Teaching Difficult Subjects

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Guest Editor

From the Editor’s Desk

The TOPIC for this issue of Spotlight on Teaching was inspired by a panel discussion arranged by Cynthia Humes last year at Claremont McKenna College titled “Teaching Difficult Topics.” Cynthia invited panelists to describe “specific challenges and encounters that they faced in their courses, and to illustrate from their own experience what teaching strategies they used in response to a charged and contentious classroom setting.”

Although religion in world events is repeatedly front-page news, public understanding of its complexity is more constrained than ever. The stakes of remaining ignorant and misconstrued get higher as political interests and religious groups compete for their own agenda. The world enters the classroom both in the faces of students, and in the situated positions which professors themselves assume and signify. Taking cover in the safety of enlightenment boundaries between perceiver and perceived, subject and object is no longer an honest option.

So how do we teach in classes where the subject peers at itself in the mirror of the text, lectures, and images studied? Students in our classrooms are not (and never were) blank pages on which we can write as we might do our articles and books. Our interactions are not one-way monologues nor should they be. But co-constructivist pedagogy and power/knowledge critiques of academe have also raised challenges.

Classrooms often run into sites of contestation by design or default that put to test the very premises of hard-won scholarly coherences recast as regimes of oppression. Exercise of free speech clashes with political correctness; academic freedom collides with identity politics; cultural criticism contends with historical revisionism; critical analysis and (co)textual study come up against subjectivism and the primacy of experiential and embodied knowledge.

This issue of Spotlight takes up the question of teaching “difficult” subjects. It turns out, as we learn from the collection of essays, that the term difficult is understood, encountered, and dealt with in many different ways. Difficult may refer to topics that are tricky, thorny, sensitive, controversial, offensive, and simply just demanding; critical methods that subvert received knowledge and unsettle the status quo; assertions and/or disavowals of the professor’s or student’s specific religious, political, or sexual identity; radical suspicion of any and all knowledge construction and production in academe. Keeping the definition of difficult wide open, professors from various perspectives offer their views and share their strategies in response to these often insurmountable difficulties.

In his piece titled “Common-Sense Religion,” Daniel C. Dennett noted that most people in the world say their lives would be meaningless without religion, and then tautly asks, whoever would want to interfere with whatever it is that gives people’s lives meaning? But for one thing: what do we do with creeds that oblige devout followers to behave innately or violently? (Chronicle of Higher Education, January 20, 2006, B6). What is lost in translation, of course, is the distance that spans the gap between creed and act, a distance made up of very specific factors such as who, what, when, why, and where.

Nonetheless, the question is apt and sensible. A persistent dilemma in fields such as the study of religion and culture, one made even more urgent by the realities of pluralism, is what we see as our role in the classroom? Should we only be translators and transmitters of different religious cultures, or are we also obligated to engage in historical analysis and cultural critique? Is our primary role to show “the internal logic of religious systems” and not to “defend or debunk anyone’s truth claims”? (Rycenga, iv) Or has phenomenological “epoché” devolved into a PC routine of “finding ways to say everything is right if only properly understood?” (Cumming, vi)?

Should we bring the communities we study into the classroom to “shift from an expert model of knowledge production to a collaborative model?” (Arnold, iii)? Or can such porous and blurred boundaries inadvertently subject students to intimidation and preempt their ability to think independently, especially when the communities in question don’t particularly “like the idea of the course at all” (Hawley, iii)?

Then, too, not only are scholarly representations of specific religious a valid object of critical analysis, as in Edward Said’s critique of Euro-American Orientalist “constructions of an anti-Islamic discourse” (Kassam, vi), but so, too, are representations of religious groups themselves who claim to speak authentically and authoritatively for all Muslims and, for example, declare “the Sunni legal tradition as the norm” (Schubel, vii).

Lest we think of “difficult” purely in intellectual terms, the sight of a student or professor’s tears vividly remind us of the emotions that well up in the classroom when “desires for knowledge move us . . . in unexpected ways” (Henking, viii). And that giving voice to those who have been marginalized is full of ironies when speech is used to silence those who have silenced others. “Not all silence/ing is bad; not all voice/ing is good” (Maldonado, ix), and both can hurt and anger.

The insanity of war and genocide takes us to the very extremities of the human capacity for inhumanity. What do we do when the subject itself evokes “strong feelings of anxiety, shame, guilt, fear, anger, horror, hopelessness” (Graham, xii)? The history of ethnic cleansing and religious genocide appears not to have been much of a lesson, much as Cassandra’s prescient warnings about the future fall on plugged ears. How does one square the moral imperative to know the past with the knowledge that “material about trauma can induce . . . vicarious trauma”? (Dobkowski and Salter, xii)

Teaching difficult subjects, as we see, often goes beyond our imaginations, and our classrooms are crucibles of learning not just for students but for teachers, too. As Cynthia Humes concludes from her own unforeseen difficulties, “what we do as scholars actually matters” (Humes, ii).
In “GURUS, Swamis, and Others,” my goal is to immerse my students in the academic study of Hindu religious leadership. This is challenging for several reasons. First, my students have been exposed to varying impressions of many of the Hindu leaders who have come to America in recent times. Each of these gurus, swamis, and others has brought his or her own conceptual and cultural matrix, and that matrix has become intermixed with a dominant American cultural matrix. In doing so, fascinating cultural transformations have occurred. Many of my students thus come to the subject with very firm opinions about some of these gurus, swamis, and others, and what “true” religious leadership should be. Simultaneously they rarely have an awareness of historical antecedents (for example, the Kartik) of spiritual migration. The topic of Hindu religious leadership is difficult, too, because although there are excellent resources for the study of early Hindu leaders, there is a relative dearth of scholarly materials in English on modern examples. Finally, this topic is difficult for me personally, because it forces me to confront the unusual path I have taken in my own research and teaching.

The True Guru

In the most recent class, about half of the students had experiences with guru movements and the other half fell into the category of those curious but almost completely unfamiliar with the subject. “Insider” students posed a challenge in that their gurus taught them the “correct” interpretation of Hindu thought, leading to difficulties in appreciating historical and regional nuances. However, I discovered that on balance, they had a clear advantage because of their familiarity with many shared (albeit contested) cultural terms and concepts, in comparison to their curious but not yet “enlightened” peers.

Students coming to the topic with little background are primarily disadvantaged because of their exposure to popular literature and prevailing wisdom on gurus and other Hindu leaders in the West — particularly on the Internet. These sources are oftentimes biased or simply wrong. For example, on the Internet especially, purportedly information sites blend haplessly the many varieties of practice and meditation in Hindu leadership into a one-size-fits-all, leaving me with little recourse but to warn students initially “just don’t go there” so as to forestall utter confusion. Such sites believe the complex philosophical and historical origins of Hindu forms of leadership I seek to learn.

Students less versed in the topic often question the propriety of Hindu religious authority. The idea of “surrender” to a guru is often considered to be a cardinal sin of a “cult.” I find the common usage of the term “cult” to describe guru movements revealing, demonstrating the success of “Anti-Cult” agency groups in successfully stigmatizing certain models of Hinduism and discipleship. For example, leaders who taught marital recitation were cast as instilling brainwashing or “mind control,” such that “victims” who were duped into joining these “cults” were best “deprogrammed.”

“Transcendental Meditation (TM) led by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, became the specific target of the Cult Awareness Network, the largest and most successful of the Anti-Cult groups (and which was eventually found guilty of conspiracy to kidnap in a “deprogramming” case involving a member of the Hare Krishna Church).

Each guru or tradition of Hindu leadership has sought to instill a new, privileged worldview, often using the same terms, but in markedly different ways. I, too, sought to teach them a new, different kind of academic approach: one of the assignments is to have the students prepare for a lengthy vocabulary quiz that introduces this problem endemic to teaching about gurus: students must gain mastery over the discipline of religious studies as well as the disciplines introduced by the teachers we were studying. I do not provide static definitions. Students are assigned a set of words and are required to create the definitions and send them to class members for their input via a course Web site. Once the definition is thorough and vetted through thinking together in a team environment, I post the terms online in a shared glossary. Concepts are often updated as we progress in the course, reflecting the specific nuances of each guru’s leaders bring to traditional terms. I have invariably found that if I introduce this step, students are better prepared to work with the materials, willing to trust in the collective intelligence of the class and the value of team learning, and able to fashion better the historical development and context of key concepts.

I ask specific comparative questions throughout the course, seeking ever-more-complex analysis. Students new to the concepts of the course are able to stabilize, through repeated use, certain appropriate mental connections to academic reasoning, and deepen those connections through intellectual hooks to facts and evidence to support their theses. This comparative method allows students to develop a deeper understanding of ideas and material, and it imparts the complex thinking skills that it fosters greater confidence in their abilities to understand complex new thought systems. For each model of leadership, we develop the intellectual toolkit that makes it invaluable to willing followers. By constructing together the terms and warrants each believer is expected to accept, we fill our major structures in each system, thus providing students entry into a worldview understandable in its own terms. I, too, come to support the very process of isolating the specific terms and warrants, and not asking students to accept their veracity but to understand how they support the system, aptly addresses the challenge posed by students’ incredulity that people would take these religious leaders seriously.

Building the Course

There are excellent resources for studying early particularistic leadership. Academic historians there are many studies of the roles of religious functionaries in Vedism, Brahmanism, and especially in the Upanishads. One can find detailed studies of these leaders, philosophers and movements associated with them, and early gurus, swamis, and others. There are excellent materials, too, on religious leaders of the Hindu Revival. For example, Kamalamati Desai, Keshub Chandra Sen, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, and others.

My interest in religious leadership, however, extended to current movements, and I found it difficult to counter the embarrassment of non-Hindus at the sight of religious leaders and movements and research in the study of such gurus and Hindu leaders. To some degree, the respective wealth and absence of materials reflected the American Academy of Religion. For several decades, work on Hinduism was largely presented within the single section called “Religion in South Asia” or RSA. Until recently, the field has thus been predominantly regionally based, allowing focused researches of Hindu subjects as well as how traditions within the South Asian subcontinent interrelate, but the field did not extend to global phenomena. I began to reach out to others involved in the study of RISHI to form a Hinduism Group unit at the AAR, creating in 1997 a new venue not located in geography and in which American and global forms of Hinduism, for example, could readily be studied. In 2001, I put together a panel on great gurus, out of which eventually came a 2005 book, which I now use as a major textbook in this course. Given the explicit focus Forshoelde and Meehan (2005) brings together the work of ten scholars, focusing on nine important Hindu gurus. Each contributor addressed the religious and cultural influences, translation, and transplantation that occur when gurus offer their teachings in America. The chapters also discuss the characteristics of each guru’s teachings, the history of each movement, and the particular construction of Hinduism each guru offers. The American Academy of Religion continues to serve as a critical support network and avenue to invigorate and expand our research and our teaching.

The Long and Windy Road

In December 2004 I attended a conference, organized by Jeffrey Krupal among others, at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. This gathering underscored profound changes in our field. “Exploring the Nature of Our Offense: A Symposium on the Study of Hinduism In a World of Identity Politics and Religious Intolerance” brought together scholars of India whose work had been subject to an increasing number of censorship campaigns from those who purported to find “defamation” or “blasphemy” in my writings.

The catalyst for my invitation was a paper I had given several weeks before at the AAR Annual Meeting about Rajiv Malhotra and his use of philanthropy to influence members of the academy (see next essay by Jack Hawley on page ii). Subsequently, I began the task of a bar- rage of Internet venom by colleagues of Malhotra. But the consequences occasioned by that presentation did not become the principal subject of my talk at the conference. Instead, after briefly recounting my own experience with Internet hate mail from complete strangers, I spent most of my time speaking for the first time in an academic forum about repercussions stemming from my 1995 essay, “Rajputs, Thugs, and Malhooses: Religion and Politics in the Worship of Vishnudavatav.” This essay described insights drawn from my fieldwork about the temple priests, pandits, and construction of a temple site in India, where certain individuals functioned as what informants described as “shareholders.” Perhaps most remarkably, some of the so-called malhooses were prominent religious leaders at the temple: “shareholders” of the temple, who owned the proceeds of a day’s offerings, and “temple priests,” whose job was to mediate between pilgrims and the Goddess. In 1995, I was contacted by sources in India advising me that my essay had become known there. It was clearly conveyed by sources in India that my study describing the violence or questionable economic activities among the religious leaders at the temple would occasion an undesirable response. As first I tried to remove anything about the political and economic dimensions (the manuscript was under contract with SUNY), but after nearly six months of effort at sanitizing, I realized these issues were at the heart of understanding anything meaningful about the religious leadership at the research site; the G-rated, inoffensive book was too to me fundamental dishonest.

I shared with others at the symposium that I had felt hoodwinked, silenced, and alone; I did not know any colleagues who had had similar experiences stemming from their research. Complicating my life was that I found that teaching about India sometimes triggered stress that exacerbated a chronic health problem. I came to realize that I would have to make a transition in both my research and teaching.

Ultimately, I decided to focus my research on Hindu religious leadership, but in a markedly different way. I shifted my focus away from a more anthropological approach of specific sites. Instead, I turned to the phenomenon of meditation, models of Hindu leadership independent of specific religious sites, and Hinduism in the West. These topics would not require visiting India, and could readily become triggers, and as a long-time mediator, concentrating on the subject helped me to accept and even embrace the change.

My experience at the “Symposium on the Study of Hinduism in a World of Identity Politics and Religious Intolerance” affected me deeply. Beyond the feeling of relief in sharing my story with others who have faced similar situations, the sheer number of stories underscored again and again the truth that scholarship, teaching, and their implications are not decontextualized — people are involved, interests are involved, and what we do as scholars actually matters.

Bibliography


Hinduism Here

Jack Hauley, Barnard College, Columbia University

In a class of this kind, vivid and open interactions with members of the communities being studied are essential. Especially since students were expected to produce text that would be publicly displayed, I took it as a cardinal commandment that members of the organizations with which we were interacting should also have their say. This meant, first of all, that the Web sites of the organizations themselves, if any such existed, would also be featured. Second, I invited members of communities to read the students’ papers and respond to them if they chose to do so. This usually happened informally: participants’ feedback was integrated into the papers themselves. Third, we planned the course so that it would culminate in a small conference to which members of the communities were eagerly invited and at which they spoke for themselves, once presenting perspectives different from those of the students. Finally, we invited representatives of the organizations under study to post any reactions on our course Web site.

In part because of this high level of engagement outside the classroom, however, it has also been very important for students to experience the classroom as a place where they can safely articulate their own ideas. Some of these ideas—perhaps tentative, perhaps just questions and hypotheses—might not be ones the students would regard as appropriate for sharing with members of the communities they were studying. Many students in the course are Hindus themselves, yet that hardship makes them homogenous or critical. Especially the first time around, there were huge arguments—often on points that the "Hindu Right" is eager to press—but that didn’t discourage the safety of the classroom as a place where such arguments were expected to occur and didn’t necessarily have to be solved.

What to do, then, when one of the organizations we were studying demanded entrance into the classroom as well? This concern for sharing with members of the communities these ideas—perhaps evaluative, perhaps just exploratory—was especially because students were being brainwashed, misled, and intimidated by their instructor—me. This accusation was made by Rajiv Malhotra, the successful information technology entrepreneur who retired from his business interests in 1994 to establish the Infinity Foundation. The Infinity Foundation describes itself high-mindedly as "making grants in the areas of compassion and wisdom," especially as these concern India and its civilization. At the same time, however, Malhotra also in fact spread a picture in his online forums that "will serve to ridicule attacks against scholars who work against him, including Wendy Doniger, Jeffrey Krupp, Paul Courtright, and myself. (For details, see Hawley 2004.)"

Malhotra has accused me in his Internet columns of being anti-Hindi: of steering all of my graduate students without exception toward Persian and Urdu—and languages with an Islamic provenance—and away from Sanskrit; and of being, in his words "white"—a person turned on by "a sort of voyeurism or subliminal conquest of the [nonwhite] other." Sanskrit, Malhotra explains on www.sulekha.com, "has been the traditional language for studying Indic religions." Speaking of me, Malhotra continues as follows: "Strategy: He hopes to train and deploy an army of desi sepoys equipped in the Persian-Urdu way of thinking, so that the next generation of Hinduism Studies scholars will be of that orientation." This charge is false. All the doctorate students with whom I have worked—without exception—have studied at least some Sanskrit; some are deeply interested in it. Not all of them are studying Persian and Urdu, though I certainly encourage it where appropriate.

In 2003, when "Hinduism Here" was being offered for the first time, I felt it was our responsibility to represent something of the range of religious expression possible for Hindus living in New York. Most of the sites I had in mind were religious communities in the obvious sense—Hindu temples—but communities centered on educational foundations are also important players, especially those with a presence on the Internet. So I proposed to Rajiv Malhotra and his colleagues at the Infinity Foundation (which, being headquartered in Princeton, New Jersey, is part of the orbit of greater New York) that their foundation itself should be one of the sites where our students would go to work. I was pleased when they accepted, especially since Malhotra’s work had made it clear that university classrooms like ours were also places where Hinduism was being "promoted" in ways that matter. The two-way mirror seemed just right.

Three students availed themselves of the chance to explore the Infinity Foundation—a master’s student who has gone on to pursue a doctorate in religious studies, a doctoral student of Indian background in mechanical engineering, and an undergraduate majoring in Middle East and Asian languages and culture—considered the field. They were traveling to Princeton as a group, and the first two, both men, largely accepted the foundation’s idea of how its work could most appropriately be represented. The third, however, did not. This quiet, determined woman, an avid student of Foucault & Co., felt that greater independence was required if one was truly to understand how the power/knowledge syndrome might be at work here. As the course progressed, she gathered her thoughts in an excellent paper called "The Infinity Foundation and the Western Academy," and like others on her team, she agreed to show it to the Infinity Foundation along the way.

Not everything she said pleased Rajiv Malhotra. She began her first draft by describing what it was like to visit his home in Princeton—the foundation had been constructed in a separate building out back—and see what his wealth had made possible. That set off a series of alarms. How could he say he was thinking in exercising a certain form of power in the realm of knowledge? How could I allow such shoddy work? Actually, I was reading her draft at the same time the Infinity Foundation people were and had also asked her to spell out the basis of her claims. But as the Infinity Foundation’s posting on the course Web site will show, they persisted in thinking that I was trying to dictate every word.

I believe the root issue was this student had said something about Malhotra’s evident power base, in the form of his financial assets. Here was someone who needed to be a victorious warrior but at the same time a victim—a David, not a Goliah—and he didn’t sound victim enough in her reporting. In response to both Malhotra’s reactions and mine, she did reconsider her initial judgments as she shaped the essay into its final form, but she never gave up her critical frame, her focus on the connection between knowledge and power. I was in the case of the students, but also where the Infinity Foundation was concerned. One can see in that what she posted on the course Web site, and she was able to be even more cautious in the version she submitted for internal consumption—for my eyes only, and hers.

The Infinity Foundation’s objections to this paper were only part of a larger picture. They didn’t like the idea of the course at all. In particular, Malhotra can review the full range of their objections by consulting what Krishnan Ramanavamy says by way of "Challenges to the Course" on the course Web site. But that kind of formal rebuff seemed insufficient. Rajiv Malhotra made it clear that he wanted to visit the class personally. I discussed this with the students and they agreed, some with considerable reluctance.

When certain of our PhD students, especially those from Hindu backgrounds, caught wind of this, they were appalled. Was it not wrong to lend an air of academic credibility to a person and an organization they saw as distorting, anti-academic, and most of all Hindu chauvinist? I saw their point, but persisted in thinking the greater danger would be to seem unwilling to receive them. I agreed with Malhotra that the hyphenated model of "fieldwork" with its "informants" left a lot to desired, but that the field—though it was a field—has to be able to talk back to the city, especially in a course so city-based.

Sure enough, there were plenty of fireworks when Malhotra showed up in class, and it was interesting to see that he didn’t come alone. He brought along two surprise guests, one an academic, the other a frequent reporter on “anti-Hindu” aspects of conferences held at places like Columbia. The numbers grew for other reasons, too. A researcher who had worked with one of our students on a yoga project asked to come, and so did one of our graduate students. She ended up becoming involved in a heated e-mail exchange—coexisting with Malhotra, and that generated further ripples of its own. Would I do it all over again? Certainly. But I have learned something along the way. There is a real tension between the course’s two goals—public service (student research published on a Web site) and intellectual formation (the shaping of that research through shared readings and classroom interchange). Both course and research. Organizations and communities that agree to play host to our students have a right to be represented publicly in ways that are palatable to their members, especially if they do like to do public things and make resources to mount Web sites themselves. (This is hardly the case for the Infinity Foundation, of course: its Web presence is massive and almost entirely devoted to this.)

To keep these public and private goals distinct, I am enduring the course requirements for the second time I taught it. I created a new rubric on the Web site called “student portraits”—shorter statements about the groups they were studying—than their term papers would be—and I expressly required that they be discussed with the groups themselves. If in addition students wanted their longer papers to be considered for Web posting, I encouraged that, but not if it meant the students felt they had to pull their punches. They had to be free to think, even if it meant that they did so strictly in-house. If they wanted to produce a separate, sanitized version for the Web, that was fine, and for most students there was nothing sensitive to be deleted in the first place. But I didn’t want to publish on the Web anything that might seem offensive to the communities and organizations that had extended us their hospitality—not unless the students could make a compelling case that public criticism of this sort needed to be made. In any case, I reserved the right to exercise my own editorial control (subject, of course, to the authors’ approval) and the organization’s right to respond remained just that.

In saying all this, I have emphasized the distinction between public and private space, but I want to close by reporting that some of the most productive encounters resulted from the line between the two, especially in the context of our course conference. One example comes vividly to mind. It concerned caste.

See Hauley, p. vii

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See Hauley, p. vii
Cosmology Hopping: Engaging and Avoiding Controversy in the Religious Studies Classroom

Jennifer Ryenga, San José State University

On the first day of class I set the tone for what it means to discuss religion in a religious studies classroom. First, we won’t pass judgment on truth claims. I’m not teaching to defend or debunk any one’s truth claims in the religious studies classroom: we are there to understand the human sources and uses of religion, and the internal logic of religious systems as systems. Second, I make it clear that all religions look absurd from the outside, including one’s own, and thus it is wise to refrain from judgmental terms such as “superstition,” “extremist,” and “fanatic,” as they can just as easily be used against you. I’ve developed a helpful exercise to set the tone of the class for the first day in the Religion in America classroom. Having presented them with a brief survey of the astounding range of religious diversity in North America, I ask them to reflect on some metaphors for adjudicating all these competing truth claims. Among the more extreme metaphors this exercise has elicited is the lottery model, which maintains that among a huge range of choices, there is only one winning lottery ticket, and you’d better find it. The chess game metaphor suggests there could be a variety of paths to the same goal; although there are many ways to get to checkmate, winning remains the soteriological goal, and losing a dreaded possibility. More inclusively, religious pluralism could be a hometown buffet of metaphysics: all is laid out for your eclectic choice or rejection. Finally, religious pluralism could be like biodiversity, where the presence of many plants and animals makes a system viable (still leaving the option of pulling out weeds and invaders), meaning that diversity of opinion should not be reduced, but encouraged.

Students enjoy this exercise, as they can indicate something of their religious perspective anonymously when discussing which metaphor strikes their fancy, without disclosing vulnerable religious identities. But most appreciate it pedagogically is how the exercise decimals truth claims, a point I reinvent by offering my own metaphor of musical genres: you don’t have to like all styles of music equally in order to study and understand their logic or to inhabit a religious studies classroom. Indeed, you can loathe your neighbor’s music, but the flourishing of your music does not depend on the silencing of his.

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Ultimately, though, two intangible factors explain my often disappointingly placid classrooms. First, as with most large state universities, at San José State, specific humanities courses are not usually required for all students, and when they are, there are so many different sections that students shop around; students can avoid professors who would challenge their views. How many students perceive me as too conservative, and decide they’ll not enroll in an infidel all semester? Second, I find the general attitude of West Coast students to classroom discussion is accommodating rather than argumentative.

In a class’ "Sinfulness and the Arts" that I taught at a California university, one student flippantly declared that Adrienne Rich was a selfish woman who had left her husband for no good reason, and was therefore not deserving of our aesthetic attention. Other students in the class sensed an opportunity to debate, and leapt to it, constructing some defenses for Rich that were quite imaginative. Nothing so dramatically demonstrates how regularly in my California classroom; when some of my San José students raised important ethical queries around why the evangelical ghostwriter Mel White remained in a heterosexual marriage even when he knew he was gay, other students rushed to resolve the potential debate, nearly explaining his behavior as a product of different historical circumstances. This approach short-circuited a feminist critique of White’s journey.

The vast majority of my students are more aggravated when I defend fundamentalism as an intellectual movement than when I present the thought of Maria Stewart or Mary Daly as central to American religious thought. The closing moments of “Religion in America” are often taken up with the story of Harry Hay being blessed by Wovoka in the 1920s, auguring the rise of both gay rights and the American Indian Movement (Hay 1996, 17–33). I’ve never had a student protest this intersection as a fitting capstone for the course; on the contrary, many cite it on their finals as an intriguing springboard for reflection. However, I’ll still be hearing from those same students that fundamentalism is anti-intellectual, no matter how often I have asked for comments. Even though it was you reading those words, he announced, staring accusingly at me, “I still felt convicted by them, guilty before my God!”

This was much more contentious. And I felt was appropriate, but before I could formulate a response, a tough young Chicana in the back nearly spat as she countered, “Oh, give me a break! That sermon does the same thing they did to us in basic training: make you feel worthless and weak, when then you put you on the back, you’re supposed to feel so grateful. I hate being used like that!”

The contrast opened a great discussion of enic and eric perspectives on Calvinist cosmology. Ultimately, both students knew their voices had been heard, but each was also able to go “cosmology hopping,” and understand why their debate partner saw Edwards’s tone as they did. I doubt that either the earnest evangelical or the jaded ex-military student had their minds (and judgments) changed, but their minds were opened (as well as others in that class, and the many other students with whom I have shared this story).

Controversy is where the intellectual excite ment is, but it can also be a place of violence and danger. The religious studies classroom is one space where controversial issues can be aired as exercises in critical thinking, rather than as contests for eternal dominance. Different professors will create this arena for intellectual play in the manner most suitable for them.

I keep the ground rules clear: my classrooms are known as nonproletizing zones. If something sounds too much like an unconditional endorsement, I’ll ask that student to construct the counter-argument to what she just said. I also model this behavior when students see me arguing for the logical coherence of religious systems that would deny women education, or, in the case of Christian Reconstruction, have me executed. Ultimately, the ability to inhabit the cosmology of another, albeit provisionally, is the learned skill we give our students, one that will help them whether they become science fiction writers, missionaries, financial advisors, or saints.

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I used to believe that my greatest challenges in teaching religion were: to convince agnostic students that whether or not God existed, religion still mattered; to convince the social scientists that religion was not just another aspect of culture; and to convince the politicians that religious experience was sui generis irrefutable; to engage the apathetic ennui-laden perennial-victims-of-impending-boredom idiot savants in an encounter with a world next door ever-so phantasmagoric and mind-absorbing at the latest release from Nintendo; and occasionally to remind the fundamentalists that they didn't know everything.

I was concerned with making students aware of the history of interpretation and the contemporary hermeneutical options, as well as the ambivalent, contradictory, and sometimes complementary paradigms that sift and shift through the multivariant religious traditions found in human culture. My courses were interdisciplinary, aimed for multicultural faculty, and emphasized empathy and understanding of the other and cautiousness in interpretation of others. I thereby hoped to create an appreciation for the subtle, and to build an “ecosphere of the spirit” in the minds of students that valued the quest for transcendence, human identity, purpose, and meaning within the traditions of humanity. Though my courses were primarily meant to serve as an initiation into the mysteries of the scientific study of religion, they could peripherally serve as an invitation to self-exploration and personal quest, but all within the safe boundaries of political correctness.

As I read it, PC was about finding ways to say everyone is right if only properly understood. These synergies affect many well-meaning and otherwise intelligent students who have been rendered fixed-code in a world of shifting paradigms, one-size-fits-all in a world of polyvalent multiplicities, either/or in a world of neither/and, psychologically stunted and intellectually challenged. I could go on, but anyone who has taught “World Religions,” or for that matter, “The Bible,” knows exactly what I am trying to convey here. I want to emphasize that I treat these as learning disorders rather than full-blown pathologiological debilitations. This is important, since disorders can be diagnosed and cured, but sociology, on the other hand, is a general terminal or, at worst, lethal. (I have long suspected that some fundamentalists and politicians have what I call “Armageddon Envy,” meaning they want to see an apocalyptic eclipse of history in their lifetime and are quite consciously involved in the hermetica to make that happen. In his article titled “End Times’ Religious Groups Want Apocalypse Soon,” Los Angeles Times staff writer Louis Sahagun wrote on June 22, 2006, that “End times’ religious groups want apocalypse sooner rather than later,” with the “endgame” to “speed the promised arrival of a messiah.”) If these are fundamentalist learning disorders, what then, are the assistive technologies or software that can overcome them? Are medicine bag features Argument, Analysis, Alternative Interpretation, and Anecdotes. I think we have to engage fundamentalists on the front foot, and they can see this as a strategy: the interpretation of scripture and the issue of “what would Jesus do.” For the first we have to provide a more complete analysis of the conditions and context of scripture, the meaning and implications, and more thorough-going, compelling, and convincing arguments than received wisdom. For the second, we need to affirm that one cannot begin to know what Jesus would do in any contemporary circumstance till we properly understand what he is actually doing in his own historical circumstances. Fundamentalisms need to be introduced to historical Jesus studies and the deep historiography and cross-discipline tools, strategies, methodologies, and consensus achieved by that ever-increasing endeavor.

We have a marvelous opportunity to engage students via the huge popularity of such phenomena as Peas the Passion of the Christ, The Da Vinci Code (Brown 2003), and the recent publication of the last Gospel of Judas. They provide what I like to call “the Pedagogical Pop Culture for the study of religion.” It strikes me as ironic that The Passion of the Christ would become such a blockbuster at the same time The Da Vinci Code book was on its ascendency. On one hand you had The Passion, the message of which one woman so aptly put as she sat on the audience, “See how much he suffered for you! and on the other, you had The Da Vinci Code which basically posits “See how much you have had to suffer for him and the church that co-opted him?” What delights me about the sudden popularity of these cultural foci is the opportunity to reembrace some important achievements such as feminist scholar’s provocations, and to revive some works that have to an extent fallen by the wayside, such as William Phipps’s 1970 book Was Jesus Married? The Distortion of Sexuality in the Christian Tradition, with its wealth of historical contextualization on the issue, or William Klassen’s Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus? (1996), which challenges traditional assumptions about the canonical textual evidence.

The ramifications of fundamentalism for the study of religion are serious and extensive. So let me conclude by saying that I have come to believe it is increasingly important to address the issues, not simply for the sake of solid intellectual achievement, but for the sake of the fundamentalist students themselves and the larger society as a whole. Perhaps the fate of the world is not at stake, but then again, it just might be.

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Orientalism and Islam in the Post-9/11 Classroom

Zayn Kassam, Pomona College

BFORE 9/11, teaching Islam presented a challenge simply because of what Edward Said has termed Orientalism, that is, a view of Islam and Muslims so deeply entrenched in European and American culture that it is difficult to think of Islam or Muslims in a nonprejudiced manner. Said argues that European fears of increasing Muslim encroachment of Europe at the time of the Crusades, and later, the European desire to colonize Muslim regions of the world, led to the construction of an anti-Islamic discourse that was expressed in four ideas, which became part of the Western understanding of Islam and Muslims:

Firstly, that there is an absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior.

Secondly, that abstractions about the Orient are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities, thus rendering the Oriental passive, speechless, powerless, and requiring interpretation.

Thirdly, that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself: therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the Orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically “objective.”

And finally, that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared or to be controlled. (1979, 300–301)

The implicit presence of such ideas about Orientals, in this case Muslims, was and continues to be revealed in student discussions around issues they find highly problematic from a Christian and from a Euro-American perspective. So, for instance, they ask how could Muhammad claim to be a prophet and yet marry so many wives and participate in war? How could Muslims force women to veil and expect them to obey their husbands? Why aren’t Muslim societies democratic, or conversely, why are Muslim regimes so despotic? Why don’t the Palestinians understand that the Jews were

Instead of bowing to the temptation to become defensive in the classroom, I take my cue from Edward Said and attempt to let the Oriental — in this case the Muslim — speak for him or herself in the readings I assign for class. For instance, in “Muslim Literary Landscapes,” a freshman critical inquiry seminar, students will read all of Edward Said’s Orientalism, or Culture and Imperialism, alongside novels written by Muslims from different parts of the globe. This approach allows the student to connect, through the lens of a literary work, to multifaceted issues. Through the empathetic bridging that is possible — in hearing a character speak, in being presented with characters who love, suffer anguish and abandonment, who dream and hope, who live in political and social realities that they bring alive to us — students are able to see the deleterious effects of colonization on many of the Muslim (and now European) societies that are producing fundamentalists and militants today. They also learn from the diverse voices presented through different characters that Muslims are not uniform in how they address challenges.

So, for instance, the novel Wild Thorns by Palestinian author Sahar Khalifeh takes the reader into the mind and logic of a suicide bomber. Khalifeh introduces multiple voices into her narrative in the form of characters who draw out for us how Islam is political and military decisions are experienced by Palestinians, and how they are in fact differently experienced. Utilizing the lens of a novel enables students to understand the many sides to the conflict, the lack of easy solutions, the terrible losses experienced on both sides, the different understandings of history by the Israelis and the Palestinians, and that this is not so much a conflict between faiths as it is a conflict over land and water and resources.

I can now expect to see 50 students on the first day of my “Women in Islam” class in contrast to the 9 or 10 that showed up ten years ago. Here, too, I utilize Muslim sources to allow students to assess for themselves what is going on with Muslim women. We read from the Qur’an to find out what in fact it has to say about women. We learn that the Qur’an considers men and women perfectly equal in the eyes of God in terms of their ethical, moral, and religious responsibilities; that women were given rights such as maintenance after divorce, and inheritance rights long before such protections were given to women in Europe or America. We read Muslim female authors on how the Qur’an was interpreted by male Muslim scholars: often, to the detriment of women. As with every course on gender, we read some feminist theory to understand what patriarchy is and how historically it has played a role in every major religious tradition to curtail the rights and freedoms of women and to construct social roles for women as a result of their biology.

We read literary works by Muslim women to see how they articulate and express restrictions in their lives, and how they take control of their lives in ways that are at times subversive, at times quite bold. We learn that the veil is the least of their worries even though we in the West are fixated upon the veil as a sign of Muslim male oppression of women. Instead, we learn among other things, that first, both men and women in Muslim societies are oppressed by political dictatorships (and often propped up by Western interests). Second, that they suffer the economic impoverishment of globalization that furthers the turn to an Islamist, or what we call fundamentalist Islam, in the hopes that creating an Islamic society governed by Islamic principles of social justice presents a viable alternative to their current conditions. Third, we learn that Muslim societies grapple with the attempt to restore a sense of pride in their culture in the face of Western cultural, economic, and military hegemony that has consistently sent the message, at least since colonization, that all the backwardness in Muslim societies is due to their faith and culture, rather than due to the very real material conditions in which they live.

All three factors — political dictatorships, globalization, and Western hegemony with its concomitant unequal power relationships with Muslim societies — have led many Muslims to question whether the wholesale adoption of Western culture provides the answer to their problems. Indeed, many Muslims conclude that they have to find solutions that are sensitive to their own cultural, historical, political, social, and economic contexts, and since Islam is both a culture and a religion, it is not surprising to find Muslims using language that draws upon the rich heritage of Islamic civilization, and by extension, religion.

“We learn that the veil is the least of their worries even though we in the West are fixated upon the veil as a sign of Muslim male oppression of women.”

The point of such discussions in my classes is not to brainwash students into agreeing with the most strident voices emerging from Muslim societies, but rather to help students critique the many differing Muslim points of view, because through understanding can come the possibility of working in partnership rather than in antagonism. Students see that one cannot talk about the liberation of Muslim women without addressing the profound challenges facing Muslim societies in a world in which their culture is ignored, if not devalued, in our pursuit of the resources that are found in their parts of the globe, resources that are necessary for propping up our own lifestyles, and our economic survival.

Utilizing the lens of a novel enables students to understand the many sides to the conflict, the lack of easy solutions, the terrible losses experienced on both sides, the different understandings of history by the Israelis and the Palestinians, and that this is not so much a conflict between faiths as it is a conflict over land and water and resources.

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The Problem of Pluralism: Teaching Islamic Diversity

Vernon James Schubel, Kenyon College

EXPOSING STUDENTS TO THE academic study of Islam for the first time is simultaneously thrilling and daunting. Over the years my classes have included both Muslim and non-Muslim students. In each case the challenge is different. Most of my non-Muslim students have come to learn about an “alien” religion with which they have little actual familiarity. For these students the initial task is to get them to look beyond the variety of stereotypes that they may hold about Islam, especially in the post-9/11 context. Among the most common of these stereotypes is the notion that Islam is a relatively uninvolucational tradition; a simple and legalistic monotheism that has remained relatively unchanged until confronted by the rise of modernity and the subsequent rise of European hegemony.

Muslim students come to the academic study of Islam with greater familiarity, however their knowledge is often rooted in particular cultural and theological understandings, making it difficult to take seriously the religiosity of Muslims who practice differently. With various forms of salafi Islam gaining currency in college and university environments, my pedagogy has often involved getting my Sunni Muslim students to accept the necessity of grappling with Shi’i and Sufi Islam as legitimate modes of Muslim piety. A central goal of my teaching is to get both Muslim and non-Muslim students to recognize the sheer fact of an inherent and vibrant pluralism of the Islamic tradition. By pluralism I refer not only to the remarkable linguistic and cultural pluralism of the Islamic world, but also its spiritual and theological diversity evident in numerous manifestations and expressions of piety — from Shariah-minded ritual practice, to Sufi dhikr and pilgrimage, to Shi’i commemorations of martyrdom. An appreciation of that diversity is central to any complete understanding of Islam and its history. Thus I begin my discussion of Islam not with religious law and ritual practice, but instead with essential beliefs shared by all Muslims.

It is not surprising that I would take this approach. As an undergraduate, I took a course on South Asian religions in which our discussion of Islam focused on the Sufi tradition. I remember vividly images of the arc celebrations at the tomb of Muinuddin Chisti, which led to my lifelong fascination with Sufism and “popular” Islam. I also took courses on Islam that, among other things, introduced me to the little-known world of the Ismaili tradition in the former Soviet Union and on the Alevis-Bektashis tradition in Turkey.

From the start, I never learned the Sunni legal tradition as the norm — the “straight path” to which one can compare the “less orthodox” Sufi and Shi’i traditions.

I present this intellectual autobiography because I feel it has been essential to my understanding of Islam as a pluralistic tradition. From the start, I never learned the Sunni legal tradition as the norm — the “straight path” to which one can compare the “less orthodox” Sufi and Shi’i traditions. For me, Shariah-minded Sunni Idris simply one very important manifestation of Islamic piety among many.

Thus I want to instill in my students the essential understanding that the various Sufi and Shi’i movements within Islam do not see themselves as “heterodox” or peripheral. Their adherents view them as valid responses to the spiritual challenge presented by the Qur’an and the Prophet.

On the first day of my classes, I begin by comparing Islam to a tree and noting that every tree has both roots and branches. The branches are theology and law which depend for their existence on the roots. Those latter are the usul al-din, the roots of religion. The three roots shared by Sunni and Shi’a alike are: Tawhid (Belief in the Unity of God), Nuhuwan (Belief in the Prophets) and Qiyamat (Belief in the Day of Judgment). I use the usul al-din as the organizing principle of all of my introductory discussions on Islam, because the varieties of Islamic belief and practice are rooted in differing interpretations of these concepts.

Tawhid is the central tenet of Islam. For all Muslims “there is no god, but God.” However, interpretations of tawhid run the gamut from the strict monotheism associated with Ibn Taimiyyah, who argues for an utter distinction between the Creator and creation, to the mystical vision of tawhid associated with Hallaj and Ibn al-’Arabi that sees a unity of being (wahdat al-wujud) between God and the universe.

Nuhuwan means belief in prophets, especially the “prophet of Muhammad” in the Qur’an was revealed. Some Muslims, particularly those associated with the salafi and wahabi traditions, emphasize the utter distinction between God and the Prophet. They see his primary role as a messenger and deliverer of the Qur’an. Most mystical traditions, however, see Muhammad as the manifestation of a primordial divine (sur) that is the origin of all creation and emphasize the intense love of God for the Prophet, who is defined as Habbullah (the beloved of God) who should be considered as evidence of one’s love for God. This has always been an essential aspect of so-called “popular Islam.” It is most fully expressed in the traditions of Sh’iism and Sufism where devotion to the Prophet is extended to those who are his legitimate descendents. Thus, for Sunis and Shi’is Muslims respectively, devotion to the pirs and imams becomes an essential aspect of Muslim piety.

Finally, Qiyamat refers to the Day of Judgment and the corollary belief that human beings are morally resposible beings who will be held accountable for their actions before God. For some Muslims the belief in the Qur’anic description of the Creation of Paradise and Hell that one finds in the Qur’an. For others these descriptions are symbolic of the bliss of eternal proximity to and the agony of eternal separation from God. More mystically the Alevi tradition even sees heaven and hell similarly present among us in the here and now.

The point I try to make to my students is that the myriad expressions of Islamic piety — from the recitation of the Qur’an to the practice of the five pillars of Islam, to recognizing and giving allegiance to the living Imam of the Age, to participation in Sufi dhikr and dhuhr — should be seen as responses to these essential but multivocable beliefs. Our challenge in the academic study of Islam is not to decide which are the “true” and the “false” interpretations, but rather to understand the variety of those responses and the arguments made for them by their practitioners.

Of course my students have often asked, “Which is the real Islam?” Before I became a Muslim myself, I responded by asking, “Do you really want a non-Muslim white guy deciding which Islam is the ‘real’ Islam intended by God and the Prophet Muhammad? After all, Muslims of good faith have argued about this for nearly 1,400 years. Should I presume to settle those arguments? Our task is to look at the diversity of answers given by Muslims over time.”

As a Muslim, I still give a similar answer. I explain that I, of course, have my own personal beliefs about the real meaning of the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet, which I am free to share with my students, but my goal in the class was not to affirm which version of Islam is the “real Islam.” Instead, I seek to fairly represent the diversity of Islamic traditions that is seen in the fact that a salafi Muslim would see his or her tradition respectfully and accurately presented, as would an ursi Shi’a a, a Nizari Ismaili, a Naqshbandi or Chisti murid, an Alevi, a Nasuayi, or a secular Muslim. The answer to the “truth question,” for believers is existentially much more important, simply cannot be answered in the classroom; in the end the truth question is a religious and not an academic question. Most of my students have accepted that answer.

HAWLEY, from p. ii

Rajiv Malhotra has joined many other Indian Americans — and scholars too — in trying to get their fellow countrymen to see India through the “higher lens” that is the “caste” system. He argues that caste has no place in a discussion of Hinduism on two grounds — first, because to talk of caste is to talk, sociology, not religion; and second, because there was never any such thing as caste in the first place. It’s just a colonial misperception, a European invention. I don’t entirely accept either point, but that’s neither here nor there.

Caste came up at our conference in presentations about the Ravidas Sabha of Qeens, since its members come primarily from the “lower” echelons of Indian society as ranked by caste. Responding to this, some of the young men who come from the Ravidas Sabha spoke movingly about their struggles against caste prejudice, sometimes in rather histrionic English. They were quickly taken to task by Infinity Foundation associates and sympathizers: “Don’t you know there is no such thing as caste! You should get this out of your thinking.” As for the Ravidas, they had lived with this thing called caste, and no one was going to tell them they hadn’t.

I was proud that our course made such a sort of exchange possible, and made it safe for both sides. These groups, vastly different in background and perspective, were evidently encountering each other for the first time. They went at it with great energy, not just while I tried to moderate but on their own as soon as they saw a break in the program. Their fundamental disagreement made it impossible to go on thinking that the great divisions fell squarely between “the academy” and “the community,” between outsiders and insiders. After all, who’s inside? That’s what the Ravidas had been struggling with for centuries.

Every step we took in “Hinduism Here” revealed that things are more complex, more interesting, and more porous than we might have thought. Some of this porosity means that holes have to be plugged and dikes built. Students also have to have a place to talk and communities have the right to self-representation. But for the rest, porosity is a very good thing.

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The Course:
"Que(e)yring Religious Studies" is a 200-level religious studies course, cross-listed with women's studies and lesbian, gay, bisexual studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. At the top of the syllabus for fall 2004, I wrote:

What do religion and sexuality have to do with one another? This course invites you into a variety of religious traditions with a focus on same-sex eroticism. In the process, students are introduced to the fundamental concerns of the academic study of religion and lesbian/gay/queer studies. Among the topics considered are the place of ritual and performance in religion and sexuality, the construction of religious and sexual ideals, and the role of religious formations in enforcing compulsory heterosexuality.

Even in November 2004, "Que(e)yring Religious Studies" was about return: I had taught the course twice before. And I had learned how difficult it was before. After the second time, I posted the syllabus on line. (See www.aarweb.org/labula/browse.aspx.) My remarks, then, were simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar when I reread them recently. The teaching of a course at the intersection of lesbian/gay/queer studies and religious studies poses some special challenges. Like many such interdisciplinary offerings (e.g., women and religion), students sometimes enroll in the course with preparation in one area and not the other. In addition, students who enroll in a course on this topic often have experiential or emotional reasons for being there which can pose a variety of problems — ranging from "I am X so I do not need to read about X" to emotional difficulties with material. Current events and the cultural location of religion and sexuality at any given moment seem also to shape the course; thus, the first time I offered it (about five years ago) all students began with the notion that religion and homosexuality were hostile to one another. In 2003, my students all assumed that they were congenital. In any case, the course tries to offer a critical introduction to religious studies (understood as a non-theological approach to the study of the human, cultural phenomenon of religion) and to lesbian/gay/queer studies (understood as focusing on the social construction of sexuality) and to the ways these two topics are related in our time. It is an exciting course to teach, and it is sometimes painful. But, given the centrality of sexuality in many of the most heated disputes about religion these days, it seems an important way to help students intellectually about some things that our culture may be teaching them outside of the realm of intellectual reflection.

What is the place of tears in teaching and learning?

What is the place of tears in teaching and learning?

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Difficult Knowledges: Sexuality, Gender, Religion

Susan E. Henking, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Teaching, Voicing, Silencing: Toward a Polyglot Pedagogy

Robert D. Maldonado, California State University, Fresno

My recent research explores the dynamics of silence and voice in the Gospel according to Mark, raising questions of ownership (who has a voice and who does not) and questions of power (who controls voice — one’s own or others’ — and who cannot). My concern with questions of power and ownership around voice stem from several interconnected realities: I come from a working-class United States family. My brother and I learned English as a first language. We acculturated into middle-sector Anglo culture from a working-class background. I have light skin. Throughout my formative academic study, my Latin-American heritage and its voices were irrelevant.

After a brief sojourn teaching at an elite liberal arts college, I secured my current teaching position at California State University, Fresno, a working-class public university in the great Central Valley. White students make up 37–44 percent of the student body and women 60 percent; almost half are first-generation college students. Students in Fresno Unified School District speak 101 languages. According to the U.S. Census, more than one-fifth of the region’s population lives below the poverty level. With this linguistic, ethnic, and class diversity comes considerable religious diversity, but the region also represents the Bible Belt. Higher education professionals often talk about the value of diversity and simultaneously lament its absence in most colleges; few professors actually live and work within such a diverse environment as Fresno.

Given how my own and my people’s voices have been silenced historically, I am sensitive to issues of voice and silence, both mine and that of my students. I want to ensure my classroom becomes a space in which each student’s voice is valued. I am aware of the power and privilege that the institution grants me as professor in terms of classroom dynamics. Yet even at times I want to silence some of those who expect class to be nothing different from Bible studies at their church, and uncomfortable confrontations do sometimes happen. In spite of this, I am committed to the progressive pedagogical model of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1970), which emphasizes dialogue and concern for the oppressed.

Teaching, Voicing, Silencing: Toward a Polyglot Pedagogy

Robert D. Maldonado

Robert Maldonado is Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Fresno. His research interests focus on autobiographical hermeneutics and the use of the Bible in Latin American identity. Since becoming chair of his department in 1998, he has been teaching “Literature of the Bible” and occasionally courses on Tolkien and philosophy of science and religion.

My “New Testament” class is made up of conservative Protestants, Catholics for whom the Bible is a Euro-Western text, members of various other religions, as well as nonreligious and even antireligious students. Both literature majors and philosophy/religious studies majors enroll in it. Negotiating the content — let alone the issues of silence and voice — is to walk a pedagogical razor’s edge. Strategies aimed at opening up one segment of the class can work against opening up other groups. Sometimes I deliberately silence students so that others might speak, yet I confess that at times I also silence students from frustration or anger. At times, I worry that my attempts to elicit voice from some silent students might themselves be part of a complex dynamic in which my猝然 paradoxically accomplish the opposite intention by rendering their voices less authentic, less “theirs.” I wonder: do they lie or misrepresent their voice out of fear of a lower grade?

I see parallels between my pedagogy and research. The Gospel according to Mark exhibits different examples of silence and voice. Some characters silence others; some ask questions to elicit a response from the silent, and some choose to remain silent in response to probing questions. Motives are not always explicit. Just like many of my students, some characters in the Gospel have little to say. Jesus appears to talk the most, yet the truly dominant voice is often unmentioned. Jesus is allowed less than three-eighths of the words in the Gospel, and totaled together, all the other characters combined get less than one-fourth. Thus over half the Gospel is literally in the voice of the narrator, Mark, and in an important sense, all of the words — even those he cites — are his, for it is he who has selected which quotes to include or exclude, which voices to privilege or to silence.

Mark uses two different verbs for silencing depending on the subject and object. When Jesus silences demons, he rebukes them (1:25; 3:12; 4:39; 9:25). When he silences humans, he orders them (5:34; 7:36; 9:35). Silencing demons tends to succeed; silencing humans does not. The one time Jesus rebukes a human it is Peter, with both trying to silence the other (6:30, 32f). There are only two places where humans are the subject of “rebuking” other humans (10:15, 48). Jesus’s rebuke of Peter (as demon) becomes a bad model for the disciples to treat other humans as demonic rather than the more limited case of ordering others to be silent.

There are several ways these instances of silencing in Mark pertain to the classroom. One model is the more tempting and perhaps even “natural,” which is for the professor to cast him- or herself into the role of Jesus, who either consciously or unconsciously, Jesus is a Power, the Teacher is a Power. It is perhaps no coincidence that with just a single exception of Jesus’s self-reference in the third person, every instance of Jesus being referred to as “the Teacher” is within a context in which the character is misunderstanding Jesus. Thus, the depiction of Jesus as “Teacher” in Mark reveals an irony that illustrates the Failure to Learn. To model oneself on Jesus as Power, as the Teacher, would instead cast us into the role of the fumigated disciples, i.e., unwittingly rebuking other human beings because we presumptively think we know how things should be understood or what should be done. Along the way, we end up teaching that such rebukes of others are appropriate and should be expected. We inadvertently become poor models of silencing. This emerges in the context of failed voices (mine and my students) in the classroom, strategic silencing as responses to attempted eliciting of voice, with others resisting all the more loudly from being demonized. At the same time, one can say that the demonic can get traction, for example, patriarchy and racism, whose institutions and structures render some people without voice and others with excess voice deserving of rebuke.

In an important sense, Mark is not an individual exulting over the narrative, rather, the author is a community. The story emerges from a community, out of its needs, concerns, and values, and speaks back to that context. If this analysis has any merit, it suggests that Mark’s community implicitly or explicitly attended to the dynamics of silence and voice via the characterizations in the Gospel. It is the whole of the community that corresponds to the whole of the story.

My view is that the voice in the classroom should be more like Mark, the community. As a community together, the classroom should attend to the dynamics of silence and voice, recognizing the debilitating effects of racism, patriarchy, and classism, and responding together to the liberating potential of learning through dialogue with respect. I try to use my patriarchal privilege to challenge, for example, patriarchy and racism, whose institutions and structures render some people without voice and others with excess voice deserving of rebuke.

The past several years have demonstrated the importance of this concern. I have noted multiple times the need to open the space for more voices to be heard. It is imperative to allow space for the voices of students to be heard, to recognize their voices, to amplify them, and to ensure that these voices are heard in a way that is respectful and that reflects the diversity of voices in the classroom.

Robert Maldonado is Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Fresno. His research interests focus on autobiographical hermeneutics and the use of the Bible in Latin American identity. Since becoming chair of his department in 1998, he has been teaching “Literature of the Bible” and occasionally courses on Tolkien and philosophy of science and religion.

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Robert D. Maldonado, California State University, Fresno. His research interests focus on autobiographical hermeneutics and the use of the Bible in Latin American identity. Since becoming chair of his department in 1998, he has been teaching “Literature of the Bible” and occasionally courses on Tolkien and philosophy of science and religion.
The shift from an expert model of knowledge production to a collaborative model goes some way toward solving the methodological quandaries in the classroom. Rather than my asking questions about what the Onondaga believe, or what ceremonies they perform, which will always be regarded suspiciously, instead students learn to ask themselves, “What are the issues of most urgent mutual concern?” For one thing this requires students to develop an ability to interpret their own urgent questions — what do we want to know, and then find answers through a collaborative process of discussion and action. No longer are the Haudenosaunee, nor the Iroquois, nor the Lakota “informants.” Instead, they are collaborators in generating new ways of communicating solutions to urgent issues.

The result of teaching “Native American Religions” in Syracuse has been that I have had to develop new classes over the last ten years to cover an ever-burgeoning conceptual ground. To explore questions of religion as “habitation” and “exchange,” I developed a history of American religions sequence titled “Religion and the Conquest of America” and “Religion of American Consumerism.” These cover the colonial-era from 1492 to the 1850s and the moderafter from the late nineteenth century to the present. This sequence highlights the cultural differences between indigenous and immigrant values and asks pointed questions about the sustainability of these distinctives.

To explore questions of race and ethnicity in America I have developed the class “Religious Dimensions of Whiteness.” This class has been growing in popularity and attracts a wide diversity of students. Most recently I have developed the class “Religion and Sports,” which is proving to be very popular. Unlike other classes of this sort, however, it is rooted in the indigenous meanings of sports in ceramic life. The Haudenosaunee are the inventors of lacrosse, which is very popular in our area, and it is still played as a ceremonial game among the Haudenosaunee. It isn’t until the class visits the lacrosse arena at the Onondaga Nation that the whole class comes together for them. In my graduate seminar “Materiality of Religion,” students gain another perspective on the topic and on the history of religions, whether their primary interest is in postmodern theoretical, Buddhism, religion and popular culture, or indigenous religions.

Teaching “Native American Religions” at Syracuse University has changed me as a scholar and a teacher. It is a contentious place to teach but, as I had originally thought, this indicates its importance. After taking my classes, students generally understand and appreciate these things more.
Teaching on War

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TEACHING ABOUT WAR is inherently difficult because everyone has a history with war, and everyone has an agenda about war. When participants in “The Impact of War on the Pastoral Care of Families” confront difficult matters about the subject of war and the painful needs of those affected by war, their own histories and agendas frequently surface in compelling and unexpected ways, often occasioning interpersonal conflict among the students as well as deeper personal knowledge and soul-searching. Almost always, students discover some previously unknown and troubling dimensions of their own family’s history in relation to war. In learning to provide care to those affected by war, they have to come to terms with their own experiences, and sometimes offensive narrative structures of meaning used by care-seekers to cope with war’s massive impact. Strong feelings of anxiety, shame, guilt, fear, anger, horror, helplessness, disbelief, shock and recovery may be elicited by confronting the realities of war. Part of my teaching strategy is to provide conceptual tools for interpreting war. I deploy a spectrum of academic, professional, and other reading, guest discussions, the construction of a family genogram and history, case consultation, and discussion. I also seek to establish a climate of care in the classroom, by which I mean listening carefully to one another and our class guests, communicating personal respect for each participant, and sharing a commitment to honest engagement of strongly held differences.

Conceptually, this course positions students on the interface between “mythic war” and “sensory war” (Hedges 2002, quoting Lawrence LeShan’s The Psychology of War). Mythic war refers to the narrative of meanings and structures of interpretation used in public discourse, including religious teaching, to justify war and to develop codes and ethical norms by which war is sanctioned, endured, or opposed. Pastoral caregivers are often required to help persons affected by war to address “mythic” issues such as self-sacrifice, patriotism, the moral dimensions of violence, and the spiritual consequences of taking or losing life. Sensory war refers to the visceral, gut-generated anger and rage by being in the direct presence of torn and destroyed human bodies and habitats, and the feeling of the suffering and despair generated by the visible suffering of violence against human beings. Religious leaders, and especially pastors, are often asked to be directly or indirectly present to the sensory horrors of war and to provide some form of mythic or narrative engagement of meaning in the context of immediate and ongoing loss. Since there are contending myths by which to interpret and respond to the dynamics of war, encountering sensory war can be extremely traumatic and destabilizing for students who are developing their orienting systems and capacities for care-giving. The classroom provides a setting and context by which to confront and understand various approaches, to reach one’s own conclusion during and after the process. They seek to establish a climate of care in relation to war issues.

The course begins with the class reading All Quiet on the Western Front, the classic novel by Erich Maria Remarque. The 1956 novel introduces the class into a direct engagement with both the mythic and sensory dimensions of war. The myths of human grandeur and national destiny are belied by descriptions of shattered bodies and the reduction to survival instincts forced on soldiers. War severs the structure of meanings and memories that tie soldiers to their families and communities. All Quiet on the Western Front sets the student into a world of shattered myths, random losses, and unexpected deliverance, the gritty humanity of the soldier, and the hopeful longing for reunion with a world that can never again exist for the soldier and their loved ones.

The novel introduces the mythic and sensory structures of war at the personal, social, cultural, and familial level, yet at a distance removed from their own histories and contemporary experience, thus constructing a kind of safety net in the course. The novel provides a means to learn to listen to one another in the class context, to begin sharing one’s own family history and pastoral situations, to normalize strong feelings about a part of the class discourse, and to name conflicting values and orientations to war among class members. Once students engage and discuss this book, there is no turning back; it disallows superficialities and uncovers personal and family histories and agendas, even as it provides a standpoint from which to address extremely uncomfortable realities.

In addition to reflection upon readings, the class hosts “guest experts” to bring insight and deepen the conversation by providing their own mythic and sensory narratives of war. A graduate of the Air Force Academy and a war veteran, for example, shares his experiences in relation to his serving in Vietnam as a fighter pilot and the impact his service had on their marriage and family during and after the war. They share their struggles to address their growing sense of the “insanity” of the war and perceived betrayal of our country and its military by our leaders and populace. They talk about the moral silence of the chaplains during the war and their subsequent resistance to their war activities and participation in rebuilding Vietnam.

An army chaplain who served in Iraq also interacts with the class. Sometimes this conversation is difficult, especially when students hear the chaplain supporting militaristic solutions to political issues in a manner that runs counter to their own political and religious commitments. This conversation helps students wrestle with what it means to address mythic and sensory war from a professional standpoint as a military chaplain.

An African-American civil rights leader has shared the factors in his life that led him to choose to leave the army after fulfilling the terms of the draft, and subsequently become a peace activist. He stated, “I was pretty good at shooting targets. And I recognized that I enjoyed it. But I realized that the army was not teaching me to shoot because I loved shooting, but to kill people that Jesus loved.” His opposition to war became active protest a few years later when he came to believe that the war in Vietnam was forcing poor people to kill people, and that African Americans were supposedly fighting for freedoms in Vietnam that were denied to them in the United States (King 1966). In conversations with this civil rights leader, the commitment to nonviolence and absolute pacifism clashed with theories of just war and strategic violence to protect the vulnerable and insure survival. This participant helped students address war from a larger social-justice and cultural vantage point, raising serious questions of settled norms about military heroism and patriotism as defining one’s relationship to fellow human beings.

Ethnic, cultural, and historical complexity emerges through conversation with a Native-American civil rights speaker who describes the dominant Euro-American and colonialist myths about Indian culture, especially as it relates to war. He describes pre-colonial Native-American views of warriors as defenders of people and land, and the limited role of killing in intertribal conflict. He also discloses the ambiguity of the United States toward Indians and war: on the one hand, Indians are regarded by the dominant culture as cruel savages, yet on the other hand, Indians have been called upon in disproportionate numbers to serve the U.S. military in this country’s various wars. He describes ritual Indian communities use to restore persons to the community and to themselves after combat, but how communities are being discarded by Indians who chose to defend their land (not the United States government) against further outside threat through participation in military service (French 2003; Holm 1990).

This array of conversations and presentations, coupled with other reading assignments (Hedges 2002; Henderson 2006), elicit a plethora of responses. Currently, one of the students in the course has a brother-in-law in Iraq, and the readings of the course are excruciating for her. Sometimes the course has reawakened memories of past trauma, for which some students have sought additional counseling. Some students become very upset that other members of the class are not more critical of war and actively opposed to it. Some students report painful conversations with family members from whom they seek information for their family history and genealogy. Compounding the situation, students are barraged by a continuous stream of media portrayals of various elements of the Iraq war and they experience growing tensions between containing public myths in our country about the Iraq war and the more personal and familial narratives that support or oppose the public debate.

This class confronts necessarily painful materials. However, the difficulty can be moderated and rendered educationally productive by helping students build a climate of respect and care, by engaging rather than avoiding strong differences of values, and by exposing students to a variety of resources to empower them to engage positively with the complex interplay of mythical and sensory war in the concrete lives of real human beings.

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by integration we meant that the subject matter has been success-
fully absorbed by the students into their moral and intellectual
world so that it somehow informs how they will now view that
world. They will become sensitive to the issue of genocidal destruc-
tion and, in the best case, that sensitivity will lead to engagement,
the use of reason to resist and analyze such medieval practices.
From the point of view of developing an understanding of geno-
cide, there seems to be only one good reason to force ourselves
and our students to confront so much pain and suffering, and that
reason is to make them earn more deeply aware of and resis-
tant to the conditions and processes that are involved in the
destruction of a people.

Based on our ultimate goals we excluded a number of approaches.
First we decided against presentations of events as only horror stories
would not do. Such a presentation not only minimizes the signifi-
cance and the importance of the event, but also erects a barrier to
the students’ ability to understand its implications. Contemporary
studies of trauma confirm our concerns that just hearing detailed
material about trauma can induce secondary traumatic stress syn-
drome or vicarious trauma. Exposure to traumatic sto-
ries can also lead to “emotional fatigue” or “compassion fatigue.”
We did not want to traumatize our own students. Moreover, in the
course of 10 or 15 weeks, accumulated accounts of genocide can
contribute to “burnout,” a chronic condition of empathy fatigue in
which constant exposure to trauma leads to less integration and
engagement with the world rather than more.

Though we try not to overthrow students, we are not always suc-
cessful. A number of journal entries from students in previous
courses demonstrate the level at which the material affected them.
One student started to reach the threshold after just one week:

After completing my first college paper and having the topic be
something as difficult and daunting as the Holocaust I am become
a bit apprehensive about this class. I am not sure that I will be able
to handle ten weeks of depressing material. I am worried that if I
continue to read literature such as Night over and over in this class
I will not make it and will not give it my full effort, for it will not
be interesting to read, it will only be upsetting to me.

We decided that one way to address the issue of numbness among
students was to alternate between texts relating concrete examples
of genocide, such as Eli Wiesel’s Night (1960) or Philip Gourevitch,
We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Family: Stories from Rwanda (1998), and more
theoretical texts on the issue of genocide, like Herb Hill’s
Genocide and the Politics of Memory (1995) and Walliman and
Dobkowski’s Genocide and the Modern Age (1987). These theo-
cratic moments of abstraction were meant to give the students a
break from the gore of genocide, a framework for understanding
genocide which ultimately would allow them to come back to the
material less worn.

Just as dangerous as “numbing,” genocidal tales of horror are also
potentially exploitative. Filing up the details of horror plays with
students’ emotions in a kind of manipulative fashion that can turn
into a psychological or emotional exercise of power. Again, turn-
ing to the literature about trauma workers, we find that experiences
of hearing about trauma create situations of negative “counter trans-
ferences” in terms of a class, that means that the teacher’s own psy-
chic issues come to surface interactions in the classroom —
despite the best intentions of the instructor. This problem adds to
the danger of numbing students and turning them away from the
material.

In addition to burnout, trauma, and manipulation, other problems
surfaced. Some were expectable, such as a problem of naivete
among generally upper- and middle-class white students, or the
problem of comparative suffering, in which students learn to
make sense of the horror of genocide by prioritizing the geno-
cides into a hierarchy of suffering.

Frequently there are problems with the students’ ability to toler-
ate moral complexity and ambiguity, leading to quick moral
judgments about genocide. Is it if the students are compelled to
judge, simply in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, even
when explicitly asked not to do so. On the other hand, the
students’ judgments tended not to be grounded in publicly
accessible reasons, and therefore they admitted being convinced of
opinions very easily.

The problem here is that the students showed a kind of moral
relativism which allowed — perhaps compelled — them to
both judge and dismiss moral issues quickly, but also to admit
the validity of every other claim. In either case, what the com-
pulsion to judge cut off was the ability to explore the ways in
which we, too, share culpability for genocides, even if we
can immediately label them evil. To paraphrase Philip Gourevitch
(1998), moral judgment about genocide is not just significant
in the classroom, but it also shows that genocide is wrong:
what is significant is exploring what those who already know it
is wrong can participate in it anyway.

It may be that the difficulties the students had with introspec-
tion and with dealing with this material are not personal, but
systemic in the postmodern world. In contrast to the modern
ideal of universal moral values, postmodern values may be
considered more as context-related possibilities. Postmoderns,
however, are not likely to show reactive moral responses to
the threat of genocide, but to reflect on the issue in a more
complex, exploratory fashion. This can be good, but it, too,
can lead to begging the real questions by distancing and
avoidance behavior.

To meet this challenge we had to find ways to break through
what may be a fairly robust socially constructed and psychologi-
cal resistance to learning about genocide in this generation of
students. Our solution for this has been to provide students with
conceptual maps that guide them through their thinking
about genocide. For students to be able to make an event a part
of their world, they need such conceptual frameworks, for as
humans we only make something our own when we have some
kind of symbolic framework that locates it for us, that allows us
to feel the event as part of something that has a “logic” to it, no
matter how perverse that logic may be. As Robert Jay Lifton
(1986) has said, “The mind cannot take in or absorb those experiences
that cannot be meaningfully symbolized and
inwardly re-created.”

Such an understanding is not easy to acquire, as we have
learned repeatedly from our students. For us, right now, the
framework has something to do, in which students that what
we might call the dimensions of the genocidal “logic.” We have
chosen as our primary texts those which display this “logic,” the
logic of power, absolute power, dehumanization, absolute pho-
dehumanization, “othering” and “absolution of othering” of vic-
tims. Presented in terms of those more abstract theoretical
frameworks, genocide almost seems explainable, even if we
know in our hearts and souls that no explanation will ever be
sufficient. In this case, theory frames Cassandra’s or Mozes’s
frantic warnings. We may still be frantic prophets, and what we
say may not really make sense, at least on an existential level,
but at least we are not dismissed as mad. And the cover that
the theory provides allows us to hold the attention of students for
at least a few moments longer.

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