

***OBJECTIVITY AND PEDAGOGY IN THE
SECULAR DISCIPLINE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES
— THE PRACTICAL CONCERNS***

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My primary concern here with the problem of objectivity is how it can be achieved in the classroom (which may or may not be distinct from the issue of how it can be achieved in scholarship). The concern nevertheless is both theoretical and practical. My task is to establish a theoretical model for objectivity within classroom procedure that is practically applicable. It should work in a secular school like Indiana University of Pennsylvania on the Armstrong County campus where nearly all the students are Christian and white. It should work equally well at Temple University in Philadelphia where a much greater racial and religious diversity flourishes.

My position is that the classroom itself is the focus of objectivity and not the people in the classroom. I believe objectivity of a significant sort is possible by establishing a neutral arena of discussion and dialogue in the classroom. In this neutral arena, all points of view about particular issues can find expression, and all perspectives can rationally compare their understanding with others.

What is at stake here concerning objectivity? In the United States, a great deal. Several scholars and theologians in the United States, among them Langdon Gilky, Stanley Hauerwas and Ronald Thiemann have waged or are waging a campaign to reinstate theology as a liberal arts discipline replacing religious studies as it has been practiced over the past few decades. Their

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basic argument is that religious studies as a critical discipline fails in its claim to objectivity or religious neutrality. It advocates its own anti- or nonreligious point of view with as much bias as any theologically based framework of understanding. Since objectivity is impossible, the secular claims against theology's inclusion in the liberal arts are empty.²

The debate concerning objectivity further disturbs those of us who would like to see the study of religion extended in a constitutionally appropriate way to the public secondary schools. Can we not live up to the standards set up by the Supreme Court in *Abington v. Schempp* that separate courses teaching about religion from the advocacy of religion?³ Is it practically impossible to do so?

The most powerful case against objectivity rests on what Richard J. Bernstein calls the “new relativism”, a relativism arising from a confluence of philosophical and hermeneutical movements rooted both in American pragmatism and philosophy

² See Brian J. Walsh, *Langdon Gilky: Theologian for a Culture in Decline* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1991); Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1991); Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Society* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). For an extended discussion of the issue see George M. Marsden, “The Soul of the American University: An Historical Overview”, in *The Secularization of the Academy* edited by George M. Marsden and Brandley J. Longfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 9-45.

³ For an extended discussion about these issues, see Nicholas Piediscalzi and William E. Collie, *Teaching About Religion in Public Schools* (Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1977); Robert L. Van Dale, “Religious Values and Secular Humanism in the Schools”, *Religious Education*, Vol. 80, 1984, pp. 16-28.

of science and in the continental hermeneutical traditions.⁴ This new relativism holds that objectivity is impossible in any secular settings that try to distance themselves from theology's traditionally normative claims. Objectivity is impossible because all teaching about religion is value laden. A value free, descriptive approach is impossible because knowledge and understanding are the result of highlighting, that is, selectivity based on presuppositions and prejudices reflecting value choices that are always culture bound and usually implicit or unstated. These values lead to points of view governed by presuppositions about the metaphysical and ontological status of the sacred, attesting to or denying its existence. Therefore, all pedagogy about religion is theological in one way or another.

The new relativists conclude that these presuppositions and prejudices often form conflicting or contradictory frameworks of understanding. No adjudication is possible between conflicting frameworks of understanding because no grounds for such critical adjudication can be absolutely established. Different frameworks offer different critical methods and criteria for selecting evidence, admitting allowable hypotheses, and judging conformational weight and criteria of acceptability. No over-arching metaframework exists or could be established logically to judge among these conflicting criteria since the very issue of critical foundations is open to question. Besides, the concepts, definitions and theoretical constructs used in any of these frameworks depend for their meaning on the context in which they are embedded. To attempt to translate them from one context to another leads inevitably to a misreading or misunderstanding of their meaning.⁵

⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

⁵ For a discussion of the ethical implications of these issues see Richard Kearney, "Ethics and the Post Modern Imagination", *Thought*, Vol. 62, no. 244, pp. 39-58.

The radical conclusion the new relativists draw is that all ideas or concepts are bound by a hermeneutic circle that acts as an imprisoning framework of understanding from which no one can escape. Each of us reads and understands from our historical and cultural epoch, with its linguistic, religious, cultural and ideational horizons. Others who inhabit different horizons will understand differently. Inevitably we must concede to the relativism of each point of view.

According to the new relativists, no instructors stand outside their own tradition. We all must teach from within our horizon of understanding. Our perspective or framework, be it religious or nonreligious, is inescapable. We are bound to it by our history, our language, our culture. The prejudices and presuppositions, conscious or unconscious, confessed or not, govern what we say and teach. They determine the methods we use to judge the importance or validity of the responses of students.

Practically this leads to serious problems for teachers who intend to provide in the classroom an understanding of a variety of differing religious faiths or positions. The limited time means some selection must be made. Not all faith positions can be represented and those that are, cannot all be represented equally. That selection will be made according to the instructor's ideas of what is of primary importance and what is not.

Thus, the inevitable power of the instructor makes any true objectivity impossible. Likewise, each participant comes with their own framework of faith and understanding. None can be asked to step out of that position because it is simply impossible to free oneself of its influences.

If this is the case, then with all due fairness, to give preference to one stance over another is unjust. Limiting the discourse to a method of evaluation from one historical tradition (say that of the enlightenment) is arbitrary. Its only defense is political hegemony. Theological advocates should have the same rights to the curriculum as those who make bogus claims to objectivity or

neutrality. In fact, the theologians have a better claim because they are at least honest about their biases.

We do not have enough time here to explore any of these ideas in detail. I am sure you are all familiar with the discussions that lay behind the clichéd phrases outlined above. I must confess that I am not entirely convinced by any of the arguments that back up these claims. However, that is another book.

Still several responses to the new relativism on this matter are inadequate. One is the strategy of retreating to the scientific method as the premier activity for gaining knowledge about the world “with cautions concerning the harmful effects of the hermeneutic method” as recommended by E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley.⁶ This retreat is based on a naive notion of scientific method that has lost currency. It has done so not so much because of any acceptance of the hermeneutical method or any other continental ways of thinking. Rather the influence of philosophical investigations of the scientific method and correlative notions of evidence, confirmation, theory change, and the structure of scientific knowledge have rendered it obsolete. Debates on these issues by Kuhn, Popper, Feyerabend, Lakatos and Toulmin have launched an era of what Bernstein calls “post-empiricism” in the philosophy of science.⁷ The very model of science as a value-free, unbiased method for establishing a purely descriptive, objective truth has proved to be highly questionable. This strategy consequently fails to answer the theological critique that the scientism is biased against the theological claims.

Another option is to retreat to safe pedagogical methods like the Bible as Literature course, where all sectarian controversy is banished from the class as irrelevant. Students read sacred texts as products of human creativity in the same way they might read

⁶ E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, “Crisis of Conscience, Riddle of Identity”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LKI/2, pp. 201-223.

⁷ For a full discussion of the movement see Bernstein, pp. 1-49.

Shakespeare or Hemingway.⁸ This approach has serious shortcomings, not the least of which is a tendency to ignore the most crucial aspects of religious life and practice. Sacred texts derive their meaning from a context of ritual and strongly held beliefs and values. To ignore this context to avoid controversy not only leads to serious misreadings of texts, it also misses the basic critical purpose of the liberal arts curriculum to provide a place where controversy and debate can responsibly take place.

A third approach is a pre-emptive admission of an instructor's bias. This usually takes the form of a "here I stand" statement at the beginning of the class excusing the instructor from any attempts at an impossible neutrality. This approach makes good sense as far as it goes. However, it cannot insure objectivity. It concedes the impossibility of objectivity and only makes the inherent biases explicit. It ignores the reality that every student in the classroom also learns from a context or framework of understanding that might need to be heard or explored as well.⁹

A fourth solution I find inadequate is Robert C. Neville's notion of universal application of critical method. Neville holds that objectivity in the classroom is feasible as long as any position or framework under discussion is subject to rational criticism.¹⁰ Neville ignores the difficulty that different frameworks of understanding make competing claims for critical relevance. What counts for logical discourse or relevant evidence in one framework may not count in another. How are we to choose the

⁸ See John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986; John R. Whitney, "Introducing Religious Literature in Pennsylvania Schools", *Religious Education*, Vol. LXII, no 2, 1968.

⁹ This position was advanced by Franklin Littel in an unpublished speech before the Intellectual Heritage Program, Temple University, Philadelphia Pa. March 15, 1991.

¹⁰ See Robert C. Neville, "Religious Studies and Theological Studies", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXI/2, pp. 185-200.

one universal method of rational criticism, the single set of rules of evidence that would be acceptable to all?

In spite of the failure of these alternatives, I want to claim that we need not agree with the conclusions of the new relativists even if we accept many of their premises. We certainly need not accept the conclusion that objectivity of any kind in the classroom is impossible or that some theological positions must stand as absolute no matter how we conduct ourselves. Nor should we conclude that religious studies has no place in the liberal arts as a distinct and separate discipline or that theology should have the predominant place in the liberal arts as a critique of and alternative to secularity.¹¹

I will grant, however, that if new relativism is correct, absolute objectivity on an individual's part, that kind of objectivity once promoted by the positivist sciences, despite framework, cultural positioning, etc., is impossible. None of us, as individuals in a particular time and place, can claim personal objectivity. No matter how hard we try, it is impossible to completely abandon our personal biases and prejudices in the classroom.

While granting these concessions, I hold three basic objections to the new relativist line of thinking. I will offer them here without adequate proof or discussion. First, nothing the new relativists have pointed out proves to me that incommensurate frameworks of understanding must inevitably remain incommensurate. Quite simply, we can learn about what others think and believe. We can provisionally and competently enter alternative and even contradictory frameworks of understanding and discourse. We can communicate what we learn when we do so to students. We move from one framework to another throughout the day and the night (as Alfred Schutz points out in his description of "finite provinces of meaning") from waking to sleep,

¹¹ For a history and discussion of the issue on a broader scale see Martin M. Marty "Committing the Study of Religion in Public", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LVII/1, pp. 1-22.

from work to play, from church to theater, to novel, to classroom to laboratory.¹² We humans have a nearly magical capacity to leap from one mode of experiencing and understanding to another. I see no reason this capacity should not be extended to other faiths, cultures, genders, and even other historical epochs, given the right kinds of training and information.

Second, nothing the new relativists point out proves that all interpretive or truth value judgments have equal status. Certainly this is not so within particular frameworks of understanding. Nor is it the case with assertions or ideas that can be translated from one framework to another. The marginal cases are those ideas or judgments that have an ascertainable interpretation or truth value in one framework, but cannot be easily translated into another, or, when translated, find a different truth value. However, the fact that these judgments are undecided or untranslated does not necessarily imply they are undecidable or untranslatable. Here again, greater understanding and insight may allow more careful and legitimate correspondence to be drawn between frameworks. Scholars can and do make progress in understanding. So can students.

¹² Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

Finally, I believe the new relativists, in their critique of the notion of the overarching framework of criticism, have overlooked the fact that all frameworks of understanding can and should be subject to critical comparison from any of the other points of view. This inter-framework dialogue broadens the horizons of each participant, and occurs so commonly that we often ignore it. Marxists talk to Christians, Christians to Jews, Jews to Hindus and Hindus to Freudians, women to men and vice versa. I have watched it happen in colloquia and classrooms. Agreement may be rare and fleeting. However, critical comparisons make sense to most participants of good faith. People agree to disagree, but do so with new insights and understanding. Again, learning is possible.

Although we are not locked into a particular framework of understanding, most of us have a particular framework in which we function or play best. To change metaphors for a moment, if Wittgenstein's concept of "language game"¹³ is correlative to the concept of "framework of faith" or "finite province of meaning" then there are some games I play very well (I grew up playing this game, speaking this language, living in this world of meaning), some I play fairly well (I have learned and practiced them) but not up to the level of my best game, and some games I do not or cannot play at all presently. If I am teaching, it makes sense that I should be teaching my best games and should leave those other games to the better players. Here I find myself in some agreement, I think, with the new relativists.

To take the metaphor only one step further, I would contend, opposing the new relativists, that the classroom is an intellectual arena or stadium in which any number or variety of games can be legitimately played, any number of frameworks of understanding can be introduced and explored, compared and evaluated from any of the points of view represented. The classroom becomes, then, a zone of intellectual free play, and I mean "play" here much in the same sense that Hans Georg Gadamer uses the term in *Truth and*

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1953), Sections 1-27.

Method, as a to-and-fro, intellectual exchange between participants.¹⁴

While all these games can be played according to their own rules, nevertheless the classroom itself, if it is to function in what I consider an objective mode, must still observe a set of principles that allow the games, in this case, discourse about religion, to continue. One such principle is, the “spoilsport” cannot be allowed to wreck the games. No one can predetermine, in this ideal classroom, the unique and singular point of view from which all other points of view will be judged, either by establishing a rule forbidding a hearing for such points of view, or by predetermining judgmental or methodological criteria. This is the basic objection I have to replacing religious studies with theology in the liberal arts curriculum. If that replacement would mean that a particular theological point of view would be sacrosanct, not allowing equal time and consideration to other conflicting faith or non faith positions, then theology has no place in the liberal arts course of study.

This does not mean that such a “spoilsport” point of view would not get a hearing or a chance to play. In fact, such points of view should be invited to play. They might even win or convince people of their accuracy or truth. The principle only insists that no single point of view, theological or nontheological, can assume the stance of preliminary rule maker.

Another condition for objectivity is that the goal of the classroom, or the teaching process, is understanding, as opposed to the transmission of value neutral data or facts. This presupposition depends on the distinction between strategic or instrumental activity and communicative action oriented to mutual understanding. It should be somewhat obvious that I do not hold that the ultimate goal of communicative discourse is necessarily

¹⁴ See Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Second Revised Edition) Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 110-134.

agreement, as does Hannah Arendt writing about the realm of political discourse.¹⁵

A third condition of this approach to teaching is that every concept and every framework brought up in the classroom is open to critical comparison with any other framework, tradition, belief, or outlook. No one tradition or framework holds the ultimate criteria for truth. The logical or interpretive rules change from one realm of discourse to another. Each should be able to use them in voicing its position. But the rules themselves are also open for critical comparison. One important component of the dialogue between frameworks consists of trying to understand how and why a particular point of view moves from its premises to its conclusions. Here again, students can be invited to learn alternate methods or criteria and try them out in provisional ways.¹⁶

What does all this imply in practical terms? The classroom should become a place where the process of coming to understand a religious faith or form of life can be fostered by allowing nearly anything to be said. It is a place where “anything goes” in the sense that no position is forbidden expression, no idea is too wild, crazy or improper to be expressed. All viewpoints are encouraged rather than prohibited including the biased, normative, theological or nontheological position of the instructor. However, once a concept or idea is introduced, it becomes vulnerable to critique

¹⁵ For a full discussion of these issues, see Bernstein, pp. 171-223. See also Matthew Lamb, “Communicative Praxis and Theology: Beyond Modern Nihilism and Dogmatism”, in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*. Edited by Don S. Browning and Francis Schussler D. Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 92-118.

¹⁶ For a more extended discussion of the issues see Hans H. Penner, “Rationality and Religion: Problems in the Comparison of Modes of Thought”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LIV/4, pp. 645-671; See also John Beattie, “On Understanding Ritual”, in *Rationality*. Edited by Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), pp. 240-271.

from all sides. No hypothesis is protected. No idea is sacred. While “anything goes”, not everything stays.

The classroom must be set up to not only allow but encourage sectarian dialogue, debate and even emotionally laden conflict. The instructor is a participant in this process. It is appropriate at times for the instructor to not only say “Here I stand” but also to argue passionately for her own point of view.

However, the instructor must also serve as a referee, an umpire, in this free play, making sure that as many points of view come to the fore as possible, and making sure that the blocks and barriers to free expression are eliminated to the fullest extent possible. In this sense, authority is an essential part of the pedagogical context. The same is true in grading and evaluation of intellectual responses and products such as papers and exams. Granted, the issues of power and fairness are made more difficult because of the need to consider an individual's framework of understanding in assessing their work. Still, the liberal arts classroom is, itself, a context that provides rules and criteria for judgment, and those rules as well are subject to critique and discussion. The fact remains that not all interpretative expressions are of equal worth, not all uses of language are correct, not all critiques as insightful or competent as others.

One problem with this approach in practical terms is that time is finite and that an infinite number of points of view on any topic are possible. Classes meet only a few times per week. No instruction can be completed or finished within the allotted time. Selectivity is practically inevitable. Not all points of view can be seriously considered and not all considered can be explored to the same extent. Would this not make some kinds of bias inevitable?

It does only if we consider the classroom and the instructional arena to be physically confined by the space and time of the course. Once an arena of discourse is established, that arena can extend indefinitely. One of my greatest joys is finding a former student at my office door still debating, researching, exploring and dialoguing about an issue that emerged in a classroom discussion.

Another and perhaps more serious problem arises with this method in Kittanning, the small Pennsylvania campus where nearly everyone is white and Christian. When one student speaks, nearly all the heads in the class nod in synchronic affirmation. I simply do not have the diversity of students I need to make the arena pluralistic and diverse. My strategy here is to import. I bring in as many other points of view as I can through guest and

other faculty lectures, visits to religious services, and the assumption of opposing positions myself during discussions. My strategy is to “be where the students ain’t”,¹⁷ when necessary. This leads me to voice points of view other than my own and to ask the students to provisionally enter frameworks of understanding other than their own. I ask questions like, “What would a Muslim think of what you just said? How do you think that idea would be criticized by a Marxist?” This technique gives me and the students an opportunity to practice other “games” or explore other frameworks critiquing our own point of view from outside.

Why does this notion of objectivity succeed where others might fail? It answers the objection of the new relativists and theologians concerning the impossibility of individual objectivity. It posits the classroom as the realm of objective discourse and not the individual mind. It requires no one to be objective, or pretend to be so, in their personal outlook. It assumes, allows, and encourages conflicting truth claims, and conflicting standards that adjudicate between conflicting claims. It does not, however, assume or advocate a single standard of critical evaluation nor any single framework as encompassing the truth. Individuals in the class may form their own conclusions. However, that is not this method's goal. The goal (itself open to debate) is understanding oneself and each other. The strategy mimics or models the world of discourse in general where a plurality of points of view are in constant conflict, but hopefully makes the discussion safer, less hierarchical, less dominated by issues of power, wealth, class, and gender. It answers the theological critique that secularisms dominates the classroom. It offers a place where any theological position can get a hearing, but not dominate. Finally, the approach is fun, and, on a good day, it works.

¹⁷ My strategy is derived from a therapeutic application of the same notion by Sheldon Kopp in *The Hanged Man: Psychotherapy and the Forces of Darkness* (Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1974), p. 53.

SOMMAIRE

***PÉDAGOGIE, OBJECTIVITÉ ET
ENSEIGNEMENT NON-CONFESSIONNEL DE LA
RELIGION
CONSIDÉRATIONS PRATIQUES***

Plusieurs universitaires et théologiens américains mènent présentement une campagne en vue de réintégrer la théologie dans les «sciences humaines» et de remplacer ainsi les sciences religieuses, qui ont occupé cette place durant les dernières décennies. Leur argument principal est que les sciences religieuses ont échoué en tant que discipline critique dans leur volonté d'objectivité et de neutralité religieuses. Elles défendraient leur propre point de vue anti-religieux ou non religieux avec tout autant de parti-pris que le ferait n'importe quel cadre interprétatif fondé sur la théologie. Puisque l'objectivité est impossible, alors l'opposition à l'intégration de la théologie dans les sciences humaines et les «humanités» serait non fondée.

Je m'inscris en faux contre une telle opinion en me basant sur l'idée que l'objectivité, dans une salle de classe, constitue une chose parfaitement réalisable. C'est la classe elle-même, et non ceux qui l'occupent, qui constitue le foyer de l'objectivité. Je crois qu'il est possible de parvenir à une assez grande objectivité en faisant de la classe une arène de discussion fondée sur la neutralité ainsi qu'en établissant le dialogue. Tous les points de vue relatifs à des questions particulières peuvent s'y exprimer, et toutes les perspectives peuvent s'y confronter de manière rationnelle.

L'argument utilisé contre l'objectivité et qui a le plus de poids repose sur ce que Richard J. Bernstein appelle le *nouveau relativisme*. Selon les partisans de celui-ci, l'objectivité se révèle impossible du fait que l'enseignement religieux est toujours saturé de valeurs. Une approche descriptive et dénuée de valeurs constituerait une impossibilité parce que le fait de connaître et d'expliquer résulte de la mise en évidence de certains points par

rapport à d'autres, c'est-à-dire qu'il est le fruit d'une sélection basée sur des préjugés et des présupposés reflétant des choix de valeurs toujours conditionnés par la culture et généralement implicites ou non exprimés. Ces valeurs conduisent à des points de vue, ou cadres interprétatifs, qui sont incommensurables et qui sont régis par des présupposés relatifs au statut métaphysique et ontologique du sacré, les uns affirmant sa réalité tandis que les autres la nient. Toute pédagogie en matière religieuse serait par conséquent, d'une façon ou d'une autre, théologique.

Je m'oppose à cette façon de voir du nouveau relativisme pour trois raisons principales. Premièrement, rien dans ce qu'avancent les néo-relativistes ne prouve selon moi que des cadres d'interprétation qui sont incommensurables doivent inévitablement le demeurer. Dit de façon très simple, nous pouvons apprendre quelque chose sur ce que les autres pensent et sur ce qu'ils croient. Nous pouvons entrer dans des cadres et des discours alternatifs, et même contradictoires, à titre provisoire et de façon compétente. Et nous pouvons transmettre aux étudiants ce que nous apprenons alors.

Deuxièmement, rien dans ce qu'avancent les néo-relativistes ne prouve que toutes les interprétations et que tous les jugements de valeur aient un statut équivalent. Ce n'est certainement pas le cas à l'intérieur des cadres d'interprétation particuliers. Ce n'est pas le cas non plus des assertions et des idées qui peuvent être traduites d'un cadre d'interprétation à un autre. Les cas limites sont ceux d'idées ou de jugements comportant une interprétation vérifiable ou ayant valeur de vérité à l'intérieur d'un cadre interprétatif particulier, mais qui ne peuvent être traduits sans difficulté dans un autre, ou encore qui se trouvent, dans le cas où ils sont traduits, à avoir une valeur de vérité différente. Cependant, le fait que ces jugements soient non tranchés ou qu'ils ne soient pas traduits ne signifie pas nécessairement qu'ils soient non tranchables ou qu'ils soient intraduisibles. Ici encore une meilleure compréhension et une meilleure perception peuvent permettre de faire correspondre les divers cadres interprétatifs entre eux — et ce, d'une façon plus prudente et mieux fondée. Les

spécialistes peuvent faire des progrès dans leur compréhension des choses et ils en font. Les étudiants le peuvent tout autant.

Il me semble en terminant que les partisans du néo-relativisme ont négligé, dans la critique qu'ils font de l'idée d'un cadre général et critique, le fait que tous les cadres d'interprétation peuvent — et devraient — être soumis à la comparaison critique de la part de n'importe lequel des autres points de vue. Ce dialogue entre cadres différents élargit l'horizon de tous les participants et il se produit si communément que bien souvent on ne le remarque pas. L'accord peut se révéler rare et éphémère, il n'en demeure pas moins que la comparaison critique a du sens pour la plupart des participants de bonne foi.

Afin de parvenir à l'objectivité, nous devons considérer la salle de classe comme une arène ou un stade intellectuels à l'intérieur desquels quantité de cadres d'interprétation peuvent être abordés et analysés, comparés et évalués par n'importe lequel des points de vue qui y sont représentés. La classe devient ainsi une zone de libre expression (*free-play*) intellectuelle, et j'emploie ce terme dans le même sens que Hans Georg Gadamer dans *Vérité et méthode*, c'est-à-dire comme un va-et-vient et un échange intellectuels entre les participants.

Aucun point de vue particulier ou aucun ensemble de présupposés ne doit dominer à l'intérieur de cette salle de classe idéale. Tous peuvent en théorie y être entendus. Le but poursuivi consiste davantage dans la compréhension mutuelle que dans l'accord entre les parties. Enfin, tous les concepts et tous les cadres d'interprétation qui y sont soulevés sont sujets à une comparaison critique avec tout autre cadre d'interprétation, toute autre tradition, toute autre croyance ou toute autre perspective. Aucune tradition et aucun cadre d'interprétation ne détiennent seuls le critère ultime de vérité. Les règles logiques ainsi que celles de l'interprétation varient d'un champ du discours à l'autre. Tous devraient pouvoir les employer dans l'expression de leurs opinions. Ces règles elles-mêmes demeurent toutefois sujettes à une comparaison critique.

La salle de classe doit devenir un lieu où nous pouvons favoriser le processus par lequel nous parvenons à la compréhension d'une foi religieuse ou d'une forme de vie — et ce, en autorisant l'expression de presque tout. Il s'agit d'un lieu où «tout est permis» en ce sens qu'aucune opinion n'y est interdite et qu'aucune idée n'est jugée trop bizarre, trop folle ou trop déplacée pour être exprimée. Tous les points de vue sont encouragés plutôt qu'interdits, y compris le point de vue biaisé, normatif, théologique ou non théologique du professeur. Une fois cependant que sont présentés des concepts ou des idées, ceux-ci deviennent susceptibles d'être critiqués par tous.

La salle de classe doit être organisée de telle sorte que non seulement elle autorise, mais encore qu'elle favorise le dialogue entre points de vue sectaires, les débats et même les conflits chargés d'émotion. Les points de vue théologique et non théologique doivent pouvoir s'y exprimer — et ce, sans que l'un ou l'autre ne prédomine.