



Geography: Geography and Faith

What if geography looked at the spiritual dimension of people and places?

Debbie's high school geography class was surprised to hear music as they approached the classroom. Debbie asked the students to go into the classroom and sit down quietly. The lesson was about people interacting with places, but it started with a series of images accompanied by music.

"I teach a unit on why the landscape is the way it is, and the interaction between people and landscape. I usually cover the social, economic, environmental, and political aspects, but I wanted to include some questions about the spiritual dimension as well. For example: Why did Sedona, Arizona, become a religious site? Why are monasteries and cathedrals built in different places?

"I added the extra questions and appropriate images as part of a visual introduction with some meditative music. This not only set the atmosphere, it set the agenda and broadened our discussion."

What's going on here?

Debbie saw people in a holistic way, so any study of the interaction of people and landscape needed to include the spiritual dimension. She believed people are spiritual beings as well as political and social beings. She did not think that issues concerning faith were limited to religion of Bible class.

She engaged students by using images and music to focus their attention on specific aspects of the lesson, and by challenging them to reflect on faith-related questions and to connect them to geography.

Debbie reshaped her practice by her choice of questions and use of images and music to change her introduction and create a particular atmosphere. She also widened her examples so as to include a focus on people as spiritual beings on the landscape.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Debbie gave faith significance by including it alongside the social, political, and economic dimensions of life, showing that faith has relevance to the public sphere. This could help students to see life as a unity rather than as subdivided compartments with one labeled “religious.” She showed the application of faith to geography and thereby reduced the division between sacred and secular.

What difference does it make?

By including the spiritual dimension of life alongside the political and social, Debbie was making a statement about the place of God in life and the nature of humans as spiritual beings. Expressions of faith both have had a huge impact on the environment and also have been influenced by it, and Debbie helped her students to become aware of the connection.

Where could we go from here?

There are other areas of geography where including the spiritual would be appropriate and natural for the subject (e.g., local area studies).

Digging deeper

Debbie did not separate the sacred from the secular. The sacred-secular divide is the idea that there is a secular world and a (separate) sacred/religious world, the latter of which is a private, personal belief that must not impact public life or any parts of the curriculum except Bible class. This attitude has led to a fragmentation of knowledge into parts often seen as unrelated to each other and to God. This division of knowledge is a relatively modern idea.

Until about a century and a half ago, scientists and scholars commonly assumed that knowledge formed a coherent whole; more precisely, they assumed that all parts of knowledge ultimately could be connected because every area of knowledge focused on some aspect of one single divine creation. J. Turner

To accept no divide between sacred and secular means seeing faith as integral to all subjects and all areas of life. Exploring a subject from a Christian perspective might involve exploring big issues, asking ethical and religious questions and making connections across a range of areas. This holistic view of the world and of knowledge means that not only religious jobs are holy; engineering, parenting, and computing can all be holy jobs. In St. Augustine's terms, all truth is God's truth, because there is a deep interconnectedness in the world. The entire world can reveal God (Psalm 24:1), and all of life can be lived to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). The musician and the engineer, the artist and the physicist— all are engaged in the same work of exploring God's world, even if they do not know it.



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