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**Stephen Webb. *Taking Religion to School: Christian Theology and Secular Education*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000. Pp. 253. \$19.99 (Paper).**

[1] Stephen Webb's *Taking Religion to School: Christian Theology and Secular Education* functions simultaneously as an example of his approach to the academic study of religion and as an explanation of his pedagogical methodology. As such, the text is one part personal narrative, telling the tale of Webb's encounters with religion, inside and outside of the classroom, and one part corrective analysis, suggesting a new direction for the educational discourse of religion. Webb's use of autobiographical anecdotes regarding his faith, his scholarship, and his teaching experience is not merely for stylistic purposes alone. Instead, it illustrates his conception of and vision for the pedagogy of religious studies. According to Webb's schematic, personal experiences, both of the professors and of the students, should play a major role in the process of learning and teaching religion, a subject that involves both individual and collective non-cognitive, emotional understanding. Accordingly, he develops two interrelated and interdependent concepts that provide the foundation for his approach: the "confessional classroom" and "theo-pedagogy." Neither of these two concepts can exist without the other, nor can Webb's methodology perform properly without the *belief* in these two ideas.

[2] Webb envisions a learning environment where students and teachers alike can share their religious experiences and beliefs in an open, pluralistic, egalitarian forum. He defines such an open arena of multi-vocal dialogue as the "confessional classroom." Within the "confessional classroom" the traditional authoritative dynamic of the teacher/student relationship is dismissed in order to implement an equal plane for uncoerced discussion. Because the study of religion involves questions of self-identity and, conterminously, how one's identity is constructed by and within one's given symbolic universe (i.e. belief system or worldview), personal self-reflection is a necessary and constitutive element of the religious studies' environment. Self-reflection must therefore be included, and encouraged, within the classroom. Webb hopes that a learning environment based on personal narratives will help reinvigorate religious studies by presenting religion as a "live option," as a "phenomenon that has the potential to change lives, just as art historians, I presume, teach art as an aspect of human creativity that can make life more worthwhile, that can entertain, challenge, demand,

and even transform" (134). As such, Webb rightly depicts religion as a powerful, dynamic, creative element of human understanding, rather than as a sterile, stagnant, historical artifact. Webb sees the "confessional classroom" as the most appropriate avenue to bring forth and demonstrate the vitality and power of religious belief.

[3] In order to afford students the opportunity to voice their religious opinions, Webb feels that it is necessary to diminish the authoritative role of the teacher as a religion expert. Yet how can the leveling of authoritative roles in the classroom, where the opinions of professors and students are considered of equal value, resist an all-out regression into soft relativism and indiscriminate subjectivism? Webb believes that the "confessional classroom" can avoid reverting "to blind and arbitrary subjectivism" (230) once confessional statements are recognized as outward declarations rather than inward affirmations. Understood as such, confessions inherently require a receiving audience or community. Webb asserts that "confession must be grounded in a community, reflecting its moral consensus and ultimate truth, if it is not to lead to moral subjectivism" (128). The "moral consensus," for Webb, is the theological tradition, which consequently becomes the cornerstone of his scholastic methodology. Accordingly, he develops his idea of "theo-pedagogy" as a constitutive counterpart to the "confessional classroom."

[4] For Webb, "theo-pedagogy" is essentially "the art of endowing students with a religious imagination" (93). As such, professors are responsible for providing students with the proper tools for understanding religious activity in regard to specific doctrines, myths, rituals, and practices. The appropriate tools would, in Webb's opinion, allow students to envision or, in some cases, feel the immense passion and zeal of religious belief. Allowing students to share their personal experiences and self-reflections is necessary for developing the religious imagination when studying religion, and is, therefore, a fundamental aspect of Webb's pedagogical strategy.

[5] While the basic premise of Webb's "theo-pedagogy" undoubtedly resides in the interest of shared experience and democratic dialogue within the classroom, the prefix "theo" remains particularly christocentric and, therefore, should be replaced with a more appropriate, pluralistic, modifier. Webb's parochial assumption that "pedagogy of religion is essentially theological" (93) is only acceptable if religion is synonymous with theology, which it is not. Webb speaks about otherness and difference but, in the end, by adopting a theological approach to religious studies, disregards the Other(s). In this sense, Webb's approach is noticeably inconsistent. On one hand, he chooses to embrace a postmodern anarchy akin to Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as "the incredulity toward metanarratives," while on the other hand, he eagerly strives to maintain the conventionally drawn boundaries between the religious (i.e. theological) and the secular.

[6] In the same way that a Western christocentric approach to the study of religions beyond theology is harmfully one-sided and narrow, so too is the uncritical valorization of otherness or diversity. Both practices can lead to a proliferation of assumed incommensurable belief systems. Incommensurability hinders open discussion by promoting an extremism that has no place in the liberal education agenda. As such, the first step toward a classroom situation that would promote democratic, uncoerced dialogue (see Jurgen Habermas's work on the "ideal speech situation") is to determine what similarities exist between students and

professors alike, as well as between the divergent worldviews of the world's religions. What all people have in common is not God, as Webb believes, but some form of social ethics. As a revision to Webb's pedagogical methodology, I would omit "theo" and replace it with "ethico." As such, "ethico-pedagogy" can embody the fundamental principles of Webb's approach, such as the allowance of personal narratives in the classroom, but in a more constructive and multicultural manner. The use of "ethico," rather than "theo," is more effective because it refers back to a basic, universal, social enterprise, the recognition of others, rather than the context-dependent recognition of God.

[7] While it is unclear whether the type of personal discourse advocated by Webb is a prerequisite or a consequence of the "confessional classroom," surely the ideal of an open dialogue involving self-reflection and unconstrained discourse is commonplace within in any liberal framework, especially for those within the humanities and social sciences. Religious studies, as a discipline unto itself, has staggered between the humanities and the social sciences. The debate over the proper object, subject, and methodology of religious studies has included a vast array of divergent opinions voiced by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, philosophers, literary critics, and others. Webb's proposal for religious studies is, in the end, unacceptable. As a guide for Christian academics who are either studying or teaching theology, Webb's book could be quite instructive. Yet for the rest of us, non-Christians and/or non-theologians, who are concerned about the direction of religious studies as its own academic discipline, the book fails to advance the conversation.

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