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Newman, Millennials, and Teaching Comparative Theology

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On the face of it, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) and contemporary students of what is called the millennial generation make an incongruous combination. Nevertheless, this essay enlists Newman to make the case that recent generational developments, often described as disaffiliation or post-denominationalism, put comparative theologians in an epistemologically advantageous position to teach religion and theology to contemporary students. Newman’s categories of “notional” and “real” apprehension and assent help to articulate how this might work in twenty-first-century classrooms.

Each of the terms in this chapter’s title is fraught with ambivalence. John Henry Newman was a member of the established intellectual elite of Victorian England and a citizen of the widest ranging colonial empire in the nineteenth-century world. England had colonies and “possessions” on almost every continent. Even in Newman’s lifetime, his younger contemporaries such as E.B. Tylor (1832-1917) and James George Frazer (1854-1941), based on their ethnocentric and often racist observations and speculations about people the British Empire had colonized, pioneered what would become the discipline of anthropology. None of this was on Newman’s theological radar. He had no interest in comparing his own Christian theology to the highly developed religious traditions of India, for example. In addition, eighteenth-century intellectual norms of the English and Scottish Enlightenments, as represented by John Locke, David Hume, and Thomas Reid, dwelt creatively together in Newman’s capacious soul alongside such nineteenth-century norms as the Romantic recovery of history and religious particularity. Nowhere is this clearer than in his distinction between the notional and the real. Despite these ambiguities, I want to claim that Newman’s reflections, in terms of the real and notional distinction, on how disciplines work...
and how they might be related, is helpful in thinking about how to practice comparative theology on a new demographic landscape.

The demographic data that provides the basis for most contemporary reflection on the so-called “millennial” generation is also deeply ambivalent. Statistical generalizations taken from survey data about young people can only be used with great care for the avoidance of stereotypes, and with attention to regional, institutional, gender, class, and other demographic variables. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that reflecting on such data and relating it to their own pedagogical situations will help professors in thinking about how their students learn, what students think is important, and how best to communicate a sense of the beauty and power of what Newman would call religious devotion in all its variety.

As the essays in this volume will make clear, comparative theology shares in the ambivalence of the first two terms. Practitioners debate questions about the stability and coherence of such terms as 

*Hinduism*, *Buddhism*, and *Islam* and their adequacy to indicate what the discipline studies. In its originating conception, comparative theology tended to be an engaged discipline whose practitioners began in their home tradition, passed over sympathetically to another, and came back home enriched.\(^1\) Demographic data indicate that many professores of theology are likely to find themselves with a classroom of students who cannot be presumed to have home traditions. Contemporary students are increasingly less likely to have serious knowledge of or commitment to any particular religious tradition from which they might pass over to another and return enriched to their home tradition.

Mindful of these inconsistencies, but refusing to be paralyzed by them, this chapter proceeds in three parts.\(^2\) The first offers an exposition of Newman’s categories of “notional” and “real” and how he

\(^1\) This approach is illustrated in popularized form in Francis X. Clooney, S.J. *Hindu Wisdom for All God’s Children*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998. Clooney acknowledges the inadequacy of words such as *Hinduism*, but thinks they can be useful “as long as we also admit that the traditions we group under such labels are more rich and diverse than the ways in which we might fix them,” xii. We might say the same of the term *millennial*.

\(^2\) In thinking about these ambiguities and inconsistencies, I am reminded of Max Horkheimer’s “A Fable of Consistency” in which a tyrant who likes their work offers two poor poets a generous stipend. Wishing to be in solidarity with the poor, the first poet refuses the stipend and eventually starves. The second becomes the court poet. From the general moral prescription of consistency, Horkheimer takes this lesson: “It is friendlier to tyrants
uses them to qualify what he calls “apprehension” and “assent.” For present purposes, what Newman calls “real apprehension” emerges as the central concept. Based on recent demographic data, the chapter’s second part offers a preliminary and necessarily limited statistical sketch of a twenty-first-century classroom. The third part asks how the discipline of comparative theology might adapt to such classrooms and, in the process, change and develop. Other contributors will discuss in depth such issues as the method, scope, and future of comparative theology. In what follows, I urge only that Newman’s distinctions between “notional” and “real” apprehension might offer timely help to comparative theologians as they reflect on their discipline’s future.

Newman

From his early sermons through to his mature works, Newman’s intellectual approach is suffused, more or less explicitly, with some form of his distinction between “real” and “notional.” Newman’s explicit explanation of this distinction appears in A Grammar of Assent (1870). Before turning to that explanation, however, two examples from earlier works can illustrate how the “real” and “notional” distinction works for Newman.

First, in this description of relations among history, philosophy, and poetry from Discourse VII of The Idea of A University (1858), distinctions and connections between what Newman means by “real” and “notional” are on full display. “History, for example,” he begins with just a bit of elitist Victorian overconfidence, “shows things as they are, that is, the morals and interests of men [sic], disfigured and perverted by all their imperfections of passion, folly, and ambition.” Philosophy and poetry add different perspectives, but none of the three are sufficient by themselves. “Philosophy,” he continues, “strips the picture too much; poetry adorns it too much; the concentrated lights of the three correct the false peculiar colouring [sic] of each, and show us the truth. The right mode of thinking upon it is to be had from taking than to poor poets.” For the fable, see Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination, A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 36. It was Horkheimer (1895-1973) who, in his 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory” introduced the term “critical theory” into western philosophical discourse. See Max Horkheimer, Critical Theory, Selected Essays, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et al (New York: Continuum, 2002), 188-243. Though Horkheimer’s “Fable” doesn’t apply directly or in the same way to the three ambiguities above, it does suggest that in the world where we find ourselves nothing and no one is pure.
them all together ....” (Newman 1858, 176). In this first case, philosophy would exemplify notional apprehension and assent. With their focus on the particular, each in a different way, poetry and history exemplify real apprehension and assent.

Newman’s *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845, revised 1878) offers a second example of how he is accustomed to deploy “real” and “notional.” This time he is dealing with questions about the historical self-identity of Christianity as a kind of living organism that inhabits a community of minds. Before he begins, Newman considers the possibility that Christianity “is a mere name for a cluster or family of rival religions all together” (Newman 1878, 4). When history is consulted to answer the question of what Christianity is, we encounter a host of variation. To account for this difficulty, Newman proposes the hypothesis of his theory of development (Newman 1878, 20). In order to distinguish what he calls true developments from mere corruptions of Christianity, Newman offers a series of seven criteria or “tests.” In the 1878 edition, they become “notes.” The essay also paints “three great church-historical tableaux,” (Nichols 1990, 51) dealing respectively with the first three centuries, the fourth-century Arian crisis, and the church of the fifth and sixth centuries. Students of the Essay have debated whether its “center of gravity” (Nichols 51) is the notes or the three historical tableaux. If we think of the notes as more “notional” and the historical sketches as more “real,” both appear central and the task of interpreting the Essay is clarified.

In neither of these two examples does Newman explicitly mention “real” and “notional.” *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) turns explicitly to the distinction between “notional” and “real” and presents a primarily notional account of it. If the Grammar’s account, in terms of what Newman calls “apprehension” and “assent” is more “notional,” we might see Newman’s earlier narrative of his own conversion in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), autobiographical and thickly-textured historically, as more “real.”

**The Grammar of Assent** – We turn now to Newman’s exposition in the *Grammar* of “The Apprehension of Propositions” (Chapter III) and “Apprehension and Assent in Matters of Religion” (Chapter V). Newman is most interested in assent, a mental act of unconditional assertion. Assent to a
proposition, however, requires what he calls “apprehension” of its terms. Apprehension is softer and more commodious than understanding. Apprehension is “intelligent acceptance of an idea [notional apprehension] or a fact [real apprehension] enunciated by a proposition” (Newman 1870, 20). If the subject of a proposition is a singular noun, apprehension of it is real. If the subject of a proposition is a common or abstract noun, apprehension is notional. Singular nouns come from experience, common nouns from abstraction (Newman 1870, 23). Apprehension can be complex or both real and notional at once.

“The heart,” Newman writes, “is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us” (Newman 1870, 92-3). That means real apprehension is, for Newman, “more vivid and forcible,” the stronger way of accepting a proposition, a way that often leads to action. It “excites and stimulates affections and passions by bringing facts home as motive causes” (Newman 1870, 11). Newman emphasizes the role of memory and imagination in both real and notional apprehension. They account for variations in vividness (Newman 1870, 23-31). To regard someone as a human, he points out, is to make them a “logarithm of [their] true self.”

Newman’s contrast of real and notional apprehension recalls his account, in The Idea of A University, of the relations among philosophy, history, and poetry, or the juxtaposition of the notes and historical tableaux in the Essay on Development. In contrasting these two modes of thought, he observes: “[Y]et no one from the sight of a horse or a dog would be able to anticipate its zoological definition, nor from a knowledge of its definition to draw such a picture as would direct the eye to the living specimen.” He concludes:

Each use of propositions has its own excellence and serviceableness and each has its own imperfection. To apprehend notionally is to have breadth of mind, but to be shallow; to

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3 If Newman’s use of the term proposition is off-putting, sentence or claim might be substituted. He is thinking, whatever we choose to call it, of the basic unit linguistic animals use to describe the world and their own subjectivities, make claims about them, and construct arguments.
apprehend really is to be deep, but to be narrow-minded. The latter is the conservative principle of knowledge, and the former the principle of its advance. Without the apprehension of notions, we would forever pace around one small circle of knowledge; without a firm hold on things, we shall waste ourselves in vague speculations. However, real apprehension has the precedence, as being the scope and end and test of the notional; and the fuller the mind’s hold upon things or what it considers such, the more fertile is it in its aspects of them, and the more practical in its definitions (Newman 1870, 34).

In Chapter V of the Grammar, Newman’s discussion of the apprehension of a religious tradition accommodates both texts (if they exist) as well as lived practice. In the study of religions, real and notional translate into what Newman calls “devotion” and “theology.” Based on these categories, a long discussion of how one might apprehend the Christian dogma of the Trinity makes up the entire second half of Chapter V. Of the mystery of the Trinity, Newman asks: “is it capable of being apprehended otherwise than notionally? … Does it admit of being held in the imagination and embraced with a real assent?” (Newman 1870, 126-27).

His answer distinguishes a creedal or confessional account of the doctrine in terms such as Father, Son, Spirit, three, and one, from a theological or dogmatic account using words such as substance, essence, form, subsistence, or circumincession. While we might be able to apprehend and assent notionally to the dogmatic account, Newman thinks it impossible to give real assent to the mystery as a whole. Real assent can only be given to the creedal propositions separately. He then applies the distinction between theology and devotion to the Trinity and concludes:

Religion has to do with the real and the real is particular; theology has to do with what is notional and the notional is the general and systematic. Hence theology has to do with the Dogma of the Holy Trinity as a whole made up of many propositions; but religion has to do with each of those separate propositions that compose it and lives and thrives in contemplation of them. In them it finds the motives for devotion and faithful obedience; while theology on the other hand forms and
protects them by virtue of its function of regarding them, not merely one by one, but as a system of truth (Newman 1870, 140).

Though this description remains useful for my purposes in this chapter, its clarity and neatness conceal a certain tension between eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, between how Newman understands theology’s organizing role as notional or deductive and his insistence on the religious role of imagination.4

**Millennials**

The birth ranges chosen to define millennial can vary. If we take the birth range of 1977-1995, this is a generation of 80 million people, about 22% of the U.S. population in 2013. This is a lot of people. Market researchers want to know how they’ll spend their money. Political researchers want to know how or if they will vote. Religious researchers are especially interested in what their impact on Christianity in the United States will be.

Demographic research on millennials and religious “nones” has reached a saturation point. We have the General Social Survey, conducted since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, the Pew Forum, the Barna Group, Gallup, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), Trinity College Center for Religion in Public Life, the Public Religion Research Institute/Berkley Center at Georgetown, and many more. Generalizations abound. “Self-absorbed,” “entitled,” “attention addicts,” “they think they’re special,” “they want your job, but they don’t want to work for it” were some of the stereotypes mentioned in a *Washington Post* story about “Millennial Week” conceived and celebrated by millennials in Washington, D.C., June 2-8, 2014 (June 4, 2014, C 1-2).

Students I have talked with are understandably uncomfortable with such generalizations. In fact, they’re sick of hearing about them and want to define themselves. Anyone who, for instructional or

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religious purposes, draws upon the abundance of research on the millennial generation, must take care to keep in mind that these statistical generalizations conceal regional, local, and other demographic differences that will come into play among the particular populations such researchers are seeking to serve. To paraphrase Newman, to call someone a millennial is to make them “a logarithm of [their] true self” (Newman 1870, 31).

“The Rise of the Nones” - For those who teach theology in any of its forms, one of the most significant aspects of the vast research on the millennial generation has to do with what demographers refer to as religious “affiliation,” a person’s self-identification with a particular religious group. The 2008 Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey revealed considerable religious instability among the U.S. population and signaled that the United States was undergoing major religious shifts. Its relatively large sample of 35,000 Americans, as well as its use of interviews, adds to the significance of the 2008 survey.

When demographers ask people about their religious affiliation, either in an interview or on a survey, there has been a dramatic increase among the “unaffiliated,” the number of people who answer “none.” According to the 2008 Pew “Religious Landscape Survey,” 28% of Americans had left their “birth faith.” If intra-Protestant shifts are included, the number rises to 44%. Though the Protestant population has since dipped under 50%, in 2008, the United States, at a little over 50%, was still a predominantly Protestant country. Former Catholics made up 10% of the U.S. population. The fastest growing “religious” group in the United States in 2008 was the “unaffiliated” or “nones.”

According to Gallup Daily tracking polls, with about 350,000 interviews annually, the rise of religious “nones” among the general population since 2008 was greatest between 2009 and 2010 and 2010 and 2011. Nones rose from 14.6% in 2008 to 17.8 in 2012. Between 2011 and 2012, the rise seems to have slowed. According to self-identifications in the general population, men (24%) are more likely to be nones than women (15%), Asians (27%) than non-Hispanic whites (18%), and Independents (22%)

5 See, for example, William L. Portier, “Here Come the Nones! Pluralism and Evangelization after Denominationalism and Americanism” Horizons 40, no. 2 (December 2013): 275-92.
and Democrats (20%) than Republicans (8%). Nones are most likely to be found in the New England, Pacific, and Mountain regions of the country.⁷

According to “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” the Pew Forum’s 2015 update of the data upon which the 2008 survey was based, the nones or unaffiliated have continued to grow, and, in fact, are the largest growing group in the survey. Between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the U.S. population declined from 78.4% to 70.6%. 34% of Americans now have a religious identity different from the one in which they were raised. The 2014 data make clear that Christians across the board continue not reproducing themselves. Between 2007 and 2014, the unaffiliated percent of the population increased from 16.1 to 22.8%. From the perspective of a theology classroom, even more significant is the fact that this trend to “disaffiliation” is most pronounced among millennials. 34% of the millennial generation (ages 25-33) were unaffiliated in 2014, with the figure rising to 36% for college-age millennials (ages 18-24) [“America’s Changing Religious Landscape” 2015, 3-18].⁸

Making sense of these numbers is more difficult than simply noting them. Nones are significantly more likely to be agnostics and deists than atheists. Their emergence seems to be related to larger shifts in American culture in general. Explaining these shifts, however, is more a matter of speculative culture critique than demographic precision. For example, Robert Putnam and David

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⁷ See gallup.com/poll/159785/rise-religious-nones-slowslows-2012.aspx. Despite the slight differences in percentages, attributable perhaps to differences in method, sample size, and relative margins of error, the surveys consulted seem to converge on the conclusion that since 2008 nones have increased dramatically, especially among the young. See also Kosmin, Barry A. and Ariela Keysar with Ryan Cragun and Juhem Navarro-Rivera. 2009. “American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population.” Program on Public Values, Trinity College. Based on the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey of 54,461 adults, this study offers a comprehensive demographic profile of 2008 nones. The geographical breakdown comes from this 2008 data. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Survey (http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study), though it uses only four geographical regions instead of the nine used by 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, confirms the 2008 geographical trends. The West, up from 21 to 28%, had the greatest concentration of nones, followed by the Northeast, up from 16 to 25% (p. 86). Though she is in no way responsible for my use of them, I am grateful to Patricia Wittberg, SC for many of this chapter’s references to research on religious nones.

Campbell relate such shifts to changes in American political culture, the shock of the long 1960s and two after-shocks. They connect what they call the “rise of the nones” to a rejection of religion by the young because of its association after 1980 with social and political conservatism, itself a rejection of the cultural shifts of the 1960s, especially the “sexual revolution” (Putnam and Campbell 120, 121, 123). Putnam and Campbell cite an unnamed survey in which young Americans view religion as “judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political” (Putnam and Campbell 121).

These words reappear in the 2012 Millennial Values Survey. College age millennials, age 18-24, report that these words describe present-day Christianity somewhat or very well: “anti-gay” (64%); “judgmental” (62%); “hypocritical” or saying one thing, doing another (58%); “too involved in politics” (50%). On the other hand, three quarters of college age millennials agree that present day Christianity “has good values and principles” and 63% agree that present day Christianity “consistently shows love for other people.” These responses are further broken down into the percentages for “Christian” and “Religiously Unaffiliated” college age millennials. As might be expected, the latter score lower on the positive assessments of present-day Christianity and higher on the negative descriptors. The Christian (65%) and Religiously Unaffiliated (68%) millennials are almost unanimous in their agreement that present-day Christianity “teaches [the] same basic ideas as other religions” (Jones, Cox, Banchoff 31-32).

This millennial ambivalence about present-day Christianity, even among self-identified Christians, seems to reflect what 2012 Gallup researchers (see note 7 above) interpret as a “general pattern of expression of religion in American society.” According to this pattern, a trend toward “more unbranded, casual, informal religion,” one’s religiosity or spirituality need not find expression in a particular religious institution. A recent Barna study breaks the “spiritually homeless” generation of millennial Christians into three vagabond groups. They can be “nomads, claiming vestiges of their previous faith while mostly rejecting the church that fostered that faith; … prodigals, leaving Christianity in the rearview mirror; or … exiles, struggling to connect their Christianity in a complex, accelerated
culture." In a fragmented hyper-pluralism, this trend is not limited to churches and is probably part of a wider decline of belonging and general distrust of institutions such as banks, labor unions, political parties, and government.10

Millennials appear to retain much of the idealism, optimism, and resilience often associated with the young, but they have less to do with churches and are more open to religious diversity than their predecessors. Unbranded religiosity and lack of confidence in national institutions suggests smaller scale, local, more transparent forms of religious engagement with culture. People who want to have a more immediate positive effect on society, as in volunteering, and tend to trust flat rather than hierarchical forms of organization, will be more inclined to seek God in family, friends and personal prayer rather than in churches.

The twenty-first-century United States is no longer a Protestant majority society. Already in the late twentieth century, Protestant thinkers as diverse as Stanley Hauerwas and Martin Marty recognized and strategized about how to respond to the passing of Protestant cultural hegemony after World War II. In After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas (1999), Hauerwas welcomed the “end of Christendom” which meant for him Christianity’s cultural captivity to America. As a consolation, Marty introduced the idea of “public theologians” to provide for Christianity’s continuing public presence and influence in a society whose elites identified less and less with the Protestant mainline. His examples of public theologians were Jonathan Edwards, Abraham Lincoln, and Reinhold Niebuhr.11

Some hoped new Christian glue for a godly society might come from either the evangelical or immigrant Catholic sub-cultures, or from an alliance between them. The brick and mortar immigrant Catholicism of the earlier twentieth century, however, has dissolved in demographic assimilation and

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evangelicals struggle to retain and attract younger members. The future is cloudy. In another couple of generations, will new non-European Catholic immigrants and Latino/a evangelicals become sufficiently numerous and upwardly mobile to assume cultural positions analogous to those once held by immigrant Catholic and evangelical sub-cultures? Or, will they simply be assimilated into the prevailing demography? The latter seems more likely.

The twenty-first-century United States is post-denominational. The denominationalism whose “social sources” H. Richard Niebuhr traced in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) is quickly becoming a thing of the past. Rather than culturally normative, the Christianity that remains in the United States is largely residual, regional, and personal. In such a context, the Reformation and the American denominationalism that came later are largely unintelligible. Anyone who doubts this should try teaching Reformation history or American religious history to contemporary students. Denominational difference is increasingly irrelevant. With conspicuous exceptions, most Christians tend to join churches, if they do, not because of theological convictions, but because they feel welcome or at home there. The voluntary, highly intentional and personal, live and let live Christianity that remains does not need denominations. If Christianity no longer provides cultural norms, we can hardly bemoan a loss of Christian religious literacy. How can students such as those described above as “spiritually homeless” have a home tradition from which to learn and practice comparative theology as it was originally conceived?

**Twenty-First-Century Classrooms, Comparative Theology, and Real Apprehension**

Given the instability and diversity of our contemporary religious landscape and the fact that our demographic knowledge of millennials is based on statistical generalizations, it is difficult, if not impossible, to describe a typical twenty-first-century classroom in the abstract. Based on tremendous variations by institution and geographical region, we might imagine many such classrooms and the conditions that might account for their possible variations. The following descriptions come with all these qualifications in mind.

A twenty-first-century classroom has a good statistical chance of being more multi-racial. Compared to 72% of the general population, only 57% of college age millennials self-identify as white.
The rest are Hispanic (21%), black (14%), some other race (6%), with 3% claiming two or more racial categories (Jones, Cox, Banchoff, 2012, 1). Obviously, this will vary by region and institution. Students in urban schools in Los Angeles will probably be more diverse than students in a rural Iowa school. Students in a twenty-first-century classroom are “digital natives,” more likely to be digitally rather than print oriented. They can fact check a class or a sermon. A vast majority (about 89%) of college age millennials have Facebook accounts and 72% report using it at least once a day. Interestingly, only 16% of college age millennials report tweeting daily (Jones, Cox, Banchoff, 11-12). Still, if you are a professor, it might be good to know that they can live tweet your class.

As we have seen, both Christian millennials (65%) and those with no religious affiliation (68%) are almost unanimous in their agreement that present day Christianity teaches the same basic ideas as other religions. This suggests that most students in an average millennial classroom are trending toward disaffiliation and not likely to have strong, normative religious commitments. Barna reports that those who are not Christians express increasingly negative views of Christianity, with only 16% of non-Christian millennials reporting a “good impression” of Christianity. On the other hand, twenty-first-century classrooms are likely to have small but significant numbers of Christians (10-20%), mostly evangelicals and Catholics, who have strong, normative Christian commitments. According to the 2010 General Social Survey, 16% of Catholics between 18 and 35 report weekly Mass attendance. A comparable but higher number of evangelicals (20%) think going to church is important.

Despite significant variations by region and institution, the cumulative impact of these numbers suggests that, from a variety of perspectives, contemporary class rooms are significantly less homogenous than in the past. A twenty-first-century classroom is likely to be something of a religious soup in which strong home commitments mix with varying degrees of Christian residue and no religious commitments at all. In the early 1990s, I recall meeting post-1989 Eastern European students for whom all religious discourse was baffling. As universities internationalize, increasing numbers of students will have no

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familiarity with western religious discourse. Teaching in such classrooms will require a “multilingual,” hybrid approach that addresses, with different dialects and inflections, multiple audiences at the same time.

Of course, it is impossible to predict in the abstract what might happen to comparative theology in such settings. Although, as a Christian theologian, I taught an undergraduate course called “World Religions” for more than twenty years, I am not a comparative theologian in any strict sense. I hesitate even to address this question. Nevertheless, it is hard not to imagine that, just as it was back when I tried to convey to largely Christian students a vivid and rich sense of what various forms of Hinduism and Buddhism might be about, encouraging something like what Newman calls “real apprehension” – intelligent acceptance of a particular or particulars – will be involved in teaching comparative theology in this setting. For that reason, I shall conclude with a few thoughts on what a comparative theologian might do in a twenty-first-century classroom.

Christian theologians seem to have arrived at a leveled learning landscape on which, for the majority of students, learning about Christianity is the epistemological equivalent of learning about Hinduism or Islam. This is probably more or less true for many other students, depending on the degree of residual Christianity they bring to the classroom. In a general sense, Christianity in whatever form has been culturally de-privileged, even at church-related schools, and needs to be explained, much as various forms of Hinduism or Islam might be, in what Newman might call real terms. If this is true, only a relatively small minority of students would, in principle, be capable of learning to practice comparative theology as it was originally conceived by scholars such as Francis X. Clooney and James Fredericks.

More importantly, if contemporary students are anything like what surveys suggest, they tend to construct knowledge more in fragments and random combinations than architectonically or systematically, or, as Newman might say, notionally. This situation calls for a primary emphasis on real apprehension in Newman’s sense rather than on more cognitive, systematic, primarily text-based approaches. In Newman’s terms, students who have little familiarity with Buddhist devotion or practice can hardly be expected to approach it notionally or theologically. In such a situation, an epistemological
advantage goes to a more appreciative, sympathetic approach that appeals to the imagination and the affections, rather than to a more impersonal, classificatory notional approach appealing primarily to our capacity for abstract reasoning. Newman’s insistence that theology organizes, shapes, and guards individual claims of devotion by taking them together as “a system of truth” suggests that notional approaches cannot be completely abandoned.

“Religion,” Newman writes, “has to do with the real and the real is particular.” Real apprehension, then, is central to learning faith traditions as if from the inside, as forms of what Newman calls “devotion.” “The heart,” he claims, “is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of sense impression, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us” (Newman 1870, 140, 92-3). In comparative theology, this might suggest less emphasis on classic texts, institutional or religious brands and more on socially located, lived, religious practice. It might mean emphasis on the thick description and local field work conducive to real apprehension, a sense of what it might feel like to be a Sivite in New Dehli or in dispersion, an Italian American Catholic in New York, a southern Baptist in Dallas, or a Shiite in a Baghdad controlled by Sunnis. An emphasis on real apprehension allows students to reach for a sense as close as one can come to how these religious particulars might feel from the inside and a concomitant sense of religious difference.

Perhaps the repressed eighteenth century and notional apprehension will one day return. Study of pilgrimage, temples, and other devotional and meditative sites might eventually turn to close reading and reflection on classic texts. In most contemporary settings, however, students will first have to engage in various forms of real apprehension of what Newman calls “religion” or “devotion.” In large general education classes, this might prove particularly difficult and necessarily limited to pale reflections of what I’ve tried to describe above.

As a cultural residue in many cases, a strong commitment in relatively few others, Christianity in its varied forms remains one among possible traditions to be studied in comparative theology, and, given our location in a largely post-Christian culture, perhaps emphasized, especially at church-related schools.
Whatever develops, perhaps everyone can agree on a basic Newmanian Student Learning Outcome something like this: Students will gain a real, not necessarily notional, apprehension of two or more religious families or traditions; neither real nor notional assent required.

Works Cited


