

From the Editor

We have not published something on creative teaching in quite some time. I would like to revive our tradition by encouraging a conversation on the topic of the undergraduate introductory course in theology or religion.

If conversations with colleagues around the country are any indication, the introductory course—its expectations, its content, its audience—remains a vexing issue. And alongside that wide-spread dissatisfaction, recent personal experience is another catalyst for this suggestion. For the first time in a decade, I taught a portion of my department’s first-year intro course and survived to tell the tale.

Two colleagues and I combined our areas of expertise (Christian ethics, spirituality, and fundamental theology) to team-teach in a unique and experimental round-robin fashion. Each of us was officially responsible for two sections of twenty-five students each, scheduled for consecutive time slots that met twice a week and at the same time as the sections of the other two colleagues. After combining our sections in one big class the first week (seventy-five students in each time slot), we taught our two assigned sections for the first four weeks, then rotated to two of the other sections for four weeks, and then rotated once again for four weeks, combining again in the final week. We built the course around the topic of Christian discipleship in a postmodern/contemporary context, beginning with a discussion of Mark 10:35–52 (James and John; Bartimaeus), and concluding with a discussion of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*. In between, students discussed revelation, faith, and arguments for God (with me), theodicy and the stereotype of a “superman God” (with my spirituality colleague), and the effect of contemporary technology on human identity and destiny (with my Christian ethics colleague).

Our experience was encouraging, and the course received mainly positive responses from students. The workload for the professors, though, was brutal: each of us was ultimately responsible for 150 students, and grading the numerous writing assignments was a crushing chore. And before even one class was held, we had to face the intractable problem of providing readings for students with very mixed backgrounds of “religious literacy,” ranging from familiarity with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in high school to absolutely no religious background or no religious interest. We eschewed textbooks for various reasons (in my opinion, even when teaching the

course from a Catholic perspective in a Catholic institution such as mine, exclusively Catholic-oriented textbooks don't work in a classroom where only about half the students self-identify as Roman Catholics). Instead, we worked with a combination of books and individual readings. We all used biblical selections (e.g., Exodus 3, Job, Luke 15). I added excerpts from Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and Walter Kasper, as well as Richard Kearney on the postmodern imagination. My spirituality colleague used excerpts from *The Brothers Karamazov*, John Hick, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Dorothee Soelle, while my Christian ethics colleague had students read essays on transhumanism as well as a chapter from William Spohn's *Go and Do Likewise*. The readings provoked lively and substantive discussions. We aimed high, and we believe that to a large extent we succeeded in offering a course on Christian theology that exposed students to the deep and rich theological tradition while engaging them in the process of faith seeking understanding in the midst of what the theologian David Ford has called the "multiple overwhelmings" of contemporary life. But there is room, of course, for fine-tuning and for rethinking certain aspects; we know that this format with this diverse content is a work in progress.

I am sure that there are others who are rethinking, experimenting, tweaking, and otherwise reconceiving the introductory course in theology or religion. We want to hear about it; a nuts-and-bolts discussion of the topic would be quite informative. We would like you to share your experience and analysis of the pedagogy, content, audience, overarching narrative, or goal of the introductory course as your or your department have conceived it. We are interested in essays of between 3,000 and 5,000 words (see the "Instructions for Contributors" at our website, <http://journals.cambridge.org/hor/ifc>). The ones judged to be the most interesting and useful will be published in our "Creative Teaching" section.