

COMMONALITY AND CHARACTER

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION

As a member of the Faculty of Religion at Loma Linda University in California, I have the opportunity to interact daily with students preparing for a variety of health care careers. A great many non-Seventh-day Adventist students enroll in my classes. In fact, at a recent university-wide convocation, our chancellor, Dr. Richard Hart, reported that the university's 4,000 students come from just over 100 nations and 60 faith traditions!

What do I hope to accomplish with these students? Should I simply transmit the appropriate academic material from the syllabus? Should I try to share my faith? Or somehow blend the two?

The students in my classes are adults, and mature enough to make thoughtful decisions about their beliefs. Many of them have earned multiple educational degrees and acquired a lot of life experience before enrolling in my class, one of several religion courses they can choose from to fulfill the requirements in this area. Most come to



The author chats informally with several of his students at Loma Linda University.

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By Mark F. Carr

Loma Linda University because they know it is a place that takes faith seriously, a place where the teachers encourage students to make faith an explicit part of their academic experience. I do not consider it my job to convince them that my faith is better than theirs, although I do hope that I model a faith that is attractive to them. What I seek to teach these students is that faith is an essential element in the offering of health care to a world that desperately needs it, and that those of us whose decision

to care for others grows out of a faith tradition can do so together. I aim to teach them that the Christian can sit down with the

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Muslim; the Adventist with the Catholic; the Baptist with the Hindu in an effort to make humans whole.

Do I hope that they see something in Adventism that is more attractive than their religion? Yes, yes, yes! But I don't try to attract them through arguing and emphasizing doctrinal differences. I do it through building consensus about what matters in ethics and morality. I also seek to model a character that reflects Jesus and is thus attractive and winsome.

Many of our church's tertiary-level Bible classes enroll a large number of non-Seventh-day Adventists. It is outside the scope of this article to argue whether this should be cause for alarm or celebration (or perhaps both). I am simply describing the demographics of the students who every year make their way (voluntarily or not) to my classroom. As Chancellor Hart spoke of the diversity of faiths present on our campus, he challenged our faculty: "We are more overt than ever about the centrality of Christ on our campus, about His part in transforming lives." Yet he urged us to consider "how we creatively develop balanced professionals in this milieu."

One of the exciting things about my religion courses is that they deal with ethics and morality, which are surely relevant to all faiths. In a classroom with such a rich diversity of faith traditions, however, ethics and morality can push in one of two ways; toward difference and conflict or toward commonalities and agreement. I favor the latter. See the sidebar for an assignment I give my students in public health.

What is the appropriate content of the religion curriculum for graduate-level courses? It is not feasible—and probably unethical—to try to "sort" students in terms of their religious commitments. But I do take religious commitment seriously in my classes; my own and my students'. While I am explicit in my application of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs to the moral issues in health care and health sciences, I also want my students to be true to their convictions. They are not so much interested in the differences between the

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When I first challenge my students to find just one moral issue about which they can all agree, they laugh! About halfway through our 10-week course, I hand out the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights. Our church has issued a formal statement in support of this document. I ask the students to read the document carefully and choose three of the 30 articles that they believe are essential for any human society, regardless of time, place, government, or religion. When we come together again, I break them into groups of four or five and ask them to choose three articles that are acceptable to their group. Then each group reports to the whole class. Generally, we find at least two moral assertions from this Human Rights document on which everyone agrees. The discovery that they were able to agree on even one moral issue is a moment of profound importance to my students. In a world that emphasizes differences and conflict, we are blessed to be able to discover commonalities and agreement.

various faiths as in finding ways to work together. They see the goal of ministering through health care as of primary importance, and they want to know if different faith traditions can collaborate toward that end. Can they work alongside a Muslim in a project to help boost the public's awareness about the risks of smoking? Can they collaborate with a group of Catholics to provide faith-based health care in a brutal business-oriented health care industry? To do these things, they need to find commonality and agreement, not differences and arguments.

In addition to the standard courses on Adventism's fundamental beliefs, our schools now teach a wide range of classes that help students understand a variety of religions. The topics addressed are rich and diverse: Old and New Testament, ministry of Jesus, world religions, religious history, and my personal favorite, ethics and morality! But regardless of the course content, each of us is an Adventist teacher working for a Seventh-day Adventist school, and this reality usually means we conceive of our work as an outreach ministry. No doubt many of us who teach in Adventist institutions do so with a passion for at least two areas: strengthening the faith and expanding the knowledge of committed Adventist students, and introducing students from other religious traditions to Adventism and perhaps even to Christianity. Oftentimes, as I challenge students of various faith traditions to examine their commitments and how those are lived out in practice, I find that they are unclear about what they really believe. (This is true also of my Adventist students.) Thus, as we search for commonalities and agreement, I can present an Adventist perspective that will strongly influence their understanding of both Adventism and their own faith. Certainly not a typical understanding of outreach and witnessing, but one that I have seen to be very powerful in my classes.

So what kind of outreach am I calling for? Let me suggest three models for understanding what we hope to do in a religion classroom whose students represent a rich diversity of faith traditions:



The author discusses ethical issues with one of his classes.

1. Pure Instructional Paradigm (PIP):

In this paradigm, the teacher seeks only to transmit a body of academic information. He or she has little interest in promoting either conversion or commitment to a faith community, or in convincing students to embrace the beliefs embedded in the course content. Almost any course in religion can be offered in a neutral, noncommittal manner. Departments of religious studies at secular universities generally present their courses from this perspective.

2. Evangelistic Apologetic Paradigm (EAP):

This model also emphasizes the need to impart a certain body of knowledge. The teacher, however, has broader goals. His or her primary motivation and final objective are to convince the student to accept Christianity and join the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Even if the course content does not lend itself to teaching distinctive Adventist beliefs, the teacher tries to orient instruction toward church doctrines. At times, this method succumbs to emphasizing only difference and conflict. It is, of course, natural to point out differences between religious traditions as we instruct our students. Occasionally, focusing on differences in a positive way can be helpful for students truly interested in our faith.

3. Evangelistic Modeling Paradigm (EMP):

The Evangelistic Modeling Paradigm shares with the other models the conviction that imparting of knowledge is an essential element of classroom interaction. And like Model 2, the teacher seeks to attract the student to our faith community. But while the goals are the same as in the EAP, the means are quite different. In the evangelistic modeling paradigm, the teacher does not try to tear down the faith or beliefs of the student, and avoids confrontation. If it is necessary to note essential differences, he or she does so in a way that will not create conflict. In fact, the instructor seeks points of agreement with other faith and beliefs.

To illustrate this approach, let me share an event from one of my classes. In the context of discussing about how humility helps prepare one to serve others, I mentioned the Islamic practice of wearing the *hijab* (the head and eye covering worn by some Muslim women). This garment is an important symbol of humility for Islamic women. Two women from the Egyptian Coptic Christian tradition immediately responded. Rather than focusing on the virtue of humility, they criticized the wearing of the *hijab*. Another class member, a Saudi Arabian Islamic woman, immediately took offense, and a conflict ensued. Had we been able to focus on humility, on which both Islam and Christianity place a high value, we might have learned a more important lesson that day. Furthermore, I would have been able to stress the importance of this essential Christian character trait in a world that disparages it!

I believe that the Evangelistic Modeling Paradigm is the most effective method of sharing our faith with adult students, and one that is thoroughly biblical. A few examples will illustrate this fact.

Joseph (Genesis 39):

Joseph found himself living in a culture where his beliefs were alien. As a Hebrew, Joseph embraced a fundamentally different perspective on a core religious issue, namely, whom to worship? Joseph worshipped one god, Yahweh, while Egyptians of that era worshipped a multitude of gods. As a believer in monotheism surrounded by polytheists, Joseph might well have spent a great deal of time in apologetic dialogue and confrontation.

In a similar fashion, many of us today see our faith marginalized by societies that are either overly pluralistic or that accept no diversity at all. Our initial and somewhat visceral response is defensiveness. We adopt a combative stance toward anyone who appears to challenge our faith. Rather than trying to find some measure of accommodation with the broader society, we create enclaves of safety—places where we can control our surroundings and protect ourselves from false beliefs.

How did Joseph live in a heathen culture? He integrated himself fully into it! He accommodated, as best he could, to the society in which he lived and worked. The power of his personal character and its witness to the true God shine through the stories of his life as recorded in Scripture. Joseph steadfastly portrayed the character traits we call integrity, openness, altruism, courage, and compassion. (The modeling of these virtues and the faith of Adventism generally is the primary thrust of the EMP model of teaching.)

In Genesis 40:6, 7, we find Joseph showing compassion. Rather than criticizing people's false hopes and faith, he recognized their vexation and responded with care.

Joseph accepted a position of power in the government (Genesis 41:44), as well as a name change, and married the daughter of a local priest (vs. 45). No doubt family dinners included some fascinating conversation between Joseph and his father-in-law! In order to keep some measure of peace in his family relationships, Joseph surely had to focus on commonalities rather than differences. Likewise, when we find ourselves in such an alien context, our witness needs to take a less explicit, apologetic tone in favor of a more implicit modeling of character.

Moses

In Exodus 18:1ff, we read the story of Moses and the Israelites traveling through the desert after escaping Egypt. In 18:7ff, we get to eavesdrop on a storytelling session between Moses and Jethro. Scripture records that "Jethro rejoiced" at the mighty works of God in delivering this people from Egypt. I say "this people" because they were not Jethro's people, even if Jethro's faith allowed for the worship of Yahweh. Did Moses tell him these stories in an effort to evangelize him? Was Moses employing apologetics or modeling? Or perhaps his approach was purely instructional.

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Jethro was a "priest" in Midian, a Kenite by family and thus distantly related to the Israelites. Did he worship Yahweh, or did Moses bring him to this faith? Moses took Jethro's advice about the judicial system of the Israelites. Would we accept advice like this from an outsider today?

The character trait that I want to highlight in this story is that of openness.

It seems to me that in our efforts to educate those from other faiths (and even at times some from our own faith),

we would do well to try to understand who they are and what they have to teach us. (Such openness does not mean we necessarily accept their views or accommodate our educational efforts to their concerns.)

In our classes, students perceive, almost immediately, whether we are open and affirming of their ideas and convictions. And to some extent, when we seem resistant to what they have to share, this closes the door to witnessing and understanding.

Openness must, of course, be balanced with discernment. When biblical characters lost balance in this regard, they stumbled into grave difficulties. Protecting its distinctive teachings is essential to the survival of a faith community. And focusing on these distinctive elements is important when believers gather together in contexts where others are not present. But even then, if believers focus entirely on teaching the distinctive elements of their faith to order to defend themselves in apologetic dialogue, they quickly bog down when encountering people of conviction from other faiths.

Daniel and His Friends

Few Bible characters are as famous as Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Or should I say, Belteshazzar and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 1:6, 7). It is difficult to know exactly how much they accommodated to the local religions, but it seems clear that their worship of Yahweh was recognized by those around them. Where along the EAP – EMP continuum should we place them?

Surely it must have been difficult for these young men to accept new names. According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, *Abednego* means "servant of the god Nebu." Our names are intensely personal and meaningful, especially when they reflect our faith. But does the Hebrew captives' name change indicate any sort of accommodation to the local religions? I doubt these young men were happy with their new names, but the fact that they apparently responded with grace and honor was a powerful witness to the character of people who worship God.

Given the fact that each of these young men became important members of the government of Babylon, we can as-

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sume that they, at least, did not actively attempt to denigrate the people around them or attack their societal structures, including religion. At the same time, they were more than happy to be used as God’s witnesses. And no one would question their loyalty and courage—the fiery furnace and the lions’ den give dramatic evidence of their steadfast convictions. Unquestionably, they lived lives of integrity and commitment to God.

Most of us live in pluralistic nations where interaction with other people and ideas forms a significant part of our daily lives. This pushes us, I think, in the direction of EMP. It is within the context of pluralism or its philosophical opposite, which allows no diversity at all, that our witness for God takes its most exalted form. It is here that God’s character—in us—makes an immense impact. The world desperately needs examples of decency and virtue. As we model these character traits in educational settings, we can be a huge force for good in the lives of our students and in the societies in which we live.

The Apostle Paul

Let’s next look at the apostle Paul. Some of the stories about Paul’s aggressive methods of evangelism suggest that he embraced the EAP approach.

However, I believe that he contextualized his approach to the situation at hand. Furthermore, Paul’s core motivation for witnessing was his interest in and care for other people.

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Today, we call this altruism.

In Acts 17:16, 17, the author highlights the agitation Paul felt at the prevalence of idols in Athens. Of course it was not unusual for Paul to be agitated, but in this case I see his reaction coming from a spirit of altruism, which helps him recognize that the Athenians had needs that our Lord could meet. However, when not prompted

by God’s Spirit, altruism can mask feelings of arrogance. Confidence in our beliefs may cause us to consider our opinions as normative for everyone, regardless of context. Under the guise of caring about others, we may simply wish to impose our beliefs and values upon them in order to make ourselves feel better. We must be humble and realize that the Lord may not meet the needs of other people in exactly the same ways that He meets ours.

Altruism can also be a mask for egoism. The triumphalism that sometimes pervades Christianity often emerges under the guise of altruism. We subtly embrace the premise that others’ beliefs are both ridiculous and absurd compared to the beauty of the Christian life and faith. Openness calls us to imagine what beauty and value might be present in the life and faith of another set of beliefs.

But what of the altruism we feel toward our students? Altruism demands that we put the interests and needs of others first, and seek to serve them. It is my sense that in Paul’s interaction with the philosophers at Mars Hill in Athens, he was expressing altruism in both word and deed.

In Acts 17, Paul argued with the Jews and others in Athens who professed a variety of traditions, one of which was Stoic philosophy. In his discussion with the philosophers, Paul used their own literature (see the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, volume 6, pages 353, 354).

I am intrigued by Paul’s efforts at Mars Hill. I have enjoyed learning about Stoic philosophy, in part because I have discovered that it is quite different from how it is often portrayed! These Stoics were upright, salt-of-the-earth folks. Though relatively clueless about God, they certainly were not a negative influence on their society.

Was Paul’s use of Stoic philosophy at Mars Hill an accommodation to the philosophers or their religion? Paul’s well-reasoned arguments reveal that he

had read their literature and that certain elements of their thinking were consistent with his beliefs. He focused on commonalities as well as differences.

Were Paul's efforts successful? Not in terms of large numbers of people joining the church. The passage suggests three responses, at least. Some "scoffed" (Acts 17:32, NRSV); others said "We will hear you again about this"; and "some of them joined him and became believers" (vs. 33). Often we assume that Paul's efforts at Mars Hill were unsuccessful, but that is not true. In fact, Ellen White says that because Paul had taken the time to know much about these Athenians, his "discourses riveted the attention of the people, and his unaffected wisdom commanded their respect and admiration" (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 236). She goes on to say: "He was in a position where he might easily have said that which would have irritated his proud listeners and brought himself into difficulty. Had his oration been a direct attack upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates. But with a tact born of divine love, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown" (p. 241).

Conclusion

When we, like Paul, Joseph, Moses, and Daniel, seek to share the truths we hold so dear, using a less confrontational

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and more connected method of witnessing, does this compromise our beliefs or water down our convictions? I do not believe so.

My study and observation have persuaded me that sharing our faith with adult students should not be founded upon an apologetic model. The most biblical and effective method of witnessing is through a personal character that has been transformed by Jesus. Our work in the classroom provides an opportunity for these character traits to shine forth on a daily basis.

The EMP model has a number of advantages and strengths. It does not incite hostility through attacks on the faith, beliefs, and culture of those to whom we seek to witness. As we seek points of agreement, we broaden our knowledge of the faith and belief of other people. The EMP model urges us to commit to a life of faith that models Christ's character. As we move toward this type of evangelism/modeling, we will find others drawn to our community and to a living faith in Jesus Christ. ✍



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Modern view of the city of Athens, where Paul preached on Mars Hill.