

A LETTER TO SCREWTAPE

An Innovative Method for Integrating Faith in the Teaching and Learning of Sociology

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Keep pressing home on him the ordinariness of things. Above all, do not attempt to use science (I mean, the real sciences) as a defense against Christianity. They will positively encourage him to think about realities he can't touch and see. . . . If he must dabble in science, keep him on economics and sociology; don't let him get away from that invaluable "real life."

—Screwtape to Wormwood in *The Screwtape Letters* (Lewis 2001:4)

Introduction

Finding engaging ways for students to contemplate the relationship between faith and a particular field of study is central to the task of the Christian university. This responsibility is complicated in introductory courses that draw a variety of students from a cross section of the departments and programs on campus, which are often comprised of students who may not pursue further coursework in one's discipline. Often, making the course material come alive for marginally interested students knocking out a core curriculum requirement is difficult. And finding ways to foster significant learning that integrates faith and sociology poses its own challenges.

In an effort to invite students to evaluate sociology through the lens of faith, I developed a learning activity called "A Letter to Screwtape." Based on C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* (2001), the assignment asks students to write a letter to Screwtape in which they characterize and assess his view of sociology (above) in comparison to their own understanding. The letter is due during the last week of the semester and provides an opportunity to bring closure to the course in a meaningful way. In what follows, I describe the project, discuss its unique contribution to teaching and learning in sociology, and evaluate the assignment's success.

Description of the Project

The Screwtape Letters (Lewis 2001) is a fictional collection of correspondence between two demons. In this imaginative account, the more experienced Uncle Screwtape offers advice to his nephew Wormwood regarding the methods for turning Wormwood's "patient" away from Christianity. In his opening letter, Screwtape asserts that people "find it all but impossible to believe in the unfamiliar while the familiar is before their eyes" (Lewis 2001:4). This logic suggests that seeing the extraordinary, mysterious dimensions of the world would draw people toward Christianity. On this premise, Screwtape instructs Wormwood "not to attempt to use science (I mean, the real sciences) as a defense against Christianity. [It would] . . . positively encourage him to think about the realities he can't touch and see" (Lewis 2001:4). The so-called soft sciences such as sociology, however, are an asset in this enterprise. In Screwtape's estimation, sociology will help keep his nephew's patient focused on the mundane, here and now, tangible world in which he lives, thereby obscuring the spiritual realities that he might otherwise see through the "real sciences." Turning people on to sociology, it seems, is part of Satan's repertoire for turning people off to God—at least according to Screwtape (and perhaps C.S. Lewis too).

Students are asked to imagine that they are Wormwood, who, after reading his uncle's letter, decided to observe a sociology course for the semester to explore the potential of sociology. In the **first part** of their letter, they are asked to characterize Screwtape's understanding of sociology. Does sociology, as Screwtape asserts, focus people's attention on the mundane features of everyday life and thereby keep people from seeing unfamiliar, mysterious dimensions of the world? After clearly stating the extent to which they agree or disagree with Screwtape, students are asked to relate their own understanding of what sociology is all about. The assignment directions include the following example:

After I received your letter, I decided to observe a sociology course to gain a better understanding of what you meant when you wrote that it encourages people not to think about realities that he can't touch and see. I think you are correct. From what I have seen, sociology may be described in the following way

In the **second part** of their letter to Screwtape, students are required to discuss two topics covered during the semester (e.g., gender and poverty) that they think are uniquely suited to the task of turning people toward or away from God. They accomplish this by summarizing at least one of the semester's assigned readings for each topic and discussing the power of the ideas presented in the reading to either help or hinder the process of turning people away from God. The following guidance is offered in the directions:

I recently read a popular introductory sociology book written by Conley. In it he discusses the sociological perspective on gender, which keeps people from seeing that they are created in the image of God.

After making such a claim, you should go on to discuss exactly what the sociological perspective on gender is, for example, by summarizing what the reading says, including at least one quotation for each topic.

Conley discusses gender as a social construct. He states The reason this is so helpful in turning people away from God is

Taken together these components invite students to revisit topics that were covered during the semester and to assess the merit of each. While this kind of reflection is encouraged throughout the semester, the Letter to Screwtape assignment brings closure to the semester by offering students an opportunity to wrestle with the implications of sociology for their faith.

How the Project Differs from Current Teaching Ideas and Methods in the Field

Teaching Sociology, the American Sociological Association's journal dedicated to the scholarship of teaching and learning in sociology, publishes articles that focus on a wide range of topics, issues, and techniques. Conspicuously absent from its volumes are articles

that discuss the integration of faith and learning. In journals oriented toward Christian academics, such as the *Christian Scholar's Review* on the other hand, attention has been paid to the integration of Christianity and sociology (e.g., Perkins and Sayers 1987), but few methods, techniques, or examples are made available. Likewise, while monographs (e.g., Fraser and Compolo 1992; Gaede 1985; Lyon 1975, 1983; Perkins 1987) and edited volumes on Christianity and sociology exist (e.g., Gill 1996; Grunlan and Reimer 1986; Leming et al. 1989) to promote the integration of faith, an assignment like the one outlined above is not included. In addition, the dated nature of these publications indicates that it is time for updating the toolkit for teaching and learning sociology. Finally, in past syllabi for the course in which this assignment has been introduced (SOC211 Principles of Sociology), the important component of faith integration is absent from the course requirements.¹

Evaluation of the “Letter to Screwtape” Assignment

This assignment is integral to six introductory sociology courses taught during the 2010–2011 academic year. Four of these courses—approximately 100 students—have completed the assignment (80 students in two sections will complete it at the end of the spring semester). In my estimation, the project encourages students to wrestle with a difficult topic in an accessible manner. It offers individuals who are new to the discipline to put in their own words what they learned throughout the semester. Also, writing this letter continues to build critical thinking skills by asking students to think reflexively about the intellectual and spiritual promises and dilemmas associated with sociology. Overall, students have responded positively to the assignment. Some students, however, have expressed concerns over being able to write in this way. In such cases, students are permitted to write a more formal essay, touching on the same topics of the assignment.

¹ While I am persuaded that Christian faith was integral to the classroom, I do not have any evidence of any assignments that required students to articulate the connection between the discipline and their faith.

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