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Rhetoric Review

ISSN: 0735-0198 (Print) 1532-7981 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hrhr20

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To cite this article: Jeffrey M. Ringer (2013) The Dogma of Inquiry: Composition and the Primacy of Faith, Rhetoric Review, 32:3, 349-365, DOI: 10.1080/07350198.2013.797880

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2013.797880

Rhetoric Review, Vol. 32, No. 3, 349–365, 2013

ISSN: 0735-0198 print / 1532-7981 online
DOI: 10.1080/07350198.2013.797880

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The Dogma of Inquiry: Composition and the Primacy of Faith

Composition studies has accepted a reductive view of dogma as an acritical commitment to received knowledge that precludes inquiry. As a result, composition gives short shrift to the role that basic beliefs play in any act of inquiry. But certain forms of humble dogma can and do serve as essential starting places for asking questions—even for skepticism and doubt. The writings of St. Augustine and Lesslie Newbigin exemplify such approaches to dogma and offer rhetorical educators a new terministic screen through which to value the role that beliefs play in inquiry.

Composition scholars in recent years have made significant gains theorizing ways to help writing instructors work productively with "religiously committed" students—students who identify wholeheartedly with a religious tradition like Mormonism or evangelical Christianity and who, in Lizabeth Rand's words, see their "spiritual identity" as their "primary kind of selfhood" (350).[1] Theorists have challenged reductive views about religiously committed students (Dively; Rand), reflected critically on their own experiences working with them (Anderson; Downs; Goodburn; Montesano and Roen; Perkins; Smart; Williams), and offered strategies for helping such students engage productively with academic discourse (Carter; DePalma; Downs; Perkins). Perhaps most significantly, compositionists have recognized the need to respect and value students' religious beliefs. Most scholars, for instance, would agree with Elizabeth Vander Lei's "hope for our

Editor's note: Please see the Burkean Parlor in this issue for a response to this article and an invitation for readers to join in a continuing conversation.

students: not that they alter what they believe but that they learn to use tension between faith . . . and academic inquiry as a way of learning more and learning better" (8).

Unfortunately, such tension can be less than productive if religiously committed students refuse to engage in the kinds of inquiry privileged in FYW courses, processes of inquiry that may involve reflecting critically on personal experience, weighing various sides of an argument, exploring unfamiliar topics, or withholding conclusions while conducting research. Consider Doug Downs's experience working with "Keith," a religiously and politically conservative Mormon who refused to question his received beliefs about gay marriage: "Congratulations!" Downs wrote on Keith's paper. "You've just written the most indoctrinated, close-minded, uncritical, simplistically reasoned paper I've ever read!" (39). Downs is not particularly proud of this "harshest" comment he's ever written and uses the opportunity to interrogate why he responded so abrasively. He concludes that he and "Keith" were enacting contrasting discourses: While Downs enacted a discourse of inquiry that privileges curiosity, skepticism, and the "pursuit of new knowledge and understanding," Keith enacted affirmation, a discourse that "affirms given knowledge and overtly resists critical inquiry into it" (42). For Downs, such affirmation amounts to dogma, the uncritical acceptance of belief, and thus falls short of "*honest* inquiry" (40).

Downs is right to be frustrated by Keith's entrenched beliefs and refusal to engage other perspectives. Students like Keith certainly pose significant challenges to rhetorical educators, even those who agree with Vander Lei and seek to value students' religious beliefs as part of the academic enterprise. What concerns me about Downs's argument, though, is his assumption that dogma necessarily precludes inquiry. Certainly, *dogma* has come to be understood as digging in one's heels and refusing to do anything outside of parroting received knowledge. But there's a difference between dogma that precludes inquiry and dogma that serves as the starting place for asking questions. I call this *humble dogma*—the basic beliefs that allow for and even prompt reflection into one's own beliefs, research into unfamiliar topics, or exploration of various sides of a debate. While Keith certainly may have embodied the former, many religiously committed students enact the latter, a point Downs makes when he writes that not "all students who express religious faith" will resist like Keith (43). But while Downs helpfully names the conflict between inquiry-minded writing instructors and religiously committed students, composition lacks terminology that highlight how humble dogma and inquiry coexist. As Shannon Carter has recognized, composition scholarship "routinely ignores the function of [religious] faith, likely assuming it to be 'anti-intellectual,' 'close-minded,' or even counterproductive," so that faith is the "complete opposite" of knowledge (578).

My purpose here is neither to defend the homophobic views of students like Keith nor to argue that religiously committed students should only affirm received knowledge. I am also not arguing that all enactments of dogma align with the expectations of academic writing and thinking—arrogantly held beliefs, religious or otherwise, will likely impede processes of inquiry. Rather, I argue for a conception of dogma that will allow compositionists to envision how religious belief—even dogmatically held religious belief—can motivate academic inquiry. Given that Downs made his argument "somewhat speculatively," I hope to extend his work by exploring what it might look like when humble dogmatic religious commitment and academic inquiry coexist (41). In doing so, I critique the wider assumption in composition that dogma and inquiry are necessarily at odds. By constructing dogmatic belief in general as contrary to academic inquiry, composition studies has rejected the possibility that certain forms of dogma might serve as the foundation for inquiry, especially modes of inquiry that involve personal reflection. This has resulted in a trained incapacity that limits our ability as writing teachers to recognize and value how belief informs the writing of religiously committed students—and how our own basic beliefs, religious or otherwise, shape our inquiries.

Two important figures in Christian tradition—Saint Augustine, Christian rhetorician and fourth-century bishop, and Lesslie Newbigin, a twentieth-century theologian and missionary—provide insight into how dogmatic belief motivates inquiry. Augustine asserts that faith precedes understanding and thus provides a terministic screen to help us recognize how commitments to belief make inquiry possible. Newbigin extends Augustine's thought, arguing that doubt and skepticism are grounded in dogma, beliefs that at the moment of inquiry are held uncritically. These perspectives provide compositionists with ways of thinking about the role humble dogma plays in academic inquiry. As such, they offer a new terministic screen through which to view not only the writing of our religiously committed students but also the role our own beliefs play in guiding inquiry. After discussing Augustine's and Newbigin's ideas in the context of composition scholarship about religiously committed students, I'll consider the academic writing from one of my evangelical students that exemplifies the role humble dogma can play in academic inquiry.

Augustine: Faith Precedes Understanding

Augustine is significant to the history of rhetoric because he managed to fuse together the rhetorical and Christian traditions. He did so, as Amy K. Hermanson points out, while facing great odds in "one of the most tumultuous times in the history of the Western world." Hermanson notes that the challenge Augustine

faced involved discovering a means of persuasion between two contrasting viewpoints: Christian aversion to classical (or pagan) learning on the one hand and sophistic rhetoric on the other. The first perspective, *fideism*, assumes that "faith is the only basis of true wisdom and knowledge" (311). Because reason and logic were associated with attacks against Christianity, fideists sought to distance themselves from such learning and inquiry. The second perspective, skepticism, belonged to what is now known as the Second Sophistic. Though many compositionists have embraced what has come to be known as the Third Sophistic of postmodernism (see Vitanza), many would distance themselves from the rhetoric of fourth-century skeptics who "focused primarily on the pleasing effect [of] their words" and "seemed to care little about the meaning of their words" (Hermanson 312–13). Because Augustine "navigat[ed] a path between sophism and fideism," he provides a way to understand how belief and inquiry can and do co-exist (314).

Augustine was committed to Christianity and neoplatonism and thus believed firmly in the existence of capital-T Truth. He also believed that one could come to a limited understanding of that truth but that such understanding would be radically imperfect in this life. As Wendy Olmstead puts it, Augustine, even after his conversion, did "not lose his sense of the shadows that darken the human mind," such that "the human being's knowledge of God is more momentary, more elusive, more mediated" than any heavenly intellect (81). But it was his very belief in the existence of ultimate truth that led Augustine to be the insatiable inquirer he was. Aside from his dogmatic beliefs in God and Christian revelation, there were few givens for Augustine. In his writing, which exhibits an epistemic quality, Augustine carries out extensive investigations into the nature of reality, language, knowledge, human existence, and, of course, the divine. At one point in *On the Trinity*, Augustine argues that investigating "things incomprehensible" such as the divine must be "sought in order that it may be found more sweetly, and found in order that it may be sought more eagerly" (XV.2.2). The pattern of inquiry that Augustine promotes is thus one in which inquiry feeds into inquiry. Seeking leads to finding which then leads back into seeking "more eagerly." There's a sense of purpose here, a resolve that's grounded in Augustine's belief that he could know something of the divine. And it seems safe to say that Augustine appeared to relish the seeking itself. Even a casual glance through his *Confessions* reveals a writer and thinker entranced by questions, many of which are answered with more questions.

Augustine relished inquiry both because he had been trained in rhetoric and because he took Christ's command in the Gospel of Matthew to heart: "Seek and you will find" (7.7). Following from this command, Augustine writes in *Against*

the Academicians that he is prompted to learn because God gave humans a rational faculty and because the authority of Christ demands that Christians use it liberally. Appealing to a religious authority as a basis of inquiry may strike some compositionists as odd if not contradictory: In the discussion about religiously committed students in composition studies, religious authority is often understood as a hindrance to inquiry. Amy Goodburn, for example, explains that the reason several religiously committed students "asserted themselves" against her efforts to engage them through critical pedagogy was because of their fundamentalist "grounds of authority" (335). Later in the essay she explains that Luke, a fundamentalist Christian, bases his reading, response, and resistance on his belief in the authority of scripture. Like Downs, Goodburn finds herself clashing with Luke about "assumptions of authority and value" (344). Though Luke's appeal to authority likely did motivate his resistance to Goodburn's critical pedagogy, it is significant that Christian authority fulfilled a different function for Augustine: It is precisely what prompted inquiry.

Of course, the kinds of questions Augustine asked, grounded in Christian belief, are different from the kinds of questions Goodburn and other critical educators ask—Augustine, after all, lived in a premodern age when Christianity was in the ascendant (Hermanson et al. 1). As such, Augustine wanted to learn more about the divine and humanity's relation to it. Goodburn, writing in our contemporary, pluralistic time, seeks to understand how instructors and students can find common ground even when enacting drastically different discourses. Their inquiries exist within different traditions, and as Lesslie Newbigin puts it, "genuine learning" only occurs within the context of a tradition "whose authority is accepted as guidance for exploration" (12). For Augustine, however, this did not mean that he had to limit his inquiries to "Christian" topics. Contrary to the fideists, Augustine rejected the idea that human reason was somehow inimical to Christian faith. This attitude emerges in one of Augustine's letters: "Banish the thought that God hates [reason], by which [God] made us superior to all other living creatures; or that we should so believe that we neither accept nor search for rational understanding" (qtd. in Howie 51). Thus the "proper function" of reason for Augustine involved "ask[ing] questions about everything" (51). As such, Augustine did not limit his inquiry to divine matters alone. Hermanson describes *On Christian Doctrine* as a text wherein Augustine "rescues extensive knowledge of rhetoric and language from the rubble of classical learning" (311). In it Augustine argues that *all* knowledge can help believers interpret Scripture, a sentiment expressed by the idea that "all truth is from him who said, 'I am the truth'" (6). In making this point, Augustine rejected the notion that secular knowledge would somehow cloud the mind of the believer. Augustine thus cast wide his

investigative net, arguing that historical, geological, literary, and even botanical knowledge could facilitate interpretation. At one point, Augustine goes so far as to say that ignorance of history actually hinders the exegete's ability to understand scripture, a direct challenge to the fideists.

As Etienne Gilson explains, though, Augustine's greatest contribution to philosophy was that he turned it on its head. Instead of seeing reason and inquiry as leading to faith, Augustine asserted faith as primary. As a result of his belief in God and Christian revelation, Augustine engaged in a "passionate effort to investigate the mysteries of Revelation by the natural light of reason" (Gilson 18). This idea often takes form in Augustine's writings as *faith precedes understanding*, which the following passage helps explain:

> Do you want to understand? Believe. For God said through the prophet [Isaiah], "Unless you believe, you will not understand." . . . If you had not understood, I say, believe. For understanding is the recompense of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand so that you may believe, but believe so that you may understand; for "unless you believe, you will not understand." (*Tractates* 29.6)

Augustine's focus in this passage was on understanding a biblical text. To do so, Augustine argued that readers needed first to believe—in divine revelation, in the inspiration of the Gospel of John, in the divinity of Christ, and so forth. Espousing such premises allowed believers to then understand scripture. One could certainly arrive at an understanding of a biblical text without believing in Christianity, as is evidenced by the wealth of secular scholarship on the Bible. Again, though, such scholarship arises out of a particular tradition or set of commitments. It is likely, then, that the premises such scholars bring to the text would lead them to conclusions different from Augustine's. But the principle is the same: In order to arrive at an understanding of a text, artifact, or phenomenon, one needs first to hold a set of beliefs that will guide the inquiry.

How might such a perspective help writing instructors or FYW students? And wouldn't beginning with religious belief result in more situations like what Downs faced with Keith? It is certainly true that arrogantly held beliefs, religious or otherwise, can lead students to resist. But the general principle underlying Augustine's claim—that faith provides the premises from which questions arise—suggests that it guides, directs, and focuses inquiry. Goodburn's essay serves as an example of how this happens. Early on, Goodburn asserts that she has "faith" in critical pedagogy, even at one point admitting that her experiences with Luke "challenged [her] to question some of the assumptions . . . in which [she] had placed so much faith" (334). Despite the difficulties Luke posed to Goodburn's

beliefs about critical pedagogy, it is clear from the outset of the essay that critical pedagogy serves as her ground of inquiry. She opens the essay by noting the influence critical pedagogy has had on composition studies, explaining that compositionists "have begun to examine how social constructs of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on account for the ways that students read and write about texts." While Goodburn agrees that it is important for students to explore such constructs of difference, she also argues that critical writing instructors ought to concern themselves with another "difference," namely "religious identity" (333). In the remainder of her essay, Goodburn attempts to come to grips with the differences—and similarities—between critical pedagogy and fundamentalist Christianity. Her belief in the explanatory power of critical pedagogy provides the premises from which her inquiry arises, premises that frame her method and shape her conclusion.

As such, Goodburn would not have been able to ask the questions she did about Luke's fundamentalism without first espousing the tenets of critical pedagogy. She demonstrates this by constructing fundamentalism in critical pedagogical terms. Early on in her essay, Goodburn finds "common ground" between critical and fundamentalist discourses because they both privilege resistance and "social critique" (334). And at the end Goodburn concludes, "Perhaps faith is what is needed most for a successful critical pedagogy—faith in the value of initiating dialogue in the face of conflicts over discourses and faith in students' and teachers' ability to value and negotiate each other's differences" (352). Goodburn's belief in critical pedagogy guides and motivates her inquiry. This is not to say that Goodburn is fundamentalist in her belief in critical pedagogy—she does in fact change her beliefs slightly by the end of the essay (351). But she does not do so wholesale; her commitments shape both her questions *and* her conclusions.

Such commitment is desirable. In *Against the Academicians*, Augustine defines his faith and epistemology in opposition to the Academicians' skepticism, a viewpoint that called into question the possibility of knowing anything and that dissuaded adherents from giving assent to a particular philosophy or set of beliefs. Peter King describes the Academicians as "anti-dogmatist[s]" who were "iconoclastic as regards competing explanatory theories, careful to believe no more than the evidence warrants, free of philosophical comments" (xi). They would "comment on other philosophical systems, relieved of the burden of having to defend any [themselves]" (xi). Though compositionists tend to value skepticism as an academic value, many would likely admit discomfort with the noncommittal nature of the Academicians. Patricia Bizzell, for instance, agrees that teaching students to be skeptical can leave them lost in a philosophical void. The danger is that they might become little more than critical husks sans belief or commitment,

a stance similar to the one Augustine decries in *Against the Academicians*. As I'll show in the next section, though, even skepticism and doubt are based on beliefs that remain unquestioned at a given moment.

Newbigin: Dogma, Doubt, and Inquiry

Twentieth-century theologian Lesslie Newbigin agrees that faith precedes understanding but also argues that dogma rests at the center of inquiry. In *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin questions the twentieth-century Western perspective that "all dogma" must be exposed "to critical (and even skeptical) examination" (1).[2] This "critical spirit," Newbigin explains, is an extension of the pluralist ethos that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century. The problem is not the act of doubting itself—Newbigin, a devout evangelical, engages in much of it throughout his book. The problem is that it is assumed to be the opposite of belief. While dogma has come to be associated with ignorance, arrogance, and the inability to think freely, critical skepticism, the seeming deferral of belief and commitment, is the marker of those who are intellectual and able to think for themselves. But if Newbigin is right in arguing that "[c]riticism does not come out of a vacant mind," then doubt and skepticism cannot exist without dogma—beliefs that, at the moment of critique, are not questioned (1).

Newbigin explains that dogma, which comes from the Greek word for "to seem," is not necessarily religious, a point Downs also makes (43). Rather, "[e]very kind of systematic thought has to begin from some starting point," adding that "coherent thought" is impossible "without presuppositions," without "taking some things for granted" (8). Newbigin explores this idea in relation to what Michael Polyani defines as "the critique of doubt": "When we undertake to doubt any statement," Newbigin writes, "we do so on the basis of beliefs which—in the act of doubting—we do not doubt" (19). By way of example, Newbigin discusses a report published by the British Council of Churches. Called "Understanding Christian Nurture," it aimed to help children develop "critical openness" and "autonomy" (41). The goal was to encourage children "to use their critical faculties in respect of any claim to truth, and to be open to new truths which might call into question their previous ideas of truth." The problem Newbigin sees in the premise of the report is "that one can only entertain rational doubt about a proposition on the basis of some belief which, at the moment, one does not doubt." It is impossible, Newbigin adds, to doubt all one's beliefs, "to be both dogmatic and doubtful about the same beliefs at the same time" (42). The act of doubting, of being skeptical, must stem from an existing belief.

Newbigin thus challenges what he refers to as "honest inquiry," a perspective that purports to be free from commitment to the extent that any perspective is up

for grabs. Downs employs the same phrase in his essay, albeit with a different meaning. For Downs the phrase points to weighing the various sides of an argument as opposed to simply finding evidence to support one's own perspective (40). Newbigin would have no quarrel with such a strategy. What Newbigin does challenge is the perspective that privileges doubt and skepticism over faith and dogma. In his words, "the fashionable preference for doubt as against faith, 'honest doubt' as against 'all your creeds,' may conceal the very arrogance which it proposes to condemn" (21). Though I would not consider Downs to be arrogant at all, the antifoundationalist or constructionist perspective that composition studies voices en masse can be held arrogantly. As Chris Anderson said so well, antifoundalionalists and social-constructionists can be "absolutist in their absolutism" and "blind . . . to their own bias" (21). And it is little secret that antifoundationalism or constructionism has come to dominate the epistemological landscape within composition studies. In 1995 David Smit noted that "scholars in composition and rhetoric are overwhelmingly antifoundationalist." A decade later, Richard Fulkerson recognized that "virtually no one in contemporary composition theory assumes any epistemology other than a vaguely interactionist constructivism" and that for compositionists, "all 'truth' is rhetorical, dialectally constructed, and provisional" (662). In Newbigin's terms we've come to accept the "story" told by such perspectives, a story that largely comprises our field's "plausibility structure" or sense of what counts as reasonable (12, 8)—what Thomas Kuhn would call a "paradigm." And within the domain of this narrative, other stories, including those believed by religiously committed students, are implausible.

While the "story" that Newbigin believes certainly differs from the paradigm to which Downs ascribes, the two share a number of common views. In their arguments, for instance, both scholars privilege what Downs refers to as "*mystery,*" the awareness that, religious or not, we're always limited in terms of what we know. In this way, Newbigin's attitude toward knowledge aligns him more closely with Downs than with Keith or Luke. Indeed, what separates Newbigin from the latter is humility. Newbigin understands that knowledge is impartial, especially when it comes to knowledge of the divine. At one point, he goes so far as to admit that "[t]here is indeed a proper place for agnosticism in the Christian life." In support of this idea, Newbigin refers to the apophatic tradition in theology, a tradition that "has always insisted on the fact that no human image or concept can grasp the full reality of God. Christians are—or should be—learners to the end of their days" (12). Also known as negative theology, the apophatic tradition assumes that "language is largely or completely incapable of stating what God is" (Milem 187). As such, it resonates with Augustine's understanding of God as ultimately ineffable or beyond human comprehension (*On Christian Doctrine* 1.6). And it demands that if anyone makes a claim about God, they must do so tentatively,

with humility—an idea to which compositionists may appeal when working with religiously committed students.

Like Newbigin, Downs also agrees that beliefs play a role in processes of inquiry. Downs, however, contends that scholars "affirm through inquiry rather than through initial affirmation of received knowledge followed by total deflection of inquiry" (42). It's a long qualification and one that while appealing on the surface, potentially "conceal[s] the very arrogance which it proposes to condemn" (Newbigin 21). Downs's purpose in this qualification is to privilege inquiry over affirmation and dogma. But while it is true that few scholars would get far by deflecting questions or refusing to entertain alternative possibilities, it's hard to imagine that one could always affirm beliefs through inquiry. For that to be true, Downs would need to question his premises that "discourses have contextual rather than essential value" and that "inquiry is preferable to dogma" (41, 42). Though it is impossible to tell from his essay whether he did this or not, the prospect seems unlikely. Questioning such premises would render the process of developing an academic argument based on them difficult and impossibly slow, such that achieving any recognizable conclusion would be impossible. It is certainly clear that Downs is aware that these are his perspectives—as such, he's not blind to his own bias. But there's a difference between being aware of one's perspective and questioning it fully.

One potential response to this argument is that while we would not expect Downs to question such premises (especially given his audience and purpose), we can assume that composition as a field has been in a process of inquiring into various epistemological perspectives over the last few decades. Downs is thus a benefactor of such inquiry and can proceed with his research assuming such premises to be true. This is certainly plausible. But if it is the case, then Downs, along with many other compositionists, has embraced a basic belief that we could define in terms of dogma. It certainly aligns with humble dogma and thus differs from the kind of dogmatism that Keith and Luke enact; as such, I am not equating Downs (or Goodburn) with these students' perspectives. What I am drawing attention to is the necessary role that unquestioned beliefs play in the kinds of inquiries that scholars like Downs and Goodburn pursue. While the idea that "real scholars" affirm beliefs through inquiry is an attractive one, it gives short shrift to the reality that such inquiries depend on beliefs that, at least at a given moment, remain unquestioned. One cannot endlessly inquire without any commitments and get anywhere. A dogmatic or basic belief exists somewhere in the chain of inquiry. Without it, there's no direction or purpose, a state of being that Newbigin would liken to "[w]andering about in a twilight where all cats are grey" (12).

While compositionists would view such aimless wandering as less than desirable, so too would they view the rigidity or arrogance that keeps students like

Keith from engaging with other perspectives. Keith does not do what many writing instructors would value: seek out other sources that challenge his own perspective in order to weigh the various sides of an argument. Downs rightly labels this dogmatic, but, from Keith's perspective, it's dogmatism with a price, dogmatism attached to an identity. Downs asks Keith to be open to the possibility that his Mormon-inflected view on gay adoption might be wrong. By extension, Downs is inviting Keith to bring into question his own deeply held religious views, views that likely comprise his "primary sense of selfhood" (Rand 350). In *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, Thomas Newkirk muses on how evangelical students might respond to similar advice. Specifically, he wonders how such students might react to Don Murray's suggestion "to contradict [one's] most certain beliefs" in writing personal essays (qtd. in Newkirk 14). Newkirk asks, "Why would anyone invite an experience that 'contradicted' basic beliefs? How could a profound and unconditional belief possibly be so open to change and contradiction?" (15). Newkirk's line of questioning, though written with evangelicals in mind, applies to Keith. Why would someone who has staked his identity on the tenets of Mormonism be open to questioning them, to seeing them as fluid, discardable?

Of course, we don't know if Keith's beliefs regarding gay adoption were central to his identity, though his reaction to the topic certainly suggests so. But it is worth wondering if writing instructors who have made similar arguments to students like Keith would be willing or even able to perform the same kind of "honest inquiry" we often advocate. Would compositionists who espouse antifoundationalism or social-constructionism weigh the possibility that universal truth might exist? Would we seriously entertain the possibility that Keith might be right, that Mormonism might encompass the truth? Are our perspectives so free of commitment that we would be able to explore—with the possibility of accepting—the fundamentalist Christianity held by Goodburn's Luke? My hunch is that the vast majority of writing instructors, with the exception of those who already espouse a similar form of religious commitment, would have to answer with a firm "no." And while this does not mean that all compositionists are arrogantly and rigidly dogmatic, it does mean that we all have basic beliefs to which we're committed that motivate the questions we ask. Such commitments are tied up in identity, such that we cannot—and should not—replace them at will. Thus I'm skeptical when I read Sharon Crowley's statement that liberals "can more easily abandon portions of their belief systems" than fundamentalists because a "liberal's identity" is "not necessarily threatened by a change in belief" (196). Certainly, not all beliefs are central to an individual's identity, liberal or otherwise, and it very well may be that fundamentalists have more densely articulated belief systems than liberals. But I'm imagining a scenario in which Crowley exchanges her beliefs in rhetoric

and civil discourse for, say, the fundamentalist Christianity she studies, and I have a hard time imagining how that could *not* radically change her identity. If identity is discursively constructed, as theorists have been arguing for decades, then our beliefs comprise who we are.

It is evident that Downs and Keith were acting on different sets of commitments that bumped up against each other. Like Goodburn's experience with Luke, Downs held premises radically different from Keith's, and it seems safe to say that neither party was willing to adopt the other's beliefs. To be sure, Downs and Goodburn did seek to explore the questions that arose from their experiences working with religiously committed students. But both did so within the confines of the "story" they believed, what Newbigin calls a "plausibility structure" (8). By the end of their inquiry, neither had replaced their original premises. Both came to some form of understanding about their respective inquiries while affirming the authority of the original narrative that guided their inquiries. In short, Downs and Keith remain committed to their basic beliefs. And if, following Newbigin, we define dogma as basic beliefs that remain unquestioned during processes of doubt, skepticism, or inquiry, then Downs and Goodburn proceeded with their inquiries humbly yet dogmatically.

Commitment and Humble Dogma

Earlier, I cited Vander Lei's hope that religiously committed students would "learn to use tension between faith . . . and academic inquiry as a way of learning more and learning better" (8). It is important to acknowledge that tension *does* exist between faith and inquiry—between the humility of realizing that knowledge will always be limited and the possibility of knowing more. Augustine's *Confessions*, rife with questions for which no easy answers exist, exemplifies such tension: "By what means did you make heaven and earth?" Augustine asks of God. "What tool did you use for this vast work?" (XI.5.i.). Believing that God *did* make heaven and earth did not hinder Augustine from asking *how* this happened. Augustine thus models how maintaining commitment to a faith tradition does not excuse one from trying to learn more. Newbigin heartily agrees, at one point noting that "[t]here is surely always more truth to be discovered" (22). For Augustine and Newbigin, the tension between faith and inquiry is one in which two or more components pull on each other; inquiry cannot be discarded in exchange for faith, but neither can faith be cast off in the name of inquiry. For tension to exist, faith and inquiry both must be embraced.

To be sure, students like Goodburn's Luke and Downs's Keith are often unwilling to entertain such tension, choosing instead to resist such assignments or parrot received wisdom—or both. Such rigidity and arrogance certainly shuts

down academic inquiry, and thus I fully agree that some forms of dogma can preclude academic inquiry. But such stances should not be confused with humble dogma, the basic beliefs that serve as the starting place for inquiry. In fact, my experience suggests that the best inquiries are rooted in students' most deeply held beliefs. I teach at a Christian college populated largely by evangelicals. Because of this, I occasionally theme my FYW course around a single question: What does it mean to identify as evangelical in the United States in the twenty-first century? In doing so, I aim to help students engage critically and thoughtfully with a discourse that largely comprises their identities and that is often understood reductively. The first assignment asks students to respond to a series of readings that define evangelical Christianity and its characteristics. Students read selections from a variety of texts: Donald Miller's *Blue Like Jazz*, Brian McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Kevin Roose's *The Unlikely Disciple*, Kathleen Norris's *Amazing Grace*, and Augustine's *Confessions*. Class discussions tend to be lively because students have a great deal of experience with the topics.

For this personal analysis essay, students must ask how their beliefs as evangelicals match up with the beliefs of other evangelicals. (Contrary to still-narrow media portrayals, evangelical beliefs vary widely across the theological and political spectrum.) By agreeing and disagreeing, selecting and not selecting, students articulate come to articulate some of their beliefs as evangelicals. Though they generally have little trouble coming up with things to say, many report being challenged by the project, largely because they take their faith seriously and because few have been prompted to explore their beliefs through writing. The better papers, of course, are those wherein students take the opportunity to explore their beliefs while maintaining their deeply held commitments and identities.

While some of the writing tends to be arrogantly dogmatic, much of it also reflects humble dogmatism á la Newbigin—dogmatism wherein belief guides inquiry. To this point, it's important to note that the personal nature of this assignment allows for belief to guide inquiry in ways that might not work with other modes of inquiry or types of analysis, particularly those that call for a more objective stance. One particularly successful example is called "No Other Gods." In it, Chris, a white male traditional FYW student, explores the main character's multiple conversions in Martel's *Life of Pi*. As an evangelical, Chris is initially "appalled" by the idea that someone could become a Christian and then thank Lord Krishna for leading him to Jesus. He is equally appalled that Pi then becomes a Muslim, embracing three religions at once. Chris writes, "The idea of holding on to other gods of other religions after accepting Jesus baffles my mind" (2). It's a thought that "immediately forces" Chris "to attempt to acquire some viewpoint concerning Pi's salvation" and thus leads to a question that is grounded in his own beliefs as an evangelical. Specifically, Chris muses on the commandment

in the book of Exodus where Yahweh decrees that the Israelites should have "no other gods" (20:3 New Revised Standard Version), a belief shared by evangelical Christians. Instead of using his dogmatic belief in Christian monotheism to demonize Pi or disregard Martel's perspective, Chris turns the question back on himself and thus engages in an inquiry that might best be described as critical, personal reflection. He is appalled at Pi's worship of multiple gods, but he finds himself equally appalled at his own inability to rid himself of "false idols" such as money, power, pleasure, greed, and laziness.

Chris's dilemma prompts him to ask what Exodus 20:3 means when it refers to "no other gods." His inquiry leads him to a "new way of thinking," a perspective that is slightly different from his "previous understanding of salvation":

> I have always felt that someone coming to Christ must abandon their [sic] previous way of life in repentance. Pondering this thought, I realize that I have carried a bias along with this conviction. Although I believe in repentance, I tend to sympathize far more when it comes to my own situation than when life presents me with a foreign one like Pi's. In my life, idols are simply a struggle that I still deal with after conversion. In Pi's story, however, I fully expect a denial of the former way of life. When this complete denial does not come, I immediately begin to question the legitimacy of Pi's Jesus experience. This idea of both idols and religious gods serving to disobey God in the same way seems to provide more questions than answers.

Chris does not resolve his dilemma. Though he leans toward viewing Pi as unsaved because of his refusal to jettison "other gods," Chris's "more recent way of rationalizing" has led him to consider the possibility that he and Pi "may not be as different as [he] once thought." In Augustinian fashion, Chris concludes with questions: "Does Pi's story truly correlate with my own? Do I, along with [St.] Paul and St. Augustine, share a common theme with Pi? . . . What determines how Evangelicals view salvation? . . . What are the implications of both idols and other religious gods towards one's salvation?" It should come as no surprise that Chris found this assignment challenging and meaningful. In a letter about his final draft, Chris told me that he "learned to take a good idea . . . and just run with it, no matter how strange or challenging it might be." There's definitely a tension between faith and inquiry here, but it's a productive tension. It's a tension wherein Chris's basic beliefs as a Christian, not the least of which is his faith in the Bible's authority, prompt him—humbly—to ask questions and articulate more clearly what he believes.

What if Chris had *not* proceeded in such fashion? What if, like Keith and Luke, he had demonized Pi and disregarded Martel's perspective, or used his essay to promote intolerance or close-mindedness? In other words, what if Chris's faith had *precluded* inquiry? With other students, this has certainly happened. My strategy in such situations is to appeal to the negative theology that Newbigin advocates and thus remind students of a key value in Christian tradition: humility. I remind them that when we're dealing with questions related to divinity or salvation—ideas that often motivate students' responses—that "our knowledge is limited" (Newbigin 21) and that, in St. Paul's words, "we see in a mirror, dimly" and can "know only in part" (1 Co. 13:12). This appeal opens up space for my students to hold a belief in absolute truth while recognizing that, as fallible humans, they can only know so much of that truth. This notion of humility and fallibility resonates with them, and in most cases they're able to shift away from the arrogant dogmatism that Downs rightly critiques and move toward the humble dogmatism modeled by Augustine and Newbigin.

Of course, simply recognizing this distinction between arrogant and humble dogmatism is no panacea. Writing instructors certainly will still face instances wherein students maintain a rigid, arrogant stance toward the subject matter at hand, especially when the topic is a hot-button issue or one that somehow implicates the religious identities of students. Moreover, we certainly need more discussion about how to work with students like Keith or Luke who resist adopting stances of humble dogmatism, especially when it comes to volatile subjects such as gay rights, abortion, welfare, and immigration, among others. In such instances, instructors would certainly do well to adopt the stances of guide, translator, mentor, and coach that Downs defines (48–52). In doing so, though, instructors would also benefit from helping students see that it is possible to maintain one's religious commitments while engaging in academic inquiry, particularly inquiry that entails researching unfamiliar topics, entertaining perspectives different from one's own, or charting the network of beliefs that inform a student's stance on a given topic.

I hope the reconceptualization of dogma I have presented here—a reconceptualization informed by Augustine and Newbigin but that no doubt resonates with thinkers from other faith traditions—will provide a means for rhetoricians and writing instructors to talk with students about how basic beliefs motivate inquiry. In turn, I hope it offers a way for all of us to embrace and communicate a much-needed perspective: that it is possible to ask honest questions while maintaining humble commitments to deeply held beliefs, beliefs that so often comprise our students'—and our own—identities.

Notes

[1] Thanks to Jessica Enoch and Michael-John DePalma for reading early versions of this essay. Thanks also to *RR* reviewers David Timmerman and Brian Jackson for offering insightful feedback that helped me clarify my argument.

[2] For the sake of consistency, I have changed Newbigin's spelling of certain words to follow American rather than British conventions.

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