Breaking the Silence: Including Jesus in the Academic Conversation

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In an article entitled “How can we teach tolerance?” (Harris, 1999a), film-maker Debra Chasnoff poses an important question: “Why is it that the worst thing you can call someone is gay?” (qtd. in Harris, 1999a, p.4). The article focuses on a film Chasnoff directed and co-produced called It’s Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues In School. The film is intended to encourage K-12 educators and students to learn and to talk about gay and lesbian people, to widen their vision, to help them understand that gay people are “members of families, famous people, teachers, and students.” Chasnoff says, “It’s about the many, many ways to talk about gay people; it’s about civil rights. . . . Most students don’t get any more information about who gay and lesbian people are than negative name-calling” (qtd. in Harris, 1999a, p. 4).

Chasnoff’s suggestion that the worst thing we can call someone is gay is certainly supported by the terrible violence, abuse, and hatred directed against gay people in our society. The murder of Matthew Shepard sickened and saddened us, causing many of us who had not spoken out previously to decry anti-gay violence in all its forms, including name calling. I think that Chasnoff is right; “gay” is perhaps the worst thing we can call someone—outside of the academy.

Within the academy, however (and by “the academy” I mean all of public education), I think there is a more pejorative label. The label appears in an article written by the same author (Harris, 1999b) in the same issue of the same publication in which Chasnoff asks her
Chapter: Tagging Jesus

Academic Contention

How can we teach tolerance?

Debra Chasnoff poses an important question. This second article is written in praise of a teacher who "defended Robert Cormier's I Am the Cheese from censorship attempts by religious fundamentalists" (emphasis added, Harris, 1999b, p. 1). Scholars sometimes use that pejorative label to attack and to stereotype others, especially members of the larger community who attempt to influence curriculum and instruction in the academy.

For example, Broz (2001), a professor of English education, tells of a parent who challenged the inclusion of a short story in her daughter's middle school English curriculum. The story (Newman, 1994) contains a detailed retelling of a young girl's first homosexual encounter. In making her challenge, the mother asked that the story not be included in the curriculum because of the explicitness of the scene in question, not because the story dealt with homosexuality. However, in his analysis of the challenge and of the story, Broz (2001) dismisses the mother's complaint, arguing that what the mother saw as a rather explicit scene is really "muted" (p. 47). It is neither surprising nor troubling that the mother and Broz respond differently to the story or that they disagree as to the appropriateness of a particular scene for middle school readers: the mother and the college professor obviously and naturally have different personal and political agendas. What is disturbing, however, is that Broz accuses the mother of lying about her motives in bringing the challenge, solely on the basis of her membership in what Broz calls a fundamentalist Christian "sect" (p. 47). He writes,

The parent asserted that the homosexual theme of the book was not an issue for her. I didn't believe her then, and I still don't. Her active membership in a local fundamentalist Christian church associated with very conservative positions on social issues, along with the vocal support she received from fellow sect members, belies this contention (p. 47).

Although the academy has developed strictly enforced guidelines to protect other groups who attempt to speak in the academic conversation, Broz is joined by many other academics who use strong language and group-labeling in order to combat and even to silence "fundamentalist Christians."

What is a Fundamentalist Christian?

In the United States, "fundamentalists" usually refers to conservative/evangelical Christians. In popular culture, the word "fundamentalist" is often linked to violent imagery, angry men with guns, extremists taking hostages or planting deadly explosives. These are people who are determined to have their own way at all costs and who seem to feel that God has authorized them to eradicate everyone who might disagree with them on theological, political, and social issues. We are all painfully aware that such individuals and groups exist. It is unfortunate, however, that they are referred to as "fundamentalists."

In the early 20th Century, many conservative Christians adopted the term "fundamentalist" to identify themselves as evangelicals who believed in what they called the "fundamentals" of the Christian faith: the verbal inspiration of the Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, the substitutionary atonement (i.e., the sacrifice of the sinless Jesus on the cross to atone for the sins of the whole world), Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead, and His imminent Second Coming (Nelson, 1987, pp. 20-21). Most Christians who use the term "fundamentalist" today to describe themselves and their movements use it to mean the same thing.

Contrary to the common usage, "fundamentalist" refers not to a narrow, homogeneous and highly volatile group of wild eyed fanatics, but to a relatively diverse group of conservative Christians from many
As Marsden (1980) notes, even in its early days as a movement fundamentalism was a "loose, diverse, and changing federation" of Christian groups who were united in their determination to preserve the purity of Christian doctrine in the face of secular attacks (p. 4). For a number of reasons, including the stigma now attached to the word "fundamentalist," many conservative Christians prefer other descriptive labels: some refer to themselves as evangelicals or conservative evangelicals; some within the evangelical community refer to themselves as charismatics. Still, some retain and proudly wear the fundamentalist label. But all tend to agree on the fundamentals and, according to Marsden (1980), can be described as "fundamentalistic" (p. 195).

As Nelson (1987) notes, today there exists an extensive diversity among evangelicals. Although evangelicals, fundamentalists, and charismatic Christians (formerly called "Pentecostals") differ on social, political, economic, and life-style issues, they are still more alike than different. . . . Whatever their differences may be, evangelicals and fundamentalists totally agree that "receiving Christ as personal Savior," or "being born again," is absolutely essential. Moreover, they take seriously the belief that the Bible is "without error" in its original form (p. 27).

I agree with Nelson that there are deep similarities of belief among the various streams of conservative Christianity. For that reason, throughout the remainder of this essay, I will use the terms "evangelical," "conservative," and "fundamentalist" rather interchangeably. There are differences, but the fundamentals tie the terms and the groups together. Although some scholars describe fundamentalists as "angry" (Marsden, qtd. in Nelson, 1987, p. 27) and refer to them as "militant Evangelicals" (Provenzo, 1990, p. 99) or "co-belligerents" (Marsden, 1980, p. 4), violence, hatred, and anger are not fundamental to conservative evangelical Christians, whatever their preferred label. Like many religious and non-religious groups, however, fundamentalist Christianity does attract a "fringe" of people who would identify themselves with the group, but by which the group as a whole should not be identified.

In educational circles and in popular media, fundamentalism has painted fundamentalists as the "fringe-terrorists who bring to break my own silence." Paulo Freire (1985) refers to "necrophiliac[s]" (p. 131) as a metaphor for all the rest of the "people who have said about fundamentalism in The Politics of Education...that they have been very open to hear...the differences of the religious and non-religious groups are legion—attitude to influence school curricular decisions and library administration. . . . someone the rest of the worldviews in the academ...For all those concerned with scholarship to attacks on...the rest of the..."
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In educational circles, a broad brush of prejudice has painted fundamentalist/evangelical Christians as proponents of racism and sexism and as opponents of progressive educational practice. In this paper, I want to break my own silence and to challenge the stereo- typing.

**On Being an Evangelical Christian in the Academy**

**Negative Name Calling**

I know that I’m on some risky ground here. In my experience, many in professional educational circles have not been very open to hearing or talking about Jesus, faith, or Christianity in relation to subject matter or teaching. But I think it’s important for my readers to get a sense of what it can be like to be an evangelical Christian in the academy and to think about why Christians might feel marginalized or silenced. Consider for a moment what some of the most influential thinkers in the academy have said about fundamentalist Christians. For example, in *Storm in the Mountains*, one of the best books I have ever read about censorship, James Moffett (1988) concludes that religious fundamentalists (not just the fringe-terrorists who blew up school buses in Kanawha County, but all religious fundamentalists) who attempt to influence school curricula and materials have much in common with Nazis. I have never heard a similar charge leveled against any of the other groups—and those groups are legion—attempting to influence curricular decisions and library adoptions. Now consider the words of one of the most revered educators of the last century: in *The Politics of Education*, an extremely important work for all those concerned with social justice and education, Paulo Freire (1985) refers to evangelical Christians as “necrophiliacs” (p. 131)—presumably because they love Someone the rest of the world believes to be dead. Many other widely respected researchers and theorists, including Nel Noddings (1984, 1992, 2002) and Michael Apple (1996, 2001), have devoted portions of their formidable scholarship to attacks on or defenses against Christian worldviews in the academy.

As an evangelical Christian, I am deeply troubled by these attacks for a number of reasons. First, I am troubled that some believers in Jesus have given professional educators reason to mistrust and marginalize them. For example, Marsden (1994) describes the ways in which fundamentalists have attacked academic freedom, beginning in the 1920’s. I have had first-hand experience in responding to Christians who react publicly and vociferously against curricular materials and pedagogical approaches about which they seem to know very little; when I taught junior high and high school English, I had to answer challenges brought against my own curricular decisions in the name of morality and Christian doctrine. I am also aware that some who claim to be followers of Jesus advocate racist practices and perpetuate the use of racist materials in schools: indeed, I have had to challenge the inclusion of purportedly Christian but obvi­ously racist materials in schools my own children have attended. I know that some who claim to follow Jesus have resorted to violence, hatred, and fear-mongering. And I am even more deeply aware that I have not always lived according to the beliefs and practices and perpetuate the use of racist materials in schools: indeed, I have had to challenge the inclusion of purportedly Christian but obvi­ously racist materials in schools my own curricular decisions and library adoptions. Now consider the words of one of the most revered educators of the last century: in *The Politics of Education*, an extremely important work for all those concerned with social justice and education, Paulo Freire (1985) refers to evangelical Christians as “necrophiliacs” (p. 131)—presumably because they love Someone the rest of the world believes to be dead. Many other widely respected researchers and theorists, including Nel Noddings (1984, 1992, 2002) and Michael Apple (1996, 2001), have devoted portions of their formidable scholarship to attacks on or defenses against Christian worldviews in the academy.

I am also troubled, however, by the thoughtless stereotyping and reckless hatred directed against Christians by some professional educators who usually argue for diversity, who
call for all voices to be included in the educational conversation, and who warn of the dangers of every other kind of prejudice. Not all Christians, not even all fundamentalist/evangelical Christians, oppose progressive educational practice, promote hatred, or seek to “force their values down people's throats.” In fact, in my experience, the vast majority don't. But as stereotyping and name calling in the larger society have worked in the past to suppress people of color, women, and gays, so stereotyping and name calling within the academy have worked to suppress the voices and the ideas of evangelical Christians.

A Culture of Silence
Many Christians who function within the academy as students, teachers and scholars have been forced into what Freire (1985) calls a “culture of silence” (p. 50). They do not advocate racism, hatred, oppression, violence, or backward educational practice but they have heard again and again that Christians are ignorant and dangerous outsiders (Nazis, necrophiliacs, liars) and that the voices of Christians who do try to speak into the academic conversation should be resisted if not silenced. As academics, they are ostensibly dependent upon the academy for their work and their welfare so they do not speak up; in Freire's terms, they do not “say the word.” They might work for social justice and promote progressive practice, but they do not say what truly motivates them; they do not name themselves for fear of being labeled and ostracized by a hostile academy. Instead, they seek to blend in, to avoid attracting attention to their views. They speak only when they can say what the academy wishes them to say. According to Freire (1985), “the dependent society is by definition a silent society. Its voice is not an authentic voice, but merely an echo of the voice of the metropolis [i.e., the dominant society]—in every way, the metropolis speaks, the dependent society listens” (p.73).

Of course, the dominant society can be very slow to admit that it stereotypes and suppresses the silent ones. But I can give many personal examples of the ways in which the academy has attacked people of faith and attempted to silence the voices of Christians. For example, just before completing my doctorate, I went on the market, looking for a university job. I was especially hopeful that a particular University, would respond. Several weeks after I had submitted my application, the Midlands' search committee called me to ask some questions about my research. “It looks good on paper,” they said. But we see on his c.v. that you are a Christian, and we just want to be sure that the professor wasn't sure at first about the research I was doing. Several weeks after I had submitted my application, it became concerning about my ability. You are really concerned that I might think my faith might make me different and undermine my teaching ability. Do you imagine a university would hire a Marxist or too gay?

That phone call worried me, I hadn't seen my teaching capabilities. I had taught at very teaching was (and am) grateful for there. Because it was a reminder the opportunity to write multiple levels (I always had many of the same students). It had been a rich experience. Midlands gave me pause concerning me as a Christian, and potential employers were concerned about my Christian faith. Interviews and offers eluded me, and I differently and to ask me.

I had thought that could not be made an issue. But I was upset. I didn't feel I had had similar experiences, wasn't the only time I had. The academy can be deeply sterile. In fact, I first encountered against Christianity while shortly after I had become...
cluded in the educational experience. The... of the dangers of every... Christians, not even... Christians, oppose promoting hatred, or seek to suppress the silent..."In fact, in my heart, I just didn't. But as stereotyping older society have worked in... color, women, and gays, dwelling within the academy as voices...

I remember saying to myself, "As a Christian, ....

That phone call worried me for a while. Until then, I had held that creed, like race, age and gender, faith might make me difficult to work with and might undermine my teaching and scholarship somehow. Can you imagine a university calling to find out if a qualified candidate might be too old or too feministic or too Marxist or too gay?

That phone call worried me for a while. Until then, I hadn't seen my teaching experience as a potential liability. I had taught at a very good Christian school and I was (and am) grateful for that job and what I learned there. Because it was a relatively small school, I had the opportunity to write and revise curricula, to teach multiple levels (I always had five preps), to work with many of the same students year after year, and so on. It had been a rich experience. But the phone call from Midlands gave me pause: that line on my c.v. identified me as a Christian, and now I knew that some of my potential employers were worried about that. Midlands' concern about my Christianity colored my approach to interviews and offers elsewhere, causing me to listen differently and to ask more pointed questions.

I had thought that creed, like race, age and gender, could not be made an issue in the hiring process. I don't mean that I was completely surprised or even that I was upset. I didn't feel indignant or hurt, perhaps because I had had similar experiences before. That phone call wasn't the only time I have been made to feel that the academy can be deeply suspicious of Christ and Christians. In fact, I first encountered the academy's strictures against Christianity when I was in high school, very shortly after I had become a Christian. In a required course for seniors entitled Decision Making, the teacher led us through various values clarification exercises. One in particular stands out in my memory. It was a classic "shipwreck" exercise: there are six of us in the lifeboat but there are room and provision for only five, so one of us must go. I remember very distinctly who the six people were: an elderly Catholic priest, the first mate from the doomed ship, (who knew how much to use all of the supplies in the lifeboat's emergency kit, including the sextant), a pregnant teenager, a famous and wealthy businessman who happened to be gay, an All-American football player in top physical condition, and I. The assignment was to decide, based on my personal worldview, who should stay and who should jump out. I remember reading and rereading the scenario while my classmates began to write. "How could they decide so quickly?" I wondered. "This is hard." After several minutes of contemplation, I knew that if I were to follow the directions, I would have to go so that the others could survive. I remember not liking the silence...
standing at my shoulder reading my response. He leaned down and whispered to me: “You can’t do that.”

“What?” I asked.

“Jump out yourself,” he answered. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s too easy.”

“But this is my worldview.”

“Nope. You have to start again.” And then he moved off to read another student’s paper.

My teacher’s response confused me. I had followed the directions. It had taken a long time to consider the scenario and to make a decision in light of my worldview. He hadn’t said that I couldn’t choose myself. I had already written quite a bit. My friends had begun to write almost immediately and most of them were finished—how much thought had they put into their responses? Why was I the only person in the room who had to rewrite? I put my original essay away in my folder, got out another sheet of paper and started writing again, but I don’t remember anything of what I wrote. At that point I was simply writing to complete a requirement.

The instructor was a good teacher, experienced and kind. When I asked him later about his decision to make me rewrite, his response was that the focus of my essay was inappropriate for our class setting. I took him to mean that an essay about Christ and Christianity didn’t belong in a public school classroom. Maybe he meant something else. Perhaps he thought I was trying to take the easy way, the thoughtless way out. Maybe he assumed that I chose myself so that I wouldn’t have to think hard about the scenario. Like many teachers, he might have thought that this Christian student was trying to escape the pressure of real thinking by retreating to a non-rational, blind-faith-based line of defense. Whatever my teacher was thinking, he didn’t understand that my decision in that moment had been deeply difficult and carefully considered, that it was based on what I saw as my worldview’s call not to self-preserving escape but to self-sacrificing engagement. I listened to my classmates’ responses that day as we sat in a circle and read them to each other. At the bell, I left wondering why my decision had been the only one rejected as unfit. Ironically, the scenario exercise had worked very well in helping me to recognize that my worldview was not well articulated.

When I entered the academy there was often contrary to my view of my comparative literature subject matter (ancient and modern) and call He later, another professor spoke with a small group of them what a pity it was for the “mind” by believing in Jehovah’s testimony, some of my classmates were offended by his statement. I was a course on critical theory, Christianity and Christ was marking a huge X through dismissively and derisively. “I didn’t say it was outdated—but I thought,” the professor had tried to communicate really. That big X could have changed me, changed my values.

It never occurred to me that the academy seemed not to be my after all, I had chosen I was going to spend a college education, I didn’t think the professors would sit with and tell me what I had made attending a secular deeply enriching. The range of available worldviews, the professor had made the right decision taught me to understand to honor those who had value the dialogue, the disagreements between that my view was a minority. What was a surprise, a nism toward my minoril people of my ilk must be
He leaned back against the wall and said, "You can't do that." "You can't do what," asked the man. I had followed the man's advice. I had begun to consider my worldview and the possibility of self-sacrifice. I had worked very well in spite of my teacher's response: the exercise had helped me to clarify my values—and it helped me to recognize that, at least in some cases, my worldview was not welcome in the academy.

When I entered the university, I learned very early in my experience there that the academy's values were often contrary to my worldview. In my first semester, my comparative literature professor digressed from his subject matter (ancient Chinese poetry) to publicly deride Jesus and call Him a madman. A few semesters later, another professor brought up my name while speaking with a small group of my classmates; he told them what a pity it was that I was wasting my "fine mind" by believing in Jesus. I guess he didn't know that some of my classmates also were believers and were very offended by his statement. And later still, a professor in a course on critical theory explained the basic tenants of Christianity and Christian literary criticism and then, marking a huge X through his notes on the board, said dismissively and derisively, "Nobody believes that stuff any more." I didn't say anything—I was too intimidated—but I thought, "Well, not nobody. I believe." The professor had tried to cross out the cross, but he couldn't really. That big X couldn't change the fact that Jesus had changed me, changed my life, changed my worldview and my values.

It never occurred to me to protest the fact that the academy seemed not to share my Christian values—after all, I had chosen to attend a public university. If I was going to spend all that time and money to get a college education, I didn't want to go somewhere where the professors would simply say what I already agreed with and tell me what I already knew. Being a Christian made attending a secular university very exciting and deeply enriching. The more I heard and saw of the other available worldviews, the more convinced I was that I had made the right decision for my life. The university taught me to understand those other perspectives and to honor those who held them; it also taught me to value the dialogue, the professional and philosophical disagreements between competing perspectives. I knew that my view was a minority view; that was no surprise. What was a surprise, at first, was the academy's antagonism toward my minority view, its expressed belief that people of my ilk must be sub-scholarly, its insistence that
my view didn't belong in the academic conversation, its apparent determination to teach people NOT to believe in Jesus, in spite of all the talk I heard about tolerance, acceptance, and diversity. I started to feel—and this feeling has only grown over the years—that the academy, even at a great university, really does want simply to hear what it already agrees with. It works very hard to keep Christian voices from being heard.

**Habitus and Hatred at the University**
In my experience, most academics who express anti-Christian sentiments aren't intending to be cruel, narrow minded, or intolerant. I agree with Smith (2002), who argues that the anti-Christian spirit of the academy could arise from what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*, which "involves persistent and deeply internalized mental schemes that correspond to and reinforce particular social conditions" (p. 20). Smith writes that none of the anti-religious faculty I know as individuals are nasty people out to make religious believers feel bad. They're smart, interesting, morally serious, and well-intentioned. . . . They're not aiming to be anti-religious, anti-Christian. They don't have to try. It just comes naturally to them, almost automatically, as if from a fundamental predisposition. . . . But with the idea of habitus in mind, we can see that in their anti-religion, these faculty are expressing a deeply interiorized mental scheme that is . . . more conventional than intentional—yet one that has an immense power to reproduce a pervasive institutional culture (pp. 20-21, emphasis in original).

According to Millard (1997), "what habitus creates, in effect, is an unexamined common-sense or practical way of proceeding within any repeated social routine that rules out, as extravagant or unconventional, other kinds of behavior" (p. 22). I think that the notion of habitus might help to explain much of the academy's antagonism toward Christ and Christians; at the universities where I've studied and taught, opposition to faith has often seemed to spring from an automatic, fundamental predisposition. It has rarely seemed to be an intentional expression of animosity toward particular believers, particular faiths, or particular beliefs.

Sometimes, however, Christian culture is expressed very intentionally. Let me digress from the evidence at another major, mid-level law school, my friend was the leader of an organization called the Christian Legal Society. The leader of the organization and I, along with another student, were invited to attend seminars and workshops at the law school's Dean of Students. One of the seminars was on the importance of diversity. The faculty member in charge of the seminar talked about the need for diversity in recruiting the participants, student organizations, and the like. The seminar film intended to heighten awareness and to promote understanding. The actors dramatized a hornet's nest; one of the actors accosted by an angry, scolding, finger-pointing mob. My friend raised his hand and said, "This is what Christians in the film would have been saying at the end of the workshop." The faculty member in charge replied, "I hate Christians. It's something I can't help, but I'm not going to change that."

This statement is not an expression of intentional animosity; it is merely an expression of disinterest in subject matter. The faculty member's words were directed at a group of gays (or people of color or Jews or people of another religious faith) that would lose her job—and her pay check—if she was accused of being anti-bias. She had been investigated thoroughly by the university-sponsored tolerance task force. The language expressed toward Christians was something that had been effective in the larger society, where those who hate Christians have for the most part been able to silence them through a "culture of silence."

It's not hard to see why so much murder, hate, and murder, many in the religious Right was to blame.
academic conversation, its subjects and subjects NOT to believe what people NOT to believe of them. I heard about tolerance, freedom to feel—and this feeling—but not that the academy, which does want simply to silence. It works very hard to silence those who believe in the film was appropriate, given the focus of the workshop. Without hesitating, the professor replied, “I hate Christians, and nothing is ever going to change that.”

This statement is not an expression of habitus; it is an expression of intentional hatred. If a teacher were to digress from subject matter to unleash venom against gays (or people of color or any other religious group), she would lose her job—and rightly so. A required, university-sponsored tolerance session that included hateful language expressed toward any other group would have been investigated thoroughly by university administration, and the leader would have been censured, if not cashiered. But in the academy, it seems to be open season on Christians. The hatred and the name calling seem to have been pretty effective, for although Christians might be speaking out with increasing volume and frequency in the larger society, within the academy, evangelical Christians have for the most part accepted the imposed “culture of silence.”

It’s not hard to see why. When Matthew Shepard was murdered, many in the public fora argued that the religious Right was to blame. Some members of religious organizations received death threats; I’m told that a gathering of the religious Right in West Michigan was picketed and interrupted. In my own community of faith, however, news of Shepard’s death was met with grief and anger; his murder was labeled a heinous and hateful crime, from the pulpit to the pew. At the time, many Christians felt that the forces who oppose people of faith in our society had used Shepard’s death simply, ruthlessly, and effectively to silence opposing views. They wanted those who would speak from a Christian perspective to be seen as identifying themselves with hatred, violence, and bigotry. Silence is a more attractive alternative in many ways.

Christians in the academy must struggle against institutional and societal attempts to silence them, however; and the academy needs to listen to their voices, for in attempting to marginalize Jesus and His followers, professional educators are losing a powerful model of progressive practice (White, 1997, 2001). Jesus is arguably the greatest teacher in all of history: including His voice and His model in the academic conversation could only strengthen the academy's pursuit of truth and enhance its ability to provide truly liberal education.

**The Problem of Conversion**

“But,” you might say, “the problem with Jesus and His evangelicals is that they’re always trying to convert people.” Does anyone seriously believe that, with Evangelical Christians safely silenced, nobody in the academy is working for converts? The academy hasn’t attempted to marginalize other teachers and groups who...
are very open about their "evangelism." In my own career as a student and teacher, I have often sat in the classrooms of Marxist evangelists, feminist evangelists, social constructionist evangelists, New Critical evangelists, Reader Response evangelists, and diversity evangelists, among others. These academic evangelists are passionate, even zealous—and they are going for converts. Sometimes they even use the language of conversion. Paulo Freire is an excellent example. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed and in The Politics of Education, Freire speaks openly and repeatedly about the necessity of conversion, of a changing of consciousness (see Freire, 1993, pp. 122-123). He (1985) writes, "Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were" (p. 43).

This language of conversion is perhaps unusual in the academy, in spite of its use by great thinkers in both modern and ancient times (see Lycos, 1987, pp. 2, 6 for a discussion of Socrates' focus on conversion). But the passion behind the language is not alien to public education. The academy wants and expects teachers and students to experience academic, intellectual, political, and philosophical conversions. Evangelists of many persuasions have set up pulpits in public schools, colleges, and universities, hoping to turn their students from racism, sexism, homophobia, economic injustice, intolerance, selfishness, and ignorance to a more enlightened ideology and a more just worldview (see, for example, Tatum, 1999).

These academic evangelists know that they will not convert everyone to their own way of thinking and living but they see it as their duty to introduce students to ideas and movements of which the students have been unaware or about which the students have been misinformed. Progressive educators want students to understand both the ideas they choose to accept and the ideas they choose to resist and reject. The attempt to understand others, especially those who are different from us or those with whom we disagree, is often evidence in itself of profound change. The academy seeks to foster conversions of this kind; it rewards successful evangelists and warmly welcomes their converts. Conversions happen all the time in the academy.

"But not religious conversion," to tolerate the voices of will turn their classroom plans into sermon notes; will give altar calls instead. This fear stands on no firm ground that homosexual teachers and their class time by reasonable and vulnerable Their trained in the academy's quite adept at not proselytizing. We have assiduously avoided students' learning experiences of many other kinds of who do not hesitate to openly and forcefully, even tangential to the course and off-task.

Including Jesus' Voice

The academy must be a passionately about ideas, needs a rich diversity of ideas, teachers, we want our students to experience a multiplicity of voices. \( \text{compelling a thinker as } J \)

Please note that I am schools and universities for arguing that Jesus' voice are important to exclude from the academy among many, then we do not establish clause of the establishment clause of the Constitution, suggesting that His voice is not mine, His is the clearest, brightest voice in the academy at large needn't say or those who follow Him.

Some might worry included in the conversations the academy already believe (or remain) inflexible in "blind faith." This worry
"But not religious conversions," you say. "If we begin to tolerate the voices of evangelical Christians, they will turn their classrooms into chapels and their lesson plans into sermon notes; if they break their silence they will give altar calls instead of homework assignments." This fear stands on no firmer ground than does the fear that homosexual teachers will misuse their authority and their class time by trying to seduce their impressionable and vulnerable students, to convert them to a homosexual lifestyle. In fact, most evangelical Christians trained in the academy’s culture of silence have become quite adept at non-proselytizing; we have learned to be very careful not to introduce subjects of faith where they do not naturally belong in discussions of course content. We have assiduously avoided forcing our faith into our students’ learning experiences. The same cannot be said of many other kinds of “evangelicals” in the academy, who do not hesitate to state their personal political philosophies and their personal religious opinions openly and forcefully, even when such statements are tangential to the course material or clearly digressive and off-task.

Including Jesus’ Voice

The academy must be a place where people can argue passionately about ideas, and the university community needs a rich diversity of ideas about which to argue. As teachers, we want our students to hear and understand a multiplicity of voices. It is not sensible to leave so compelling a thinker as Jesus out of the conversation.

Please note that I am not calling for our public schools and universities to become Christian. I am arguing that Jesus’ voice and example are too important to exclude from the academy. If Jesus’ voice is one among many, then we don’t have to worry about the establishment clause of the first amendment. I am not suggesting that His voice is merely equal to the rest; for me, His is the clearest, brightest, and best voice. But the academy at large needn’t share that belief to include Him or those who follow Him in the conversation.

Some might worry that, if Jesus were to be included in the conversation, students who come to the academy already believing in Him might become (or remain) inflexible in their thinking, tethered to a “blind faith.” This worry seems to be particularly acute at Grand Valley, where so many of our students come from religious, primarily Christian backgrounds. Many Grand Valley professors have told me that they find their Christian students to be rather backward, closed to the ideas and worldviews of others. I have noticed this myself on occasion, perhaps especially when I taught our department’s Capstone course which introduces students to the major schools of critical theory. Several of the professing Christians in the course were at first resistant and somewhat defensive; they seemed to resent being asked to consider other perspectives and, at times, their words revealed that they did not have a very firm hold on the basics of the world-view they themselves espouse. At first glance, it might seem that including Jesus in the conversation could make it harder for students like these, students who believe in Jesus but aren’t immediately open to other points of view, to understand and respect others’ beliefs: maybe the best thing to do is to exclude the words and example of Christ so that Christian students will learn to be more open.

I have a couple of responses to this argument. First, I wonder if faculty members would advance such an argument about students who come to Grand Valley already committed to other worldviews. Imagine excluding a Marxist perspective, for example, so as to help students with Marxist tendencies to be more flexible, more open to the benefits of capitalism (or vice versa); imagine requiring courses that praise patriarchy so as to “loosen up” students who come to us already committed to feminist perspectives. Second, although it is true that the
inclusion of Jesus’ voice and example might make it more difficult for those in the academy who seek to turn students away from Him, it might also help Christian students to be more open to seeing the value of other perspectives. When the academy genuinely respects and includes what a student believes, the student feels less need to retreat or to attack. I found this to be true in the Capstone course in critical theory. As the weeks went by, I discovered that the Christian students who at first had seemed so resistant were reacting out of fear—not fear of being “contaminated” by other worldviews, but fear of being labeled and ostracized themselves, fear of being told again by yet another professor that their Christian worldviews were “wrong” or “dangerous.” When they understood that the class and the professor were determined to respect their worldviews (in part by challenging them to consider other worldviews in light of their own), many of them came out from behind their defenses and joined in the conversation.

Lois Tyson’s (1999; 2001) work evinces a deep dedication to diversity and to progressive education. She argues that “the inclusion of Christian philosophy in the dialogue of diversity might make it more difficult for Christian students to fall back on ‘blind faith’ as a convenient escape from the work involved in thinking through their position” (personal communication, January 15, 2000).

This falling back on blind faith that many of us have noticed might not signify a closed mind or a convenient escape so much as it illuminates a rhetorical problem: many students—not just Christian students—simply don’t know the rules of academic argument. In evangelical homes and churches, “the Bible says” is an acceptable and authoritative statement; in fact, many Christian students have learned that unless they can support their views with scripture, they don’t have an argument at all. If these students are not aware of the important differences between the rules of argument in the two discourse communities, they might find it very hard to understand why professors challenge or even reject their biblically based assertions; they might react with such shock and confusion when challenged by powerful members of the academy, especially when rejection of their arguments is accompanied by disdain, disgust, condescension, or anger.

Many students come to the academy how to enter the academy, how to support an argument, what counts as evidence, and what counts as evidence, and how to provide biblical evidence. They are not being trying to bar the door to other views on others; they are trying to follow the rules of argument which is often a community, attempting to respect and to an authoritative source. Many students do not attempt in that light, persons, to engage the student’s worldviews. Christian students bear the responsibility to follow those rules and to consider them in ways that a wider academic community might understand and accept. Many professors who challenge poorly supported arguments do so not out of prejudice or beliefs but out of a sense of academic integrity and the rules of argument. They do not want to be contributing to a proliferation of poorly supported arguments; rather, they want to engage the student’s views.

When evangelical students often sense strongly that they are outsiders in the academy; and like outsiders, they sometimes find the discourse difficult to learn while they are in it. Christian scholars have sometimes looked for academic success and shown them how to engage the literature. Students are looking for advice on how to provide examples of how to move from the religious worldviews to the academic worldviews. The contention is that the academy is obstructed that movement is attempting to silence this religious view professed to deplore: to consider and engage the approaches that spring from religious worldviews.
Many students come to the university not knowing how to enter the academic conversation or how to support an argument, what counts as a supportable assertion and what counts as evidence. When a Christian student provides biblical evidence for her assertions, she might not be trying to bar the door to other ideas or to force her views on others; she could simply be playing by the rules of argument which obtain in her discourse community, attempting to support her views by appealing to an authoritative source. If professors were to see her attempt in that light, perhaps they would be more likely to engage the student’s ideas and to teach her how to follow the rules of academic discourse. Of course, Christian students bear the responsibility to learn and use those rules and to consider how to express their ideas in ways that a wider academic audience is more likely to understand and accept. They must also recognize that many professors who challenge their biblically based assertions do so not out of prejudice against religious beliefs but out of prejudice against what they see as poorly supported arguments or arguments that do not “play by the rules.”

When evangelical students speak out, they often sense strongly that they are speaking from the margins of the academy; and like many students on the margins, they sometimes find the rules of mainstream academic discourse difficult to learn. They need professors to teach them. Christian scholars perhaps bear a special responsibility in this regard; just as other marginalized groups have looked for academic and professional models to show them how to speak from the margins and to consider how to express their ideas, many professors who challenge their biblically based assertions do so not out of prejudice against religious beliefs but out of prejudice against what they see as poorly supported arguments or arguments that do not “play by the rules.”

The Open Flow of Ideas

Michael Apple often writes to defend progressive educational practice against challenges from the Christian Right, but he doesn’t believe that Christians should be silenced. In fact, he honors the right of all people to participate in making decisions that affect their lives (Beane & Apple, 1995, p. 9) and calls for “the open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible” (p. 6). Beane & Apple (1995) argue that those involved in democratic schools see themselves as participants in communities of learning. By their very nature, these communities are diverse, and that diversity is prized, not viewed as a problem. . . . These differences enrich the community and the range of views it might consider. Separating people of any age on the basis of these differences or using labels to stereotype them simply creates divisions and status systems that detract from the democratic nature of the community and the dignity of the individuals against whom such practices work so harshly (p. 10).

Apple (1996) thinks that one reason the Christian Right has grown in numbers is that educators have responded to conservative challenges anti-dialogically, seeking to silence and separate those whom they view as opponents. He writes that “people often ‘become Right’ due to their interactions with unresponsive institutions” (p. 42). In his most recent book, Apple (2001) argues that some
of the critiques mounted against public education by members of the Christian Right contain "elements of insight" but that those critics have been "stereotyped and ignored" (p. 32). He continues, "Not only do I think that this is intellectually suspect, but it is also dangerous strategically if we . . . wish to counter the rightist turn in education in serious ways" (p. 32). Apple further argues that attempts to remove religious perspectives from progressive political and educational movements could harm those movements:

I tend to believe that in many nations it would be impossible to develop larger liberatory movements without religious mediations as one of the major dynamics. I take this position not only for empirical reasons—that is, because of the power of religion in these nations—but because I believe that utopian hopes are important for envisioning a better future. And religious yearnings often embody such dreams. (2001, p. 28)

Listening As Well As Speaking

As Apple argues, it is in the best interest of the academy to consider the ways in which it might cause people of faith to feel silenced and marginalized. However, I am not merely calling on the academy to put an end to the culture of silence, to be more open to the example of Christ and the voices of Christians; after all, if Christians within the academy would simply begin to speak, the era of silence would end. Nor am I thinking only of Christians within the academy, for the voices of teachers and scholars motivated by a variety of faith perspectives would enrich the academic conversation (White, 2003). Nor am I hoping to silence colleagues whose views regarding faith or the place of religion in the academy are very different from my own. A university is at its best when all are free to speak and all are determined to listen. I hope to be allowed to speak; I intend also to listen.

I am still learning how to listen. But I have heard some interesting, enlightening, and seemingly contradictory things of late. For example, I have heard many Christians argue, as I have in this essay, that powerful forces within the secular academy have sought to silence the relatively quiet voices of Christian students and scholars; I have also heard Apple (2001) characterize the Christian Right as loud and increasing, as some professors on our campus will be denied tenure because they are political or religious, as others will be denied tenure because they are God or because they are some Christians in the legal system who are "taking over" the academy as the best student teaching tearfully of her immense frustration on campus and in her personal life as she is a lesbian.

At a university, all should be speaking in the world we have determined to listen to each other, to that many of our disagreements in mutual understanding are not necessarily agreements and especially at a university conversation worthy of views are respected, whether beliefs, and philosophies, academic interests and to students are invited to participate and where no one moments of intense disagreement.

I am particularly e professors to break the culture in their students and colleague that followers of Jesus are gay and lesbian people, teachers, and scholars, and ourselves within the academy students won't get any Jesus and "fundamental name-calling. It's time for all of us to listen.
that public education by do not contain “elements of ... stereotypes” (p.32). Apple further notes that religious perspectives are often embodied in educational movements.

If we continue to see the academy as one of the major sites for the power of religion in the United States, I believe that utopian visions of a better world often embody such visions.

... which it might cause some to be marginalized.

On the university campus today, silence, to be more precise, is a problem. The voices of many within the academy are silenced, and they are determined not to speak; I intend also to speak.

I am particularly eager to encourage Christian professors to break the culture of silence so that more of their students and colleagues will come to understand that followers of Jesus are, as Chasnoff noted regarding gay and lesbian people, “members of families, famous people, teachers, and students.” If we refuse to name ourselves within the academy, I’m afraid that most students won’t get any more information about who Jesus and “fundamentalist Christians” are than negative name-calling. It’s time to say the word. And it’s time for all of us to listen.
Works Cited
politics and education.


