**Case 1:** Write a letter to the editor responding to Mark C. Taylor’s “End of the University as We know It” (New York Times, April 27, 2009). Write your response from one of the seven philosophical approaches to education discussed in the course (not the one that your precept group will present in class).

**Case 2:** A youth leader from a para-church organization was asked to resign her position because she refused to utilize a new marketing strategy aimed at drawing young people from the community into the program. Using the interpretive lens provided by one of the approaches to the philosophy of education considered in this course, identify and analyze what you believe was the central problem in this situation.

**Case 3:** You have been called to serve a church as its associate pastor for education and youth. In the glory days of the 1950’s, the church had hundreds of youth involved on Sunday mornings and in the midweek fellowship group. After continual decline in the 1960’s and the 1970’s, the numbers of young people participating in the church leveled off at about one-third of the previous number. Several youth leaders have come and gone in the past twenty years; the average length of service was eighteen months. The church is excited about you and thinks that you can help “to turn things around.” Drawing upon and being informed by one of the approaches to the philosophy of education we have studied in this course, develop the outline of a plan for leading the youth program of this congregation.

**Case 4:** One of the parents of an eighth grader in the yearlong confirmation class pulled you aside as an all-church dinner event and said that while you are doing a great job teaching the Apostles Creed, you should really teach confirmands the basic beliefs of other religions. She stresses the importance of religious literacy in the increasingly multicultural, global and digital context in which we live. She thinks that this is the primary responsibility of the teaching ministry of the church. Develop your initial response by drawing on one of the approaches to philosophy of education in this course.
Case Study #1 – A Letter to the Editor of the New York Times

In his recent op-ed article (“End the University as We Know It”: 4/27/09), Mark C. Taylor offered a poignant and illuminating critique of contemporary graduate education. As a budding academic, and post-graduate studies hopeful, I found his analysis of particular interest. If the expectation of Ph.D. seminars, comprehensive exams, and three stressful years as an ABD (All But Dissertation) wasn’t enough reason for me to drop out and become a carpenter, add to that irrelevancy, exploitation, and debt. And, let us not forget the exciting prospect of competing with one hundred of my fellow “clones” for the ten available university positions available—in the nation. Thankfully, Taylor’s pragmatic analysis of the problem of higher education is gaining a wide reading and causing quite a stir.

In his 1910 classic How We Think, John Dewey described a five-step method of pragmatic problem solving. After (1) encountering a problem, one must (2) try to define the nature of that problem. Once the problem has been better defined and contextualized, one (3) suggests possible solutions and (4) ponders the likely implications of those suggestions. Finally, by (5) testing the best solution one is led to further analysis and better insight into the problem. Taylor’s editorial is an excellent example of this process at work.

The problem with American higher education, according to Taylor, is that it simply does not work. It does not achieve the desired ends. How do we know this? Well, as William James often said, “The proof is in the pudding.” The American university works like a factory that spits out graduates with highly specialized and impractical knowledge, who then compete for jobs that simply don’t exist. This result is quite obviously disadvantageous. That the “ends” are undemocratic and stubborn is hardly surprising when one ponders the “means” of higher education in America: an archaic and exploitative system of “cloning” fueled by market forces and the self-interest of academic institutions and tenured professors. That this critique comes from a department-chair of a major university gives one hope that there are educators out there who are committed to open-ended, revisable concepts of education.

Thankfully, Taylor does not end with a concise definition of the problem. He offers working hypotheses of solutions. He urges cross-disciplinary studies at the highest levels (one envisions a Ph.D. in Social Studies or Language Arts), and “Problem-focused Programs” of study. His solutions are at once shocking (abolish tenure?!?) and impeccably practical (prepare graduates to be adaptable in an evolving world). Taylor’s solutions would foster a more democratic and market-driven learning environment. This is, perhaps, ironic given his background in Postmodern Philosophy and his use of Marxist “critical theory” in his deconstruction of the modern university.

It remains to be seen whether the final step of Dewey’s pragmatic process will ever be implemented. It seems that would require a paradigm-shift: a Copernican revolution of the modern university. There is also the added difficulty of the Catch-22 of the scientific method—the very tool needed to evaluate the effects of a new system is also the tool that led to over-specialization and compartmentalization in the first place. Yes, the final step seems like a tall order indeed. On the other hand, the modern American education system began with one university—Johns Hopkins—that was modeled after one university—the University of Berlin. Perhaps what is needed is a graduate-level “laboratory school” with Mark Taylor leading the charge. If, indeed, “the proof is in the pudding,” then the growth of the students will be evident and the groundwork for a pragmatic (post)modern university system will be laid. I may even consider leaving the carpentry business to be a part of it.
Case Study #2

This youth leader is an example *par excellence* of a solitary individual thrown into the harsh, confusing, absurd world that is “Ministry.” She most likely entered with strong ideals and high hopes before discovering the constraints of para-church ministry. Though very difficult, this whole ordeal was probably a “wake-up call” and a “reality check.” To better understand what happened, let us answer three questions: (1) why did the youth leader resist the marketing strategy? (2) why did she respond the way she did? and (3) what can we learn from her situation?

While we cannot know the exact reason for her resistance of the marketing strategy, we can draw some inferences. Marketing campaigns have the tendency to depersonalize interaction. From the viewpoint of a marketing campaign, people are not viewed as individuals, but as potential “customers.” The aim of a marketing campaign is essentially to persuade people to buy a product. Often marketing strategies work by manipulating people’s emotions or taking advantage of their insecurities. The youth leader most likely refused to allow her ministry to function this way. Where a marketing strategy threatened to turn her students into impersonal “Its,” she desired to see them, in Martin Buber’s language, as an individual “Thou.” The youth worker refused to be caught up in unbridled American consumerism. She refused to be part of a system that threatened to take away her freedom to do her job the way she felt was necessary.

Faced with the bleak choice between compromising her convictions and possibly losing her job, she would have felt deeply Sartre’s paradox: we are condemned to be free. The youth worker acted according to that freedom, and did not just go along with what she was told to do. Had she compromised on this issue, she would have been asked to compromise on another later on. This is the slippery slope on which many people find themselves, slowly losing their integrity and turning into people they never wanted to be. The decision to resist the marketing strategy at personal risk took a great deal of self-examination and self-awareness. In all likelihood, it was a moment of self-awakening: the youth worker saw the underbelly of ministry, but held onto her own integrity. Of course, the absurdity of a youth worker being fired for treasuring her students as individuals instead of as “customers” is not hard to miss.

By staying committed to her convictions this youth worker showed herself to be a true teacher and minister—despite the view of her superiors. In her “wide-awareness,” she would have helped others to wake-up. From her situation, we can learn to recognize the tragic side of life. As Christians we know that on the cross Jesus won the ultimate war, but sin still seems to reign in our daily experience. In the tension between “now” and “not-yet” we experience anxiety, angst, and doubt. While one would hope that things might be different in Christian ministry, sadly it often isn’t.

One wonders what this youth worker’s future will look like. Will she be overcome by the absurdity and tragedy of her lived experience or will she make the “leap of faith” and choose to trust in God’s goodness and faithfulness despite the apparent evidence to the contrary? Will we learn from her courage to hold to her convictions, to refuse to be a cog in a ministry machine, and her dedication to the individuality of her students? We each must answer these questions for ourselves; no one can answer them for us. One thing is certain: our decisions will form our character.
Case Study #3

We’ve never done it that way before.

These are the seven most dangerous words of the Church. While I am excited to be a part of a church with such a great history of youth ministry, I am also aware of the uphill nature of any attempt to influence church culture. The problem, however, is that adolescence culture is shifting, and the church needs to keep up. Like it or not, modernism is giving way to postmodernism and this presents new challenges and opportunities for youth ministry. Recognizing the inherent dangers of “rocking the boat” and the high turnover rate of youth ministers at this church, I nevertheless offer the following plan to bring the youth group in question into the 21st century.

First, we must recognize that it is no longer 1950, and a successful ministry today will look different than a successful ministry looked fifty years ago. The reason for the stagnation in this church youth group is most likely a result of a resistance to change and a desire to return to the “glory days.” This image of the former success of the ministry has become an idol that must be smashed. The purpose of the church is not to replicate the status quo; it is to bring new life, growth, and social consciousness. Of course, the process of changing this culture will be slow, but it must happen to move forward.

Lyotard described postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.” There is an overriding suspicion of grand narratives in the youth culture today. Grand truth claims are not accepted as easily as they once were. In order to build the youth group, the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ must be communicated in new ways. We must recognize that facts are inert; what really matters is imagination. Telling people the Four Spiritual Laws, while useful, will not change the imagination in the same way that stories will. The new youth group will focus on the personal narratives of the students themselves. Likewise, viewing the Bible as a story, in which one can place one’s own story may be an intermediate step away from grand metanarrative truth claims without collapsing into nihilism, a tall order in a world as absurd as the one in which we live.

The demographics of the local community have changed dramatically since the “heyday” of the youth group in the 1950’s. There is greater diversity along racial, ethnic, political, and cultural lines. One of the goals of the new youth group is to increase the horizons of the students by fostering conversations. By allowing students to connect and learn from one another, and from those different from them, they will learn to see the world in a deeper, thicker way. In learning to respect the alterity of the “other,” students will learn about what it means to love as God loves—radically respecting human dignity by allowing human freedom. Additionally, the youth group will encourage dialogue with those on the margins: the people in our own community and abroad who experience oppression. This social discourse will prepare students to connect their faith with their lived experience in new ways.

One of my main goals, as the new youth minister, is to create a “third-place”—not school or home—where students can gather, dialogue, and develop a community of growth and love. I envision a Christian, sustainable, free-trade coffeehouse where events can be held that are open to the public (e.g. movie nights, concerts and poetry sessions) and where local artists can display their art. This will foster reflection on and interaction with art, music and movies as an avenue toward conversations about issues of faith and justice. Finally, I will work to implement alternate forms of worship, bible study (i.e. lectio divina) and utilize on-line social network utilities (myspace, facebook, twitter) in order to reach kids where they are.
Case Study #4

The central tenant of Realism is the principle of independence. This principle states that matter, knowledge, and truth exist independent of the mind. The facts of the universe exist whether we know them or not. For example, if every human being were blind the moon would still exist. This same logic can be applied to religious truth. As Christians we believe that the Gospel is true for all people whether they have come to believe it or not. Romans 3:4 says “Let God be true, though every man were a liar” (ESV). Of course, the great hope of Christianity sounds more like: let God be true and every person a believer.

It is certainly important for students to learn about religions other than Christianity. We do live in an increasingly multi-cultural, global and digital context and it would be wrong for students to be ignorant of the precepts and beliefs of other religions. The Angelic Doctor, Thomas Aquinas, affirmed human ability to come to knowledge of God through the use of Reason. It is no surprise that people of other religions also believe in the existence of an “Absolute,” which they call God. That knowledge is available to all. Furthermore, through the study of the world religions, we may attain a greater knowledge of God. There are, however, religious truths that cannot be deduced through the observation of the world around us or the study of the world religions. For instance, the concepts of incarnation, trinity and atonement require special revelation. It is this special revelation that is passed on through the generations in the Scriptures, creeds and councils.

As a religious realist, I am committed to teaching the Christian religion as articulated by Scripture and the basic creeds and councils of the Church. Confirmands should learn the basic facts of their own religion in a measurable way. Memorization of the Apostles Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer ensure that the basics of Christianity make it into the students’ heads (with the prayer that it eventually makes it into their hearts). I would contend that my primary responsibility as the confirmation teacher is to teach the “facts” of the Christian religion.

If the world of experience is a true path to knowledge, then the same can be said of the events of history. The strength of the Apostle’s Creed lies in its grounding in historical events that Christians affirm actually happened in space-time. God actually created the heavens and earth. Jesus really was born, died, was buried, descended, resurrected and ascended. The Holy Spirit is truly active in the church and the final resurrection will actually happen.

That being said, I reiterate again the value of learning about all of the world religions. The main reason for learning about anything, according to religious realism, is to transcend to the knowledge of God. Through our observation and reason, God can and does reveal God’s self to us—even through the world religions. In fact, this principle works with the Christian religion as well. The purpose of learning the basics of the Christian religion is not simply to know bare facts. The purpose is to transcend the religion and attain a true knowledge of God. The clearest revelation of God is Jesus as revealed in Scriptures and as illuminated by the Holy Spirit. That is what we teach in confirmation class. There is a proper time and place in which to learn about the world religions. Indeed, there is a proper time to learn about everything from science and philosophy to music and aesthetics. I would encourage this concerned mother to organize a class about the world religions through our Christian Education committee. I will support her in it and I will even help to teach some of the classes.