Today’s teachers of writing—whether they acknowledge it or not—constitute part of the 2,500-year-old rhetorical tradition that, during most of its long history, prepared young people to participate in civic life. As Robert Connors has shown, this tradition metamorphosed during the nineteenth century into the composition course, where one of its remnants is the argumentative essay, usually about some controversial aspect of public life (see Connors 1997, 1–12, 210–40). Often students choose or are assigned to write about controversial political issues such as abortion, capital punishment, gun control, gay marriage, or preemptive war. Because such issues are contested in our society, it makes sense that students learn how to represent their opinions effectively in these debates. Yet I have often heard writing teachers express dismay—I have done so myself—when students’ papers for or against a particular position on an issue are grounded mainly in their religious beliefs and are more in the genre of sermonizing or witnessing than of political argument. “Don’t these kids know,” we lament, “that you just can’t do that? You’re not going to persuade any audience that doesn’t already share your beliefs.” At the same time, we feel a twinge of guilt because it seems wrong to tell students they can’t use as reasons for their position the very beliefs to which they feel most deeply committed.

With our own commitment to academic freedom, we recognize that students should be able to voice the religious reasons for their positions. We feel conflicted because we want to be tolerant, yet we recognize that, as arguments, some students’ papers will miss their audiences. For their part, students may feel that we are demeaning their faith when we attempt to show them why and where their arguments are ineffective. They may think they have to choose
between saying what they believe and getting a good grade (see Rebecea Nowacek’s essay, Chapter 13). I have known students to resolve this dilemma by supporting their positions either with reasons that they don’t really believe in or with reasons offered by others that they don’t fully understand—a good first step, perhaps, but not a satisfactory final one. Some students change topics to something easier and safer. A few teachers I know have simply stopped assigning papers about controversial public issues because they don’t want to confront the dilemmas such assignments raise.

But are any of these good solutions to the problem? I think not. My reasons for this answer are partly personal, so I spell those out first. Next, I explain why I believe writing teachers must come to grips with students’ desire—indeed, their right—to express their religious views in the writing classroom. Finally, I explore some possible answers to these two questions: How can we teach students with strong religious convictions to write about controversial public issues so that they can learn and practice the rhetorical arts that will prepare them for citizenship in a pluralist society? And how can we do this without making them feel they must deny or trivialize their religious beliefs?

The Personal Is Political

First, I want to provide some personal context since it certainly influences what I have to say here. I belong to a distinct minority in the state of Utah, being a Democrat who is also an active, devout member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (often called the Mormon Church, hereafter referred to as the LDS Church). Well over seventy percent of Utahns are members of the LDS Church, and, though I don’t know the percentage, more than half are Republicans. Currently, no Democrats hold statewide office, and the numbers of Democrats in both houses of the state legislature are too small to block any legislation the majority determines to pass. Many races for statewide offices and seats in the legislature are uncontested because no Democrat is available or willing to run, and Republicans usually win the contested elections by lopsided margins. Of Utah’s five members in the U.S. Congress, only one is a Democrat, and the 2001 state legislature gerrymandered his district in an obvious—and barely unsuccessful—attempt to unseat him (Harrie 2002, A1).

Because the Republican Party dominates a state that is also dominated by the LDS Church, many people inside and outside Utah assume that membership in the church goes hand-in-glove with membership in the party. Although the LDS Church’s leadership has gone to some pains to disavow connections to any political party—a high-ranking member of one of its presiding councils gave a lengthy front-page interview to the Salt Lake Tribune explaining why a two-party system is desirable and why Mormons can be Democrats—the belief that “good” Mormons are Republicans remains popular (see Fraughton...
1998). It is not uncommon for Republican state legislators to justify their positions on political issues with veiled or open references to LDS doctrines; for example, legislators opposing bills to make child car seats and seat belts mandatory complained that such laws would violate people’s God-given agency to choose between right and wrong. Every day, letters to the editor of the two statewide newspapers are filled with arguments connecting political views to religious teachings. Occasionally in church meetings I am subjected to teachers whose political leanings—usually Republican—color their interpretations of the scriptures.

Readers from other regions where one religion and one party predominate probably recognize the situation I describe. Frankly, I am not surprised by the extent to which politics and religion intermingle in my state or elsewhere. It would surprise me if they did not: Those who are inclined to be deeply religious and also interested in politics no doubt view religion and government as the two things that have the power to affect their daily lives the most. It would be surprising if those who are religious did not seek to bend political decisions in a direction congruent with their beliefs. And it is understandable when the reverse happens and people attempt to shape religious organizations to mirror their political desires. I admit that I want public policy to mirror my deeply felt religious convictions. Like many who are religiously minded, I can interpret scripture to support my stances on political issues, so I tend to feel that my political positions are not only right but righteous.

Yet it’s radiantly clear that members of my church who don’t share my political views feel just as strongly that their positions are divinely inspired. This sometimes presents a problem for me in my professional life, particularly whenever my courses veer toward political issues. I teach at Brigham Young University, which is owned and operated by the LDS Church. Some 32,000 students from all fifty states and more than 130 foreign nations are enrolled there. Approximately ninety-eight percent of them are members of the LDS Church; and, although diversity seems to be increasing, the majority are politically conservative. No doubt they have come by their politics just as I did, by growing up in a family where their parents discussed their political views as they taught their children religious precepts, making it seem as if the two were one and the same. Some of my students are aghast when they discern my political leanings. I seem so orthodox in the faith, it’s hard for them to imagine how I could be—gasp!—so liberal, a word most have heard used mainly as a term of derision. Despite knowing that I share their religious beliefs, students can find it unsettling if I question something they have written about political issues, prompting them to state the point better, support it more fully, or earn rather than assume the reader’s agreement. Sometimes students seem to think I have questioned their understanding of God’s truth. And when I attempt to explain my own positions, I find that I have to choose my words carefully so as not to offend my students, who think their political positions are right in almost the same way they think their religious beliefs are right.
Many of us have sensed this kind of student reaction or have faced interesting politico-religious challenges. Whether the teacher, the student, neither, or both are religious, and whether they are at a private or a public institution, instances of misunderstandings and conflicts are bound to arise with regard to the expression of religious and political views—particularly when religion and politics intersect. We must deal openly and effectively with those occasions to further both our students’ learning and the future of our democratic polity.

Why We Should Tolerate Religious Expression in the Writing Classroom

I offer four reasons why teachers should permit students to talk and write about their religious beliefs, particularly in connection with the political stances they take on issues that confront society. First, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allows freedom of expression, and that freedom does not end when students enter the classroom. The classroom is an extension of the public square, particularly at public institutions of higher education. And while private institutions may limit the amount and nature of expression (e.g., my university prohibits disparagement of the sponsoring church), in general on private campuses, freedom of religious and political expression is also safeguarded by the Constitution. Although some interpret the establishment clause of the First Amendment to mean that religion has no role to play in the political realm and that public discourse ought not to be inflected by the idiom of religion, the courts have consistently ruled that individuals may express their religious views freely. The clause means only that government is barred from favoring the religious views and practices of some citizens over those of others. The famous “wall of separation” between church and state does not mean that religion must be banned from the public square; it means only that government cannot establish preferences among religions. Furthermore, it means that government cannot prefer non-religion to religion. As Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas wrote in a 1952 opinion, no clause in the Constitution requires that “government show a callous indifference to religious groups. That would be preferring those who believe in no religion over those who do believe” (quoted in Eastland 1993, 107–108).

The second reason we should allow freedom of religious expression in the discussion of political issues is that we have inherited from the founders of our nation a language that is no longer adequate for conducting our political affairs. This language, often called the discourse of philosophical liberalism, is inadequate because it does not allow for the expression of particular religious beliefs, which are, for many people, the basis for some important political decisions. Philosophical liberalism is the product of eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals propounded by John Locke and others, who taught the separation of private and public, of subjective and objective knowledge. According to these ideals, objective knowledge is that which is universally available through the
application of rational methods of discovering truth (see Elshtain 2001, 50–53). These methods are basically scientific and mathematical; they are favored because, in theory, they produce knowledge that is objective, or knowledge that can be quantified and reproduced. Quantification is desirable because it seems solid and factual, and the rhetoric used to present numbers is thought to be transparent, objective, and rational. Reproducibility is desirable because, if knowledge is reproducible, it can stake a greater claim to universality. Objective knowledge became favored as the basis for political action in the eighteenth century for, as Kant said, a law can be a law only if the people can understand it and would impose it on themselves (1986, 266–67). People across generations and across time must be able to understand why it is a law. Succeeding generations would not understand laws, in Kant’s view, unless they were built on universal reason. Philosophical liberalism has been mostly successful as a basis for governing a diverse nation like the United States because it appears to promise that disagreements can be solved with recourse to the proper rational methods, thus regulating public affairs in a way that is neutral and fair.

But philosophical liberalism, because it separates public and private knowledge, also effectively separates public and private spheres. Religious knowledge is consigned to the realm of the private because it is not obtained through the application of rational methods, but rather through divine revelation, from sacred texts and sanctioned authorities. Moreover, religious knowledge is apparently not universal, or else all would have the same religious beliefs. The presumed advantage of consigning religion to the private realm is that deliberation about a political course of action can then proceed without the interruptions, impasses, and violence that sometimes occur when different religious beliefs come into conflict. Given the increasing pluralism of our society, some argue, political debate is not well served by the introduction of religious ideals and language into its give and take.

In response to these arguments, however, others claim that our political discourse would be enhanced if it included more references to religious teachings. For example, Robert Bellah and his coauthors of The Good Society state that “philosophical liberals . . . have tended to define politics as narrowly concerned with procedural justice, with, as they put it, matters of the right rather than of the good. In [their] reading, religious groups, with their strong visions of the good, tend to disrupt democratic politics by bringing into public life matters that should remain essentially private” (1991, 180). However, Bellah and associates worry that in its aim to use only an unbiased, secular political vocabulary, philosophical liberalism risks promoting an incomplete and impoverished public discourse by excluding the rich ethical vision that religion can bring to public deliberations. They have no fear that what they call the “public church” might steamroll nonbelievers into a theocratic system because “few if any issues in the history of the United States have pitted the churches against the secularists; usually we find different denominations on different sides, disagreement within denominations, and religious and secular
people joined on one side or the other” (181). Because the alignment of various groups and the consensus on various issues is “ever fragile and changing,” there is no reason to exclude religions from public debate. In fact, “The importance of the discussion, and of the religious contribution to it . . . cannot be overestimated. The public church has almost never spoken with a single voice; that does not diminish its significance in our common life” (181).

Likewise, Jean Elshtain argues that taking philosophical liberalism to its logical conclusion would mean the triumph of liberal monism. Liberal monism is the belief that the institutions of a democracy act in accordance with “a single authority principle” as well as “a single standard of what counts as reason and deliberation” and “a single vocabulary of political discussion.” As a result, liberal monism defines reason “in such a way that faith is discounted as irrationalism” (Elshtain 2001, 54). Liberal monism underlies the doctrine of “strong separationism,” which interprets the First Amendment to mean that church-state separation requires a “thoroughly secularized society stripped of any and all public markers and reminders of religion” because religion is entirely private and therefore must be invisible in public life (53). To press for strong separation, thus enthroning liberal monism as the ruling ideology, would be to undermine the vitality of the American polity, claims Elshtain, for American social pluralism is constituted “by the history and presence of diverse faith communities” (54). In our system, “religion and politics have always mutually constituted one another in ways direct and indirect” (40). It would be painfully ironic if a nation that emerged in part as a reaction to religious intolerance were itself to become intolerant of religion.

Similarly, Stephen Carter argues that the religiously devout should not have to disguise their moral convictions and translate them into a language that philosophical liberalism accepts. Carter dismantles the distinction between facts and values that philosophical liberalism uses to describe religious knowledge as simply a set of values that believers hold. Believers know what they do because their epistemology is not limited to methods accepted by eighteenth-century rationalists. Therefore, says Carter,

What is needed is not a requirement that the religiously devout choose a form of dialogue that liberalism accepts, but that liberalism develop a politics that accepts whatever form of dialogue a member of the public offers. Epistemic diversity, like diversity of other kinds, should be cherished, not ignored, and certainly not abolished. What is needed, then, is a willingness to listen, not because the speaker has the right voice but because the speaker has the right to speak. Moreover, the willingness to listen must hold out the possibility that the speaker is saying something worth listening to; to do less is to trivialize the forces that shape the moral convictions of tens of millions of Americans. (1993, 230–31, emphasis his)

This trivialization of religion has also been noted by Stanley Fish, who calls on academics to actually listen to religious voices and take them seriously.
Fish notes that while religious views are usually tolerated on campuses as *expressions*, the content of those expressions is often vilified. But this vilification makes religious views “just like other views” because the only thing valued about them is that they have been freely produced (no one forced you to utter them) and that they are freely broadcast (no one has censored them). What is not valued about them is the content of what they urge. As instances of a favored category—expression—religious utterances are cherished; as something you are asked to take seriously, they are feared and condemned. (1999, B4)

In this way, Fish says, “liberalism, in the form of academic freedom, gets to display its generosity while at the same time cutting the heart out of the views to which that generosity is extended” (B5). If academic freedom allows religion to be a part of university life only “so long as it renounces its claim to have a privileged purchase on the truth”—which is, of course, the very thing that makes a religion a religion and not just an opinion—then it is asking those who are religious to “inhabit their moral convictions loosely and be ready to withdraw from them whenever pursuing them would impinge on the activities and choices of others” (B5). Fish claims that our society is morally “thinner” when individuals’ moral stances are turned simply into individual preferences and their moral assertions become mere opinions. The salient point is this: If we allow free expression in the public square and on the college campus, we have to take seriously not just people’s *right* to assert their beliefs. We must also take seriously their *beliefs*.

The third reason writing teachers should allow religious expression in the classroom derives directly from the second: When religious voices are not only tolerated in the public square but listened to, good things may happen. Stephen Carter points out that some of the most important accomplishments in the history of the American polity—the abolition of slavery, the enacting of fair labor laws, and the civil rights legislation of the 1960s—came about largely because religious people worked tirelessly to advocate and realize their vision of a more just society, a vision inspired by their beliefs (2000, 4). The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. made no apologies for his use of Bible-based rhetoric to earn the right for African Americans to eat at lunch counters, use restrooms, sit in the front of the bus, attend any public school, and vote. According to Carter, “King and other religious leaders showed no reluctance to claim for their positions an ‘exclusive alignment with the Almighty.’” Likewise, Carter notes, much of the antiwar effort during the Vietnam conflict was inspired and led by members of the clergy, who “freely invoked God’s name” (1993, 48–49). In its day, each of these efforts was opposed, even by other religious voices, but the majority prevailed, in part because of the ability of religious discourse “to fire the human imagination, and often the conscience, even of nonbelievers” (232).

No doubt my readers agree that the abolition of slavery, fair labor laws, the extension of civil rights, and the end of the Vietnam conflict are praiseworthy
milestones in the nation’s history, so it is worth pointing out that these were movements of which the political left would approve. And it is also worth noting, as Carter has shown, that the use of religious rhetoric in behalf of those movements was not criticized to the same extent that religious rhetoric is criticized today, when most of it comes from the political right. The fact that religious rhetoric is now more identified with the right should not be a reason to condemn the invocation of religious beliefs in political causes. If one disagrees with a platform, conservative or otherwise, one should condemn the platform, not attempt to stop its supporters from using religious reasons to support it. Whatever cause the religious raise their voices to support, they are “only doing what communities of faith around the world have always done: advocating and working for the world they believe God prefers” (Carter 2000, 69). Without their voices insisting that laws and policies be informed by what the people believe is ethical, moral, and right, democracy would be the poorer. Again in Carter’s words,

> A democracy that lacks the moral force of religious understanding is likely to be a democracy without purpose, in which politicians promise to allow citizens simply to satisfy their own wants, whether for money, power, or sex, with little regard for the needs of others; in which the measure of success in war is how small a sacrifice the nation’s citizens are called upon to make, as the enemy’s dead, including civilians, pile up unmourned, at least by Americans—they are, after all, merely the enemy; in which the worst off are allowed to languish and often die in their segregated urban prisons, while the elite live in safe high-rises and safer suburbs. (2000, 31)

None of the foregoing is intended to mean, of course, that only religious persons can or should seek to influence the course of politics in ways that reflect their moral convictions. I acknowledge that secularists also have a sense of right and wrong and their own codes of morality and ethics; therefore, they too should speak up. But if unbelievers can freely do so, believers can too.

The fourth and final reason we should allow religious expression in the classroom is that it seems to be increasing in the public square, not only in volume but in diversity. That suggests a rhetorical situation is developing that we need to help students address, if we see part of our aim as preparing them for citizenship in a diverse society. Political discourse in this nation since the days of George Washington has always included what Alexis de Tocqueville called our “civil religion.” Civil religion has been defined by Frederick Gedicks as “faintly Protestant platitudes which reaffirm the religious base of American culture despite being largely void of theological significance” (1991, 113). This civil religion is the reason that “In God we trust” is printed on our money and the reason our presidents intone “May God bless America” at the end of speeches. The widespread acceptance of civil religion fifty years ago is probably why “one nation under God” seemed an innocuous addition to the Pledge of Allegiance. Each of these expressions has come under fire in recent times
from those who believe such phrases promote government’s establishment of
religion, but I doubt they will disappear. If anything, I believe we are likely to
see more evidence of what Lee Albert calls “God talk”—“public expressions
of piety” and “bland assertions of faith in a generic deity that most believers
(and some non-believers) can embrace” (2000, F1). Many observers have
pointed to the 2000 presidential election as an interesting example of this, par-
ticularly vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman’s frequent references
to his faith, perhaps as a way of indicating that the political right had no exclu-
sive claim on spirituality.

But even beyond the “God talk,” I think we are likely to see more serious,
specific, and denominationally related religious discourse in politics. Michael
Novak not only foresees but celebrates this possibility.

We should be glad that the old pluralism of give-no-offense, lowest-common-
denominator mumble is giving way to a new and more mature pluralism:
frank public discussion of the diverse convictions that move us. In the next
century, religion is likely no longer to be “believed in without discussion” [de
Tocqueville’s phrase]. Arguments in public will be many and hot. We are
becoming confident enough of each other’s bona fides to say who we are,
each of us; to listen respectfully to those who differ; and to argue with one
another civilly. (1998, 37)

If Novak is right, then I believe it is incumbent on us as teachers to explore
how religious and political discourses intersect. The changing landscape of
American politics and the diversity of our society will require rhetorical sen-
sitivity and dexterity if we are to engage religiously motivated arguments
while promoting understanding and sufficient national unity to prevent preju-
dice, divisiveness, rebellion, or opting out of the political process altogether.
We and our students need to know more about the origins, nature, and pur-
poses of religious political discourse; how to create such discourse if it seems
necessary or desirable to do so; and how to receive and evaluate it.

Teaching Students to Give and Take Religious
Arguments Responsibly

In a previous essay about politics in the writing classroom, I have stated that I
don’t believe teachers should try to change students’ politics. I won’t here
depart from that stance (Hansen 2002). But I do claim that politics—including
the religious convictions that might inform a person’s politics—can legiti-
mately be the focus of a composition course. In such a course, the teacher
should make every reasonable effort to work with students of any political and
religious or nonreligious persuasion to help them develop their rhetorical pow-
ers, even when the teacher personally dislikes some or all of the beliefs those
students espouse. What I am suggesting here is that, rather than set religion
aside as irrelevant or inadmissible in the teaching of rhetorical arts, we confront
the fact that religion matters to many students. It follows that we need to help students find the language that will allow them to bring religious values into public discourse without crippling the dialogue that a democracy depends upon.

To that end, I sketch below some pedagogical activities for a course centered on politics and religion for sophomores or advanced first-year students. This outline is suggestive, not exhaustive. The final form of any course based on this pedagogy would be determined in the teaching, and it would change each time it was taught because it would evolve out of the exchanges between student and teacher, student and student. The premise for the course would be that the United States is not a melting pot in which citizens are homogenized, but a salad or a stew in which the components retain their identity. A familiar way of describing the nation is as a set of contact zones, defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power” (1991, 34). Contact zones form wherever diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups meet, but also where different religions meet. Because religion intersects all ethnicities and social strata, it simply makes contact zones more complex. Writing classes at public institutions and some private ones are likely to be, in many ways, a microcosm of national contact zones, so this concept can be fairly well exemplified within the classroom walls. By introducing volatile political topics into a class of students whose cultural, ethnic, class, and religious identities differ, the clashing and grappling Pratt identifies would no doubt appear, as they do in the group interview Nowacek describes in this volume (see Chapter 13).

In fact, Pratt describes her roller-coaster experience when she first taught the Cultures, Ideas, Values course at Stanford, after the traditional Western Civilization course was changed to include more non-Western and minority texts and experiences:

This course attracted a very diverse student body. . . . The classroom functioned not like a homogeneous community or a horizontal alliance, but like a contact zone. Every single text we read stood in specific historical relationships to students in the class, but the range and variety of . . . relationships in play were enormous. Everybody had a stake in nearly everything we read, but the range and kind of stakes varied widely. . . .

All the students in the class had the experience of . . . hearing their culture discussed and objectified in ways that horrified them. . . . All the students experienced face-to-face the ignorance and incomprehension, and occasionally the hostility, of others. . . . Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain, there were exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom—the joys of the contact zone. (39)

Pratt’s course sounds like what sometimes happens in the public square when people set forth their religious or their secular reasons for their political positions—except for the part about “exhilarating moments of wonder and
revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom.” I wonder how often those moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom occur. Are there more frequently moments of tuning out, indifference, anger, and polarization? In the course I propose, the goal would be to get past the ignorance, the incomprehension, the objectification, the hostility, and the pain to the mutual understanding and the wisdom. The reading and the talking in this course would be calculated to bring about the clashing of the contact zones; the further discussion and the writing would be aimed at the understanding and the wisdom.

To that end, I would employ some of what Pratt calls the pedagogical arts of the contact zone to encourage students to become skilled in what she calls the literate arts of the contact zone. The first pedagogical art is exercises in storytelling. Students would produce an autoethnography, wherein writers “describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (Pratt 1991, 35). So, for example, Catholic or LDS or Jewish or Muslim students might look in encyclopedias or history and anthropology texts to see how they have been represented to readers who are not of their faith, and they would then describe themselves “in response to or in dialogue with those texts” (35). I would have students share their autoethnographies orally, in order to enact the “redemption of the oral,” another pedagogical art of the contact zone (40). And I would have them comment orally on each other’s stories in as detached and objective a fashion as possible, accepting each other’s representations for what they are, not praising or blaming. In this way, students would examine their own identities from new angles and get to know every other member of the class more than superficially. The goal would be that this familiarity should breed not contempt but understanding and respect.

A second pedagogical art consists of exercises in “identifying with the ideas, interests, histories, and attitudes of others” (Pratt 1991, 40). In these exercises students would role-play and impersonate. They might role-play one of their classmates, not in parodic fashion, but seriously, attempting to use the ideas and words of that person. They might impersonate a historical figure or a type. For example, I might ask my LDS students to identify with the ideas, interests, and attitudes of the non-LDS minority in Utah by impersonating a member of that group and writing a letter to the editor about some facet of LDS culture or religion that would be strange or unsettling to the minority member. As another example, students might research the way Jews, Catholics, Muslims, or Buddhists have been treated as they have immigrated into this country and then write a narrative of a day in the life of a fictional person in a minority group. In my experience, taking seriously the requirement to step into the shoes of a person you don’t understand creates empathy for that person.

Another pedagogical art Pratt calls “experiments in transculturation and collaborative work and in the arts of critique, parody, and comparison” (40). Transculturation is defined as “processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or
metropolitan culture” (36). In such an exercise, students might identify an aspect of their own beliefs that they consider to be marginalized by some strand of dominant culture and then criticize that domination either straightforwardly or in a parody, using the language of the dominant culture. The critique might take the form of a dialogue between the dominant and the subordinate viewpoints, or it might set them side by side. Asking two students whose backgrounds are rather different to collaborate on such exercises might deepen their understanding for each other while both find a mutually satisfying way to contend against the dominator. Another form of collaboration might be for a student who understands the dominant culture to mediate it to the one who feels marginalized. For example, a student who is new to the ethos of rugged individualism in the West might need to have an insider mediate an understanding of why gun ownership is considered almost a sacred right by so many rural Westerners. Another form of mediation might be translating a dominant belief from the peculiar language of an in-group to the vernacular, so that an outsider student would understand it.

Still another pedagogical art Pratt mentions is “ways to move into and out of rhetorics of authenticity” (40, her emphasis). Since Pratt offers no further explanation, let me describe how I interpret “authenticity.” It obviously implies that some rhetoric is inauthentic, and perhaps one kind of inauthentic rhetoric is the “God talk” that Lee Albert speaks of in political campaigns, which often “constitutes pandering, hawking of faith and marketing of God in a manner that insults, demeans and trivializes both religion and political discourse.” In addition, Albert deplores “religious jingoism, the portrayal of America as the special object of God’s blessing and the special recipient of God’s mission” (2000, F1). There seem to be plenty of instances of pandering and jingoism during political campaigns, a fruitful time to ask students to identify authentic and inauthentic uses of religion in speeches. This would be a tricky assignment because two students might bring in the same example, one declaring it pandering and the other declaring it sincere. But the very difference in reception could lead to valuable discussions of the rhetorical concepts of ethos, situation, and audience. The one who identifies it as pandering might be asked to indicate under what circumstances, if any, such discourse might be authentic. The one who identifies it as sincere could likewise identify the circumstances and audience for which the discourse would be inauthentic.

All of these pedagogical exercises are potentially explosive. It would take a skilled teacher to keep the students on track, and it would take commitment from the students to continue to engage in the dialogue even when they have been misunderstood or hurt. The final outcome of some dialogues might be that students agree to disagree. Students would find themselves sometimes in the majority, sometimes in the minority. But at least they would feel they had been heard. I hope that the outcome of such a course would be the forging of what Pratt calls “ground rules for communication across lines of difference and
hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect” (1991, 40). Such rules are not now clearly defined. As Albert puts it, the Constitution does not interdict or qualify religious expression in the public square, but it also gives no principles or rules to follow in such expression. Where principles are lacking, we have to rely “on the dictates of prudence and civility” (2000, F1). I think that prudence will come from the classroom experiences I am proposing here, and I believe that greater civility of tongue and pen will be the natural outgrowth of the talking and writing required. My fondest hope is that both prudence and civility will migrate from the classroom to the public square. In this way, we might reclaim for the composition classroom the rhetorical tradition’s serious purpose of preparing the young to participate effectively in civic life. What is more, we might contribute to renewing the vitality of the dialogic processes that sustain democracy.

Notes

1. See Carter’s God’s Name in Vain (2000), especially Chapter 5, “The Single-Sided Wall,” for an enlightening discussion of the history of separation of church and state in the United States. Briefly, the origin of the metaphor of a “wall of separation” is not in Thomas Jefferson’s 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists, but in the seventeenth-century writings of Roger Williams, who conceived of the wall as protecting the garden of the church from the menacing wilderness of the secular state, not the other way around. Williams’ idea was that people would tame the wilderness by using their religious beliefs to shape the political realm. Carter adds, “No serious historian disputes the proposition that the antiestablishment provision in the First Amendment was included solely to prevent the Congress from either establishing a national church or interfering with those states that had established churches” (217, emphasis his). In other words, the separation was not meant to stop people from expressing their religious views in public and using them as motivations for political action.

2. Philosophical liberalism is the name given to the tradition of thought and practice that undergirds Western forms of political democracy and notions of individual freedom. It is not the same as espousing liberal or left-of-center positions on public policy.

3. Geoffrey Sirc’s English Composition as a Happening (2002) seems implicitly to criticize Pratt’s description of the college classroom as a potential contact zone by criticizing at length David Bartholomae’s (1996) article “What Is Composition and (If You Know What That Is) Why Do We Teach It?” in which Bartholomae writes approvingly of the style of Pratt’s travel narratives, holding it up as a model for students to aspire to. By proposing that writing courses aspire to be more like “happenings” on the “Campus of Interzone University” (2002, 40), Sirc imagines a new space (between zones?) in which boundaries and genres dissolve. Sirc asserts that Bartholomae would have students imitate Pratt, urging them “to retrace a became” instead of “tracing a becoming” (61) so that their writing will have the “literary aesthetic of the Contact Zone” (52). The goal of such imitation, Sirc says, is “museumification” of student writing. My goal in the pedagogical sketch I offer, following Pratt’s suggestions, is not to have students write like Pratt, nor yet to have them create beautiful objects worthy of a
museum. In fact, I agree with Sirc that there is a great “need to address deep, basic humanity in this modern, over-sophisticated age” (31). Thus, I believe the possible assignments I propose (and they are by no means prescriptions), would answer Sirc’s call for writing that is “new, interesting, and transformative,” because they are assignments that “experiment with new materials and forms, blur disciplines and boundaries, and subsume the whole with a life-affirming humor.” I believe that the writing I would want students to do in the kind of course I propose “might,” to use Sirc’s words, “in some small way, change the world” (31).

Works Cited


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