

# The 4th R: Encountering Conservative Christianity in the Classroom

*By Rebecca Barrett-Fox*

*Jesus is my friend...I don't want to disappoint Him. To me, He's not dead; He's alive. I don't want anyone to get talked out of believing in him just because some professor thinks he should.*

—Josh Wheaton, *God's Not Dead*

I walk into class on the first day, scanning my roster and my classroom for visible signs of difference—or lack thereof—that are likely to affect how my students relate to each other and to me, and that may shape how they approach, engage, and use the material presented in the college classroom. I think deeply about the kinds of differences that are not visible yet are present—in sexual orientation, in family status, in invisible disabilities, and in other categories—and adopt a universal design for learning that seeks to meet the needs of all students, respectfully engaging them and supporting them in their studies. I teach explicitly about the community of the

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classroom. I check in with students regularly, asking them to reflect on their learning. I feel good about my sensitivity to students' unique backgrounds. Then, I unsuspectingly stumble over a landmine: conservative Christianity.

During a discussion, a student becomes offended, angry, hurt, undermined. A parent may threaten to get involved. The dean offers encouragement in her office but shows me a drawer full of handwritten notes she has collected from parents over the years complaining about an

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anti-Christian bias in a variety of classes: anthropology, biology, geology, physics, sociology, social work, and more. I am confused. *I wasn't even teaching about religion.* But, my students remind me, I was. For much of what I teach, while not explicitly about religion, rubs up against the religious beliefs of students in ways that challenge them dramatically. This article examines how scripts that circulate among culturally and theologically conser-

vative Christian students, whether they are categorized as “born again,” “Religious Right,” “Christian Right,” “nondenominational,” “evangelical,” or “fundamental,” aim to prime students for the college classroom. Teaching in this context, of course, can affect professors in all disciplines in that we all (presumably) ask students to question the epistemological frameworks they bring with them to college. As professors, we all (presumably) hope that education can transform individuals and communities, alleviate suffering, and reduce oppression, that our students will be both freer and more responsible for having engaged critically with their world. Many of our conservative Christian students would similarly argue that “truth sets free,” but they may have a very different view of both truth and freedom, one informed by scripts that they have heard since infancy and that are emphasized as they enter college. Professors whose work is explicitly concerned about inequality and social justice may be particularly suspect and subjected to arguments rooted in such scripts.

Political and religious orientation have overtly little to do with most

college courses, though like other kinds of identity markers, religion intersects with race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, etc., and all education is inherently political.<sup>1</sup>

The problem is not that course content veers inappropriately into the territory of religion; rather, the challenge is that, for religiously conservative students (as for many religiously liberal ones), religion is expansive, covering all areas of social life. Indeed, for religiously conservative students, religion is one of the defining parts of their identity, and its influence over their behaviors and thoughts does not end at the church door. To distinguish between secular and sacred life would not only be impossible for them, but a sign of weak faith. Religion permeates all parts of their identity, and they are encouraged by their religious leaders not to surrender that in any context—not at the ballot box, not in the classroom. Thus, issues that may not seem to be religious to non-believers may be highly fraught with religious meaning for religious conservatives, so that discussions of American education are “tinged... with an eschatological hue.”<sup>2</sup> In this way, even the most religiously indifferent professor must recognize the veracity of Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen and Douglas Jacobsen’s warning that “religion is educationally unavoidable.”<sup>3</sup>

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In particular, the “culture war” issues described by James Hunter Davison in 1991—the origins of the universe and human life, politics, economics, poverty, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—are special “hot spots” that arouse impassioned conservative political *and* theological engagement, and remain areas of potential conflict in the classroom. For example, the basic principle of cultural relativism, central to investigation of cultures other than one’s own, challenges the exclusivity of conservative Christianity’s claim that it alone is the correct religion; hence, the term is often muddled with moral relativism and used with derision by right-leaning groups.<sup>4</sup> When educators ignore the salience of religion for

students, they risk “proceed[ing] on the assumption that God is either dead or irrelevant,” an assumption not shared by students.<sup>5</sup>

#### LEARNING THE SCRIPT

Conservative Christian students may enter the university primed to be defensive and distrustful, having been warned that, especially at a secular university, professors’ goals are to dissuade them from religious

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belief. Christian publishers, event planners, filmmakers, and church leaders actively warn students of the dangerous terrain that the secular university presents to them. Summit Ministries, for example, offers two-week intensive summer courses, aimed at advanced high school through college-age students, where students are socialized to see themselves as warriors fighting against secular professors. (For their time, they earn credit through

Bryan College, a small evangelical college named after William Jennings Bryan, the great orator who, among many other accomplishments, argued against teaching evolution at the Scopes Trial, the 1925 legal case that upheld the illegality of teaching evolution in the state of Tennessee). The Summit Ministries registration website reminds students:

You are engaged in a battle. Ideas come at you from every direction, and few know how to make sense of the world. Few know how to think Christianly. Few know what they believe; and fewer still, why they believe it. Equip yourself. Learn to equip others.<sup>6</sup>

According to Summit Ministries, professors will indoctrinate students with messages supporting feminism, Marxism, secular humanism, and postmodernism. The result, according to Summit’s website, is that “[an] alarming number of Christians stumble while in college and around half will renounce their faith because they simply do not have

a defense for what they believe.” To effectively counter the appeal of alternative ideologies that might tempt students away from evangelical belief, students must be rooted in a “Biblical worldview” that promotes traditional gender roles, heteronormativity, capitalism, and American exceptionalism. Students are not safe even in Christian colleges, according to fundamentalists such as Ken Ham, CEO of Answers in Genesis and co-author, with Greg Hall, of *Already Compromised*, which argues that Christian colleges’ failure to teach creationism shows how far secular humanism has infected even conservative educational settings.

The central image of professors in such texts is as “an elitist class of intellectuals [who seek] to police the thought of those Americans whom they [believe cling] to racist, sexist, jingoistic, and other atavistic attitudes.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the “professor as adversary” has found its best

expression in *God’s Not Dead*, a critically panned but popular (among its targeted audience of conservative Christians) 2014 film about a college student challenged by his philosophy professor to prove God’s existence. Josh, the protagonist, is warned to expect his faith to be tested in an introductory philosophy class, which another student compares to “the Colosseum,” taught by Dr. Radisson, played by actor Kevin Sorbo, an outspoken conservative Christian.<sup>8</sup> On the first day of class, students are instructed to write “God is dead” on a slip of paper, but Josh Wheaton (whose name recalls Wheaton College, a leading evangelical Christian college and home to evangelist Billy Graham’s archives), a Christian, refuses. Dr. Radisson demands that he prove the existence of God before the end of the semester. The battle between them becomes more than academic as the professor stops him in the hallway, forcefully placing a hand on Josh’s shoulder and turning him around to sneeringly announce, “In that classroom, there is a God—and I’m him.”

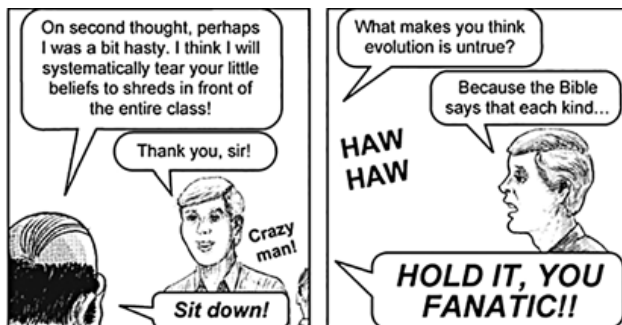
In the culmination of the film, as Josh debates his professor, who has

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previously warned him “Do you think you’re smarter than me, Wheaton? Do you think there is any argument you can make that I won’t have an answer for?” Josh bypasses scholarly arguments about the existence of God and penetrates the heart of his professor by asking him directly, “Why do you hate God?” The professor must confront his own reasons for feeling that God has failed him, and Josh “witnesses” to the other students in the class. The film includes all the stereotypes of the secular university professor—atheistic, cold, arrogant, and dismissive of students—in contrast to the humble but brave student.

A similar character appears in a tract by Jack Chick, a fundamentalist cartoon artist known for his hellfire-and-brimstone pamphlets. In “Big Daddy?,” a college professor threatens to throw a student out of the class for politely indicating that he does not believe in evolution. The professor immediately changes his mind, however, to humiliate the student in class. (See image 1.)

Image 1.



The two engage in an argument about the scientific validity of evolution versus creationism, and the professor begins to lose his cool, superior attitude. (Literally, he starts to sweat profusely.) Soon he cedes authority in his own classroom, asking the student to explain the origins of life *to him*. (See image 2). By the end of the tract, he accepts the fact that evolution is wrong and takes down the beloved image of “the missing link” that decorated his office. He informs his administration that he can no longer in good conscience teach evolution, only to be treated with the same scorn that he had earlier heaped upon the student (See image 3.), who is now leading the class toward the “Sinner’s Prayer”—a simple prayer



that, from an evangelical perspective, insures salvation and that ends each Chick tract. The “Big Daddy” on campus ends up being Our Heavenly Father, not the arrogant professor, now humbled before God but fired by his secular university.

Image 2.

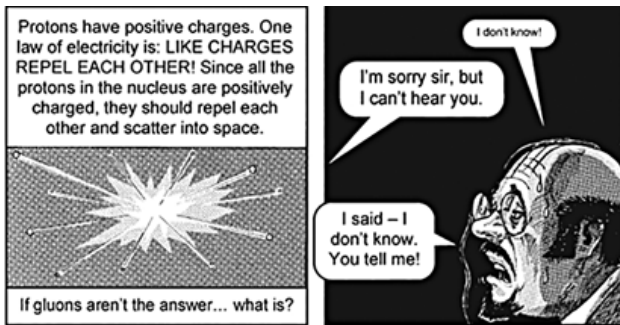
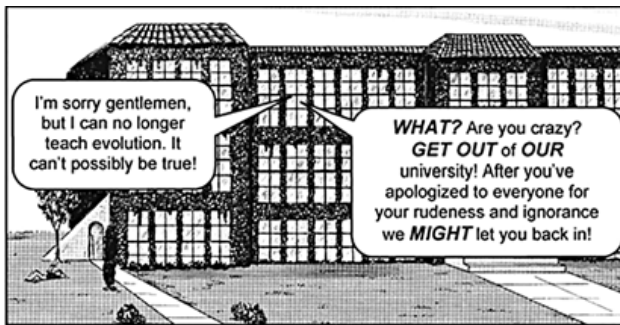


Image 3.



Such images appear not only in Christian education, filmmaking, and publishing, but in the imaginations of students readied to see their professors not as guides to help them develop their critical thinking skills, but as adversaries and even as potential mission fields, potential recruits to their religion. Real students, not just ones in comic strips and movies, feel similarly threatened when confronted by what they perceive to be anti-religious professors. In 2013, Dr. Deandre Poole, an instructor at Florida Atlantic University, asked students in his intercultural communication course to write the word “Jesus” on a piece of paper, then place it on the ground and step on it. The lesson, which was suggested in the instructor’s

guide in his textbook, invited students to think about their discomfort at violating a cultural norm—even though, unlike Islam, Christianity, generally speaking, has no proscriptions against placing religious objects on the ground or handling them in such ways. Unlike in *God's Not Dead*, students were not singled out, given extra assignments, or threatened with failure of the course if they did not comply. Instead, the exercise was designed to open class discussion about how, across cultures, different

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words and images may be treated in different ways. A student grew agitated during the class period, according to Poole, and confronted him after class, repeating his angry question, "How dare you disrespect someone's religion?" only this time, according to Poole, "hitting his balled fist into his other hand and saying that 'he wanted to hit me.'" While the student did not do so, Poole said he was alarmed and notified campus security and filed a

report about the student's threatening behavior.<sup>9</sup>

As the story spread with headlines that Poole, a leader in the Lighthouse Worship Center, a Church of God in Christ, a historically black Pentecostal denomination, received death threats so frightening (and many of them containing language that used racially terroristic language toward Poole, a Black man) that the university placed him on paid leave for fear for his safety.<sup>10</sup> Stories such as this one circulate in conservative Christian media, told from the students' perspective without regard for any pedagogical value in the assignment, lending legitimacy to the idea that professors are anti-religious and force students to renounce their faith. Indeed, even other professors, such as Paul Kengor, from the very conservative Grove City College near Pittsburgh, shared on Fox News that Poole's lesson plan is symptomatic of broader hatred for religion on college campuses, claiming the assignment "reflects the rising confidence and aggression of the new secularists and atheists, especially at our sick and surreal modern universities."<sup>11</sup>



Right-wing commentators missed the point of Poole's lesson—which worked, ironically, better than expected because its very goal was to invite students to share their unease (if they had any) and think self-reflectively about it. According to James W. Neuliep, the Catholic professor at St. Norbert College who wrote the textbook from which the exercise came, after being instructed to step on the word Jesus, “Most will hesitate. Ask [them] why they can't step on the paper. Discuss the importance of symbols in culture.”<sup>12</sup> But the student, who complained to the local news station after the incident, “Anytime you stomp on something it shows that you believe that something has no value. So if you were to stomp on the word Jesus, it says that the word has no value,” didn't learn the intended lesson.<sup>13</sup> The story was picked up as another version of *God's Not Dead* with a heroic student battling an oppressive professor.

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#### THE DEVIL IN THE CLASSROOM?

Despite the promotion in Christian media of such stories as Poole's, which cast Christian students as victims initially but victors ultimately, students may be rightly concerned that an outspoken defense of Christianity will have adverse effects on their academic success. “Personal talk about religion and spirituality [may] count as a negatively valued form of cultural capital in the upper echelons of the academic universe,” argue Neil Gross and Solon Simmons in “How Religious Are America's College and University Professors?”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Gross and Simmons report that faculty are hostile to the integration of religion into college curriculum and to practices that go “too far” to accommodate students' religious views, especially “if these [practices] conflict with the demands of science or higher learning.”<sup>15</sup>

Students also may experience anxiety that they will “become more secular as their atheist professors call into question the value of religion,”

but the source of their secularization, if it actually happens, may not, in fact, be faculty. The characterization of faculty as anti-religion seems “implausible as a broad generalization,” suggest Gross and Simmons, given that most faculty members express religious belief of some sort and “the bulk of the teaching function in American colleges and universities is being carried out by academicians who are personally sympathetic to religion, albeit not in the most traditional forms.”<sup>16</sup> Elaine Howard Eckland

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suggests that the number of science professors at elite universities who are vocally anti-religious is just five percent.<sup>17</sup> If the group appears more numerous, it may be because its members are vocal. Indeed, the majority of professors—even those who are not religious—do not see themselves as hostile to faith, though they are far more likely to report dislike for conservative Christians than other religious groups.<sup>18</sup> In their survey of profes-

sors, Gross and Simmons note that more than 80 percent of respondents agreed with the statement “American colleges and universities’ welcome students of faith,” with the highest level of disagreement at community colleges and the lowest at doctoral granting institutions.<sup>19</sup> Further, most professors (81 percent) claim some kind of religious belief, with variation according to the institution, the discipline, and the religion.<sup>20</sup> Academics, in general, are more politically left-leaning *because* they are less likely to be religious, more likely to be Jewish, and less likely to be theologically conservative Protestant.<sup>21</sup> However, interviews with high-profile scholars who are religious suggest that they do not face discrimination.<sup>22</sup>

In some regards, professors actually may have much in common with the religiously devout. Both may be concerned with inequalities that cause human suffering; both hold that “life-and-death matters are not only intellectual interests but also realities that we are called to collectively act upon and change,” a central tenet of feminist, socialist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-heteronormative social justice-orientated pedagogy

and many kinds of religious faith.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, evangelical Christians support some of the widest-ranging efforts to end human misery, including anti-trafficking measures, drug rehabilitation programs, orphanages, hospitals, and schools. Worldwide, organizations such as the evangelical World Vision work to end poverty and suffering, goals shared by globally-minded scholars. Despite this, conservatives are warned to avoid college majors considered “impenetrable islands of leftism (e.g., sociology, social work, women’s studies, and ethnic studies) that may be impervious to outside perspectives.”<sup>24</sup>

#### DIFFERENT SOURCES, SHARED VISIONS

The problem is not that politically left-leaning, less-religious-than-average professors do not share the same concerns as politically and theologically conservative Christian students. The problem, when that professor triggers the landmine of conservative Christianity in their classroom, is that they see the source of the problems as fundamentally different. For example, sociologists are, by definition, interested in the *social* roots of social problems. In adopting “a sociological perspective,” they seek the source of inequality (and its solution) in structures. By contrast, religiously conservative students may find the source of social problems in supernatural sources or in individual bad choices. Both of these “Christian” explanations, though, are rooted in sin. As one student explained to me in an anonymous reflection at the end of a sociology course,

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From the Christian perspective of Genesis 3 (The Fall), everything talked about in this class makes sense. Sociology knows that there is something incredibly wrong with the world and tries to explain it through all of these theories and generalizations but there’s only one truth that makes it all come together and that is we are living in a fallen world that needs [to be] redeemed.

From this perspective, sociology helps us see the evidence of the problem—poverty, racism, sexism, economic exploitation—but the source is human sin. And the only real answer is Jesus. Because of humankind’s sin nature—*original sin*—all people are prone to make choices that result in harm to themselves and others.

Exploitation, in other words, is in our nature, and our social arrangements simply reflect that rather than create it. Ellen Messer-Davidow, University of Minnesota English professor, sees the desire to blame the individual as inherent in a politically conservative position: “The negativity ... in attributing the problems of individuals to their sex or race, rather than to their social circumstances is, of course, symptomatic of ... sexism and racism but even more fundamentally of ... profound pessimism about human nature.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, while Christian students may reject Nietzsche’s assertion that “God is dead,” the conservative Christian belief that the very nature of humanity is to exploit others is perhaps more nihilistic than anything that purportedly atheist professor ever wrote. **nea**

## ENDNOTES

1. Carnoy, “Education as Cultural Imperialism,” pp. 688-90; Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy*; Apple, *Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age*.
2. Hartman, “A Trojan Horse For Social Engineering’: The Curriculum Wars In Recent American History,” p. 114.
3. Hudstedt Jacobsen and Jacobsen. *No Longer Invisible: Religion in University Education*, p. vii.
4. See, for example, Knight, *The Age of Consent: The Rise of Relativism and the Corruption of Popular Culture*, with a forward written by Gary Bauer, former Family Research Council president.
5. Nord. *Does God Make a Difference?: Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities*, p. 4.
6. Summit Ministries’ website may be viewed at: [www.summit.org](http://www.summit.org).
7. Hartman, “A Trojan Horse,” p. 129.
8. Sorbo came under fire in 2014, around the same time this film was released, for racist comments, some of which he retracted, and anti-Semitic comments.
9. Jaschik. “I Was Doing my Job.”
10. Bluemke. “The ‘Stomp on Jesus’ Professor Finally Tells his Side of the Story.”
11. Starnes. “Professor Makes Students ‘Stomp on Jesus.’”
12. Drake. “Stepping on Jesus Classroom Exercise Developed by Professor at Catholic College.”
13. CBS4. “FAU Professor in ‘Jesus stomping’ Incident Placed on Administrative Leave.”
14. Gross and Simmons, “How Religious are America’s College and University Professors?”
15. Gross and Simmons, “The Religiosity of American College and University Professors,” p. 124.

16. *Ibid*, p. 125.
17. Eckland. *Science v. Religion: What Scientists Really Think*, p. 105.
18. Yancey et al., "How Academics View Conservative Protestants," p. 331.
19. Gross and Simmons, "How Religious are America's College and University Professors?"
20. *Ibid*.
21. Fosse and Gross. "Why are Professors Liberal?" pp. 159-62.
22. Bartlett, "Some Evangelicals Find the Campus Climate Chilly—But Is That About Faith, or Politics?," pp. B6-B8.
23. Hobgood, "Feminist Classrooms as Counterpublic Spaces: Notes on the Education They Provide and the Challenges They Face," p. 192. This is not to suggest that non-religious students do not share these concerns too, only that religious students may have particular religious motivations for their engagement with these issues.
24. Maranto and Woessner. "Diversifying the Academy: How Conservative Academics can Thrive in Liberal Academia," p. 471.
25. Messer-Davidow, "The Right Moves: Conservatism and Higher Education," p. 56.

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