book? Has this book shed any new light on our topic for you? If you were to write a letter to this author, what would you tell her or ask her?"

Both debates and group presentations offer students the opportunity to work closely with some of their peers and help establish a bit of a collaborative base from which to work on our tricky subject. As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, I believe group work to be invaluable in this class. However we choose to employ this strategy, though, we do well to remind ourselves that we are focused on the usefulness of faith in the public world, not its “truthiness.”

Writing Assignments

In this section I will briefly list a handful of writing assignments that are, as I mentioned earlier, intended for inclusion in a Final Portfolio; they may also, of course, be taken otherwise. They are familiar assignments—a persuasive essay, an annotated bibliography, a critical analysis, a query, and a reflection letter—geared toward our pragmatic exploration of religious faith in the public realm. The order is not crucial, nor are they all necessarily recommended in the same semester. I do suggest an annotated bibliography early on so that students might begin to see what is “out there” and, of course, the reflection letter at the end of the term. During the first couple weeks, for instance, as we are talking about the Pragmatists with respect to faith, we might also spend some time in the library to work on the annotated bibliography. Students may find three to five sources on our topic, cite these sources in MLA format, and write a brief description of that source after each citation. The description should be five or six sentences long, providing a summary of the source and how the student thinks that source

is useful in negotiating the issue at hand. This bibliography may also help to create a pool of books for a possible book club assignment.

Leading up to the Persuasive essay, we might begin with Aristotle's definition of rhetoric (finding the best available means of persuasion) and his related rhetorical triangle. After reading a few texts on our topic (in addition to those I listed above under Texts, I also recommend Robert Johnson's "Teaching the Forbidden" and Deal W. Hudson's "Thinking about God"), we can prompt our students to work from Aristotle's triangle to persuade their audience to think in a certain way or act in a certain way regarding religious faith as a *social or political* force. In other words, the writer should pay particular attention to how she situates her ethos, makes logical arguments and emotional appeals to convince her reader that her argument is not only a live hypothesis, as James puts it, but the best option. And it must be made evident how the truth of this argument successfully runs the gauntlet of our other relevant truths. We might also ask students to write a critical analysis of a text or a cultural event from a pragmatic perspective. What are the primary arguments at stake? How might we, as a society, be better off if these arguments were believed to be true or untrue? How else might a pragmatist analyze this text or event? In a similar vein, we might assign what we can call a query where we prompt students to enter a specific dialogue by asking questions and reserving judgment; i.e., enter the dialogue without knowing the answer beforehand, and leave the dialogue without having reached a firm conclusion. For example, regarding the public role of the church, C. S. Peirce differs from John Dewey, George Eliot differs from Stephen Carter, Elizabeth Cady Stanton differs from Jim Wallis. Students might

write an essay where they simply “talk” with a few of these authors about their positions, raising their own questions, arguments, and angles. Finally, we might ask students to write a reflection letter at the end of the course in which they look back on the work they have done, commenting on what they struggled with, what they felt went well, what they might do differently, how they view their writing process at the end of the term, ect. We might also ask them to consider our project—was it difficult for them to discuss religious faith in this way? How do they think the pragmatic method helped us talk about this issue and where did this method fail?

All of the assignments and texts I have suggested in this chapter are meant to be taken in conjunction with one another, mixed and matched as one sees fit. They are primarily intended to help students become better writers, but they are also intended to coincide with the pragmatic approach that can help us theorize and talk about religious belief as a social issue—an approach based in critical literacy, social responsibility, reevaluating our habits, and inspired from, as Wislawa Szymborska puts it, “a continuous ‘I Don’t Know.’”

CHAPTER V
BELIEF AND DISBELIEF: PRAGMATIC
PARTNERS IN THE WRITING CLASS

How can outsiders discuss
insiders' beliefs with anything
like fairness and accuracy?
Sharon Crowley

In the preface to her recent book Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism, Sharon Crowley admits that her status as “an outsider to conservative religious thought” brings to the surface some of the primary questions she aims to address: “How can believers converse with unbelievers” and how “is it possible to persuade people who subscribe to intensely resonant belief systems to adopt different positions?” (ix). Crowley draws on classical rhetoric to explore how we might be able to start talking to one another in our contemporary political climate, but she notes from the outset the difficulty of answering these initial questions, and adds that ultimately she has only found but “a few paths” (x). One of the issues I have tried to address in this project is the way in which “outsiders” and “insiders” have fixed, preconceived notions of what the other holds to be true: in other words, to use James’ terminology, they both claim to know “beforehand” and have thus closed off not only possible hypotheses but channels of conversation as well. Theists and atheists alike are guilty of this limitation. As an

“insider” of the latter group, however, my aim in this conclusion is to extend the above application of the pragmatic method to religious disbelief, for atheists are no more “off the hook” than theists in our context of the writing class. First, though, a brief discussion of the term atheism is required.

Most atheists in the United States have had ample opportunity to consider God as a live hypothesis; they either grew up as I did with families who went to church every Sunday or they otherwise absorbed Christian traditions as an indelible part of our national culture. Most atheists have not rejected “belief” as it might be understood in opposition to science or logic—they have only rejected the notion that God, as described in the Bible, actually exists. Theism is a belief in God. Atheism is not a belief. It is simply a *response* to one particular belief (denoted by the prefix “a”). As such, it doesn’t even indicate on what grounds this response is based. As George Smith writes, “If a person is designated as a theist, this tells us that he believes in a god, not why he believes. If a person is designated as an atheist, this tells us that he does not believe in a god, not why he does not believe” (8). One can rightly be called an atheist, then, not because he champions reason and science, but because he believes that canines are responsible for our creation and our sanctity.

Nonetheless, in the United States atheists have often been and are still very much today cast as hollow and amoral in large part because belief in God has become synonymous with integrity and morality. As the Supreme Court of Tennessee opined in 1871, “The man who has the hardihood to avow that he does not believe in God, shows a recklessness of moral character and utter want of moral responsibility, such as very little

entitles him to be heard or believed in a court of justice in a country designated as Christian” (4). Such a perspective has its roots in the Bible; Jesus, for instance, advises that nonbelievers will be cast “into the furnace of fire” where “men will weep and gnash their teeth,” much as “the weeds are gathered and burned with fire...” (Matthew 13. 40-42). Leviticus and Deuteronomy are replete with similar commands: “If your brother...or your son or daughter, or the spouse whom you embrace...tries to secretly seduce you, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’...you must show him no pity, you must not spare him or conceal his guilt. No, you must kill him...you must stone him to death, since he has tried to divert you from Yahweh your God...” (Deuteronomy 13. 7-11). Theologians through the centuries have, to varying degrees, reinforced these instructions. Thomas Aquinas, for example, proposed in no uncertain terms that “the sin of unbelief is greater than any sin that occurs in the perversion of morals” and that after committing this offense a third time, the offender must “be exterminated from the world by death” (Smith 4).

This potent history that has so defined the atheist has left her feeling like she has some explaining to do. Indeed, “atheism, it is charged, is nothing but pure negativism: it destroys but does not rebuild” (Smith 5). Disbelief in Yahweh has morphed (or has been manipulated) into disbelief period save a cold, intellectual wasteland devoid of real sentiment. This is unfortunate, because our everyday experiences tell us something different. They tell us that atheists believe in luck and love and karma and momentum and ghosts and all kinds of things that one can’t see or reason through. Atheists read tarot cards, talk to plants, find strength in the spirit of dead relatives, and base their lives on a

mixture of intuition and reason as much as any devout Catholic. And yet, while we no longer have to fear being executed as godless and hence amoral creatures, the stereotype persists. In 1994, Stephen Carter published his influential and oft cited book, The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion. The title alone suggests that there is a secular movement (aimed at trivializing and disparaging people of faith) led by those without *any* capacity for belief—i.e. disbelief in Catholic dogma is equated with general “Disbelief.” In his foreword to a recent edition, Carter writes that maybe one of the reasons his “book has struck a chord” is because so many people “are coming to understand the possibility that a culture can grow too secularized,” and he adds that he is optimistic for the future “because it is impossible to envision a serious public discussion of morality from which the religious voice is absent” (xvi). The term “too secularized” can easily be read as “too atheistic,” and both are meant to imply a lack of moral capability (atheists and secularists are, in fact, later described as simply “devoted to sweet reason” (24)). I do agree with Carter, however, that faith should be allowed every opportunity to be heard in the public forum—on all pertinent issues for maintaining a democracy, including morality—but in this forum it must pass the same muster as all our other voices.

That is the crucial distinction between religious belief as practiced in the privacy of one’s home and religious faith as offered for the basis of public policy. In our democracy, when the stakes become higher, we demand more proof. For example, in our justice system, the standard of proof in a criminal case is “beyond a reasonable doubt” while the standard of proof in a civil case is a “preponderance of the evidence.” The

standard is higher in the former because the stakes are higher—in a criminal proceeding one can lose life and liberty, but in a civil proceeding one can only lose money and property. All that atheists are asking is that in a debate of ideas for the common good, religious faith not be given preferential treatment—or granted a lesser standard of proof—simply because *it is* religious faith. The stakes are too high. Carter laments that “we often ask our citizens to split their public and private selves, telling them in effect that it is fine to be religious in private, but there is something askew when those private beliefs become the basis for public action” (Carter 8). Those of us who do not believe in the Biblical God only find something askew, however, when these private beliefs are allowed to power public action on the sole basis of their religious nature and not because they are in tune with our other democratic principals. If they can’t meet the same scrutiny as all our other proposals, then they should indeed remain a private matter.

Carter argues, however, that asking a person to keep her religion a private matter trivializes that belief, and that we must fight against a culture that treats religion “like building model airplanes, just another hobby; something quiet, something private, something trivial” (22). But his inference that to privatize faith necessarily leads to trivializing it seems dubious. As Richard Rorty points out in his brief response to Carter’s book, “our family and love lives are private, nonpolitical and nontrivial. The poems we atheists write, like the prayers our religious friends raise, are private, nonpolitical, and nontrivial.” There are, Rorty continues, “lots of other private pursuits that both give meaning to individual human lives and are such that mature, public-spirited adults are quite right in not attempting to use them as a basis for politics. The search for private

perfection, pursued by theists and atheists alike, is neither trivial nor, in a pluralistic democracy, relevant to public policy” (Philosophy 170). Furthermore, as I described in chapter two with respect to public policy, for a pragmatist it doesn’t matter where the belief comes from, it just matters how useful that belief is to all of us at the moment (and in the future). The belief could come from a Batman comic, Homer’s Odyssey, the Koran or the Bible. It’s origin makes no difference. Again in response to Carter, Rorty suggests

that the epistemology suitable for [our] democracy is one in which the only test of a political proposal is its ability to gain assent from people who retain radically diverse ideas about the point and meaning of human life, about the path to private perfection. The more such consensus becomes the test of a belief, the less important is the belief’s source. So when Carter complains that religious citizens are forced ‘to restructure their arguments in purely secular terms before they can be presented’, I should reply that ‘restructuring the arguments in purely secular terms’ just means *dropping reference to the source of the premises of the arguments*, and that this omission seems a reasonable price to pay for religious liberty. (173, emphasis mine)

This price Rorty refers to is, in fact, no more than any of us pay when proposing public policy. My views on abortion may have their roots in a picture my grandmother drew when she was a teenager, but as a diverse community, we have our hands full worrying about the possible consequences of my views without spending energy on where they might have come from.

In continuing to shift the focus away from a belief’s origins and towards its consequences, Rorty outlines the term “anticlericalism.” In “Anticlericalism and Atheism,” he suggests that the argument over whether or not God really exists is besides the point, and therefore so too are the tags “theist” and “atheist.” He now describes

himself as an anticleric rather than an atheist because “anticlericalism is a political view, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. It is the view that ecclesiastical institutions, despite all the good they do—despite all the comfort they provide to those in need or in despair—are dangerous to the health of democratic societies” (Future 33). In making this argument, Rorty refers to the thinking of Gianni Vattimo who, Rorty says, “wants to dissolve the problem of the coexistence of natural science with the legacy of Christianity by identifying Christ neither with truth nor with power but with love alone” (Future 36). The direction that both Rorty and Vattimo pursue here aligns in many respects with Dewey’s distinction between religion as an institutional noun beholden to certain truths and religious as a contingent adjective beholden only to love and human happiness (Peirce’s distinction between a Gospel of Love and a Gospel of Greed is also apt).

Vattimo develops his argument from the idea of kenosis, whereby God relinquishes everything to us. This perspective, Vattimo writes, aims in part to pave “the way for a renewed dialogue with the Christian tradition, to which I have always belonged (as the rest of modernity), yet whose meaning has become incomprehensible to me” (Future 65). A new dialogue is desperately needed, he argues, if we are “to avoid the impasse in which modern consciousness always finds itself when confronted by Christian revelation: the impossibility of adhering to a doctrine that appears too sharply contrasted with the ‘conquests’ of enlightened reason, too full of myths which demand to be unmasked” (66). By grappling with the meaning of kenosis—the transfer of love and charity from God to humans, i.e., the act of Incarnation—we are able to conclude that “Christ himself is the unmasker, and that the unmasking inaugurated by him... is the

meaning of the history of salvation itself’ (66). Within this process of unmasking—a process in which we take an active role by continuing what Christ started—Vattimo urges that believing

in salvation will not mean adhering to the letter of everything that is written in the Gospel and in the dogmatic teaching of the Church, but rather in trying to understand the meaning of the evangelical text for me, here, now. In other words, reading the signs of the times with no other provision than the commandment of love. (66)

As the search has been handed over to us and as it will always be contingent on future contexts, faith is no longer about foundational truth and power, but rather situational love and charity, or contextual responsibility to other human beings. In this light, there is no longer a hierarchal relationship between us and God; there is no longer a need to worship. And we can also see “all the great unmaskers of the West, from Copernicus and Newton to Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud, as carrying out works of love” (Future 38). They were, as Vattimo puts it, “reading the signs of the times” with the goal of increasing the possibility for human happiness. From this perspective (or to use Kenneth Burke’s phrase, from this particular terministic screen), people like Freud and Nietzsche may be understood as leading religious figures.

An overwhelming majority in the U. S., however, do not take this approach to religious faith. Stephen Carter defines religion as “a tradition of group worship” (17), a definition most would likely agree with. If they care at all, atheists more often than not respect a person’s private right to worship with others (in some respects, we are even a

bit envious). It's only when worship gets moved to the public forum where we get a bit unsettled because this term implies to us a subservient, uncritical service to something behind us, above us, and beyond us. Public policies drawn from this practice may or may not coincide with our other democratic values, and that is why it is imperative that they consistently "run the gauntlet" of all our other truths. Again, it's the consequences of any belief that receives (that must receive) our criticism, not a person's private choice to believe. To take an example, next to Nietzsche and Freud, Karl Marx stands as perhaps one of our most famous (or infamous, depending upon one's lens) contemporary atheists. His views on religion, however, have been widely misunderstood in just this way. "The classical Marxist critique of religion," as Cornel West notes, "is not an a priori philosophical rejection of religion; rather, it is a social analysis of and historical judgment upon religious practices" (Philosophy 373). In fact, "contrary to such wide-spread crypto-Marxist myths about religion, Marx and Engels understood religion as a profound human response to, and protest against, intolerable conditions" (373). For both Marx and Engels, religious faith had the possibility of being intimately bound up with Vattimo's following description of human history:

The historicity of my existence is provenance, and emancipation—salvation or redemption—consists in recognizing that Being is event, a recognition that enables me to enter actively into history, instead of passively contemplating its necessary laws...this is the meaning of the statement 'I no longer call you servants but friends.' (Belief 78)

It's only when worship and religious faith negate such an active assertion of Being and our ability to improve the conditions for our collective Being that Marx, and lesser-known atheists, tend to voice an objection.

But where does that leave us? As Vattimo admits, when "I reflect on all this, I no longer know what I am saying when I recite the Lord's prayer. But it seems to me that this disorientation also belongs to my experience of faith as well" (78). There is evidence to suggest that more and more people are recognizing a similar disorientation in the United States. As Nicholas Kristof writes in a New York Times article, "The number of avowed atheists is tiny, with only 1 to 2 percent of Americans describing themselves in polls as atheists. But about 15 percent now say they are not affiliated with any religion, and this vague category is sometimes described as the fastest-growing 'religious group' in America today" (A29). There's an in-between space, so to speak, that more and more people are finding themselves confronted with, and there's certainly a need for a more effective and useful dialogue about religious belief in our country. I turned to C.S. Peirce who wanted a great Catholic church but argued that the church is what the church does—it can preach a Gospel of Greed or a Gospel of Love. I turned to William James who argued we have every right to believe in religion and that "in the end it is our faith and not our logic that decides [many of our] questions" (Pragmatism 130); our faith, however, must run the gauntlet of all our other truths. And I turned to John Dewey, who saw religious belief as having the possibility of being everything for us if it could only extricate itself from the supernatural. These pragmatists—together with folks like Emerson, Rorty, West, and Vattimo—offer atheists, theists, agnostics, anticlerics, and

those who fall somewhere in-between a common method that can help us move forward by looking not to the source of a belief, but to its consequences.

In a speech commemorating civil war hero Robert Shaw, William James said, “Democracy is still upon trial. The civic genius of our people is its only bulwark, and neither laws nor monuments, neither battleships nor public libraries, nor great newspapers nor booming stocks; neither mechanical invention nor political adroitness, nor churches nor universities...can save us from degeneration if the inner mystery is lost” (Trilling 963). Whatever we call it, this inner mystery guides most of us, and we are hard-pressed not to see it as an indelible part of developing public policy for the common good. It’s when this mystery is offered as somehow extricable and fixed that we must be sure to judge it by the same standards as the rest of our public-spirited proposals. The pragmatists can help us do just that as we begin to grapple with religious belief in the composition class.

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