Inadequate Acknowledgement of Secondary Sources

(Plagiarism)

Written assignments at Yale Divinity School often require consultation of and critical reflection on secondary sources. Secondary sources include books, articles, reviews, web sites, published or orally delivered sermons, poems, and any other written, oral, or electronically mediated communication. Failure adequately to acknowledge secondary sources in a written assignment is a matter that, per YDS policy, must be forwarded to the Professional Studies Committee for review. Depending on the disposition of the matter by the Committee, consequences for the student can include a mandate to rewrite the flawed paper or to write a new paper unrelated to the flawed paper; the recording of an F on the student’s transcript for the class; or expulsion from YDS.

Per YDS policy, a student’s stated lack of intent to plagiarize cannot be considered material to a case under investigation. It is therefore in students’ best interest to inform themselves fully about the kinds of plagiarism that exist so that they may avoid those errors in their written work. Toward that end, I supply the clarifications of plagiarism below. These are intended for your instruction only and are not to be taken as an exhaustive or definitive list.

Kinds of Plagiarism

1. Wholesale failure to acknowledge a source. If you use information, an idea, a line of argument, or a distinctive turn of phrase without noting explicitly the source in which you found the material, you will have plagiarized. Very well known information, such as the fact that Amos may have prophesied in the 8th century B.C.E. or that the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 587, need not be footnoted or otherwise acknowledged. If you are unsure whether you need to acknowledge a source, do acknowledge it. It is always better to err on the side of caution. For our purposes here, my lectures and our class discussions as such do not need to be footnoted, but if a classmate offers a particularly effective or unique formulation in discussion that you then use in a paper, it would be desirable, although not required, to credit that classmate appropriately.

2. Failure to indicate a verbatim quotation. The verbatim (word-for-word) quotation of secondary material in your written work must be indicated in every instance by the use of quotation marks. If you do not use quotation marks, the reader will take the material as your own words, and you will have plagiarized. This is the case even if you supply a footnote at the end of the verbatim material or attribute the material in a general way to the source in question. If material is used verbatim, it must always be marked by quotation marks. Note that for lengthy quotations block-indented in single-
spaced format, the block indentation stylistically takes the place of quotation marks as such, so quotation marks are not needed in that kind of situation.

3. Failure to indicate more general dependence on a secondary source. If you use an idea from another source without acknowledgement, or follow another writer’s line of argument without acknowledgement, you will have plagiarized, even if you paraphrase the idea or sequence of ideas rather than rendering the material verbatim.

Illustrations of the above kinds of plagiarism will draw on the following excerpt from J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 78:

If, as Whitehead says, “we are never very free,” we do usually have a margin of freedom within which we can reflect on our situation, with all its constraints, and respond to it in ways that promise to make our continued life possible and perhaps even better. But from time to time we wonder whether we have enough freedom to enable us to get out of the dead-end streets our exercise of freedom has gotten us into. If human freedom arises in what we call our will and finds its direction in what we call our imagination, the question is, Do we have the imagination to modify a social arrangement or course of action that our imagination once devised for what seemed good reasons but that now threatens to become a straitjacket on ourselves or others? In the biblical view, such freedom, such imagination, is the gift of God who, according to the word at the burning bush, is most deeply named in the words, “I will be who I will be.” As I suggested earlier, such a name implies at least this much: However much we have known God in terms of our past typical experiences, needs, practices, and patterns of life, God is not limited to this past but remains free to respond to whatever new circumstances may arise in God’s creation.

Example #1: a student’s wholesale failure to acknowledge a source.

In considering the terrifying judgment oracles of the book of Amos, and especially the absence of promise material except for that brief bit at the end of Amos 9, it seems that Amos would argue against free will. Repentance no longer seems possible for the people of Israel. They no longer have enough freedom to enable them to get out of the dead-end street that their sinning has gotten them into. In the biblical view, freedom is the gift of the God who appeared to Moses at the burning bush, but according to Amos, the Israelites have consistently used this freedom only in order to sin, so they are now faced with utter destruction.
Example #2: a student's failure to indicate a verbatim quotation.

Even if Ezekiel does stress personal rather than corporate and generational responsibility for sin in Ezekiel 18, still, as Janzen suggests, from time to time we wonder whether we have enough freedom to enable us to get out of the dead-end streets our exercise of freedom has gotten us into. Even if we are free theoretically, in practical terms we continually reforge our chains of slavery to sin. But thanks be to God that God is not limited in the way that we are. However much we have known God in terms of our past typical experiences, needs, practices, and patterns of life, God is not limited to this past but remains free to respond to whatever new circumstances may arise in God's creation.¹


*Note that in the above example, even though Janzen is mentioned in the body of the student's essay and the student has supplied a footnote, the student's paragraph is still plagiaristic. The absence of quotation marks leaves the impression that the passages taken verbatim from Janzen are in fact the student's own words, which is not the case.*

Example #3: a student's failure to indicate more general dependence on a source.

The Garden of Eden story raises some difficult and compelling questions regarding the whole theological problem of free will versus determinism. Alfred North Whitehead has suggested that humans are never very free, in real terms. But do the prophets not proclaim that we have a certain kind of freedom in that we can reflect on our life, repent, and try to improve it? We may have enough freedom to do that, to try to lift ourselves up by our bootstraps and get out of the traps of sin that we set for ourselves. But imagination is also needed, the imagination to see new ways of living as Christians. We may be bound as if in a straitjacket to choices we once made, thinking they were good ideas at the time, and lack the spiritual imagination to see how we might be transformed, how we might walk a new path in a new situation.

*Note that although the above essay is written in the student's own words, the general line of argument, from Whitehead to free will to the roles of reflection and imagination to the image of straitjacket, is followed by the student without acknowledgement of the source. This too is plagiaristic.*