Religions ask and respond to such fundamental questions of the meaning and truth of our existence as human beings in solitude, and in society, history, and the cosmos. Theologians, by definition, risk an intellectual life on the wager that religious traditions can be studied as authentic responses to just such questions. To formulate such questions honestly and well, to respond to them with passion and rigor, is the work of all theology.

—David Tracy, The Analogical Imagination

Teaching theology to college students is a wonderful privilege. Many of the students I teach are questioning their religious and spiritual beliefs, whether these be the beliefs of their parents, their culture, or their friends. In teaching theology, I believe that my goal is to enable students to think about the fundamental questions they might have in a passionate and rigorous way. In teaching Christian theology, I offer them one particular tradition’s attempt to wrestle with the very questions of purpose and meaning in life that they themselves face.

My goal for my students is twofold. First, I want them to learn how to do theology themselves. I introduce this by using Anselm’s description of theology as “faith seeking understanding” and asking them what each of these three terms means. Because the students I teach range widely in their faith commitments from atheism to agnostic searching to spiritual—but-not-religious to unquestioning devotion, I encourage them to understand faith more basically as a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Even though this meaning might be thematized in different ways, I have found that nearly all my students are pursuing answers to such fundamental questions. I encourage them to understand theology as the activity in which these questions are formulated and pursued.

Second, I want my students to have a thorough understanding of the key ideas, symbols, and teachings of the Christian theological tradition. For example, when I teach particular narratives (e.g., Exodus, the Gospels) and mysteries (original sin, salvation) to my students, I present them as classic attempts within the Christian tradition to respond to the very same fundamental questions my students have. These topics represent concrete attempts to wrestle with the purpose and meaning of life in light of God’s revelation in history. Further, by requiring the students to interpret the scriptures and the Christian tradition in light of their personal experience, I foster an environment in which each student can challenge and be challenged by the interpretations of their peers.

In order to achieve these two goals, I work to foster a conversation-oriented classroom. When I lecture on material, I follow a Socratic method of question and answer in hopes of leading the students to think through the material themselves. This method allows me to more seamlessly incorporate discussion as a classroom activity. When there are specific ideas that I want them to analyze in light of their personal experience, I have them turn to a neighbor and discuss the topic one-on-one before sharing with the whole class. This process encourages the students to come to the material with questions, which are often the most effective way to present the material.

My assignments also reflect these goals. Every other week, my students write short reflection papers on topics ranging from whether they view themselves as theologians to exegetical papers on specific scriptural passages. The writing assignments require them to weave together the activity of being a theologian with the specific theological topics we’ve discussed that week. Their final exam is a group oral exam in which the students collaboratively prepare certain texts and works of art and then engage me in conversation over them. Through these types of assignments, the students are increasingly formed in the process of becoming a theologian. My hope is that they will take the skills they develop in my class and apply them to critical reflection on the theological questions they encounter both in society and in their personal lives.