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Introduction

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Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy,
Volume 25, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2014, pp. 11-13 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tnf.2014.0000>



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Introduction

For better or worse, religion is embedded in United States culture: from questions about the role of religion in public life to discussions about prayers in schools, from debates about the relationship between religious expression and individual liberty to reflections on personal beliefs and religious pluralism. The First Amendment's clause prohibiting putting state power behind religion, the Establishment Clause, once seemed to draw a bright, clear line separating church and state. When decisions like the Supreme Court's recent *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*—which accords a private employer's religiously framed beliefs about women's use of contraceptives the power to outweigh employees' health care needs—are issued, secularists might be tempted to turn away from all religious institutions in disgust. Yet our writers in this issue remind us that studying religion in inventive ways doesn't mean giving religion more power to harm. Instead, such analysis can allow students to see the how institutionalized religion interacts with other social forces and connects with their own religious, or not-religious, perspectives.

Working on this issue of *Transformations* on Teaching and Religion, we discovered that some of the most interesting teaching about religion is going on outside of religion departments. General Studies, English departments, history departments, American Studies all are engaging religion from different angles. In the United States where 65 percent of Americans assert that religion plays an important part in their daily lives, focusing on religion can both draw students to a class, and can complicate what goes on in the classroom.¹ At the same time, faculty in religion departments are hardly complacent, teaching their students to reframe and reinterrogate their fields, using tools ranging from mapping systems to videogames, and asking fundamental questions about what a religion is, in ways the Supreme Court majority could learn from.

Brendan Randall engages the establishment clause most directly in the essay that opens this issue, “Reinterpreting *Schempp*: Is Teaching Spiritual Identity Development in the Public Schools Possible?” Focusing on the Supreme Court's pivotal *Schempp* decision, Randall suggests that there is a distinction between keeping religious instruction out of public schools and recognizing the essential need for students—especially adolescent students—to reflect on their own spirituality. Heather Hill examines similar questions about how to productively engage students' religious beliefs from the perspective of teaching at a Christian college where many of her students are evangelicals. In “Embracing Resistance: Teaching Rhetorical Genre Theory in a Christian College,” Hill considers how to enable students to become critical thinkers and writers while working within an institutional dogma that reifies absolute truths.

Navigating the strictures of teaching at religious institutions is also a concern of our unique Teachers Talk conversation, “Trans*formative

1 Frank Newport, “State of the States: Importance of Religion Overall, 65% of Americans say religion is an important part of their daily lives.” 28 Jan. 2009 Web. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114022/state-states-importance-religion.aspx>

Teaching” with Joy Ladin, H. Adam Ackley, and Cameron Partridge. Ladin, Ackley, and Partridge are all transgender. Ladin and Ackley both transitioned while teaching at religious institutions (Ladin was tenured at Stern College, the women’s college of Orthodox Jewish Yeshiva University, and H. Adam Ackley had long taught at Azusa Pacific University, an institution without tenure). Both experienced discrimination at their respective institutions, to the point of persecution in Ackley’s case: he was fired. But both found that their transgender identities enrich their teaching. As an ordained minister, Partridge’s experiences are more embedded, leading him to carefully navigate when, how, and if to reveal himself as transgender to his employers, his students, and those to whom he ministers.

This issue is filled with practical advice and resources for teaching about and with religion. Lillian Larsen and Stephen Benzek’s students use paper maps, acetate overlays, and GIS to explore the discrepancies between text and landscape as they try to map the places and journeys of the Christian scriptures. Rather than smooth over the discrepancies and disjunctions, students learn to “mine the gaps,” and devise ways to highlight and explore them, as they explain in “Min(d)ing the Gaps: GIS: Exploring Ancient Landscapes through the Lens of GIS.”

Technology is also a focus in our Methods and Texts section. Rachel Wagner considers videogames as religious texts through which her students can think about rituals, quests, and other tropes in “Gaming Religion? Teaching Religious Studies with Videogames,” and supplies tips for using videogames in class for other valuable purposes too. Michael Altman encourages his students to participate in a class blog in “Dispelling the Magic: Blogging in the Religious Studies Classroom.” His students unpack the question of what religion is by exploring the ways many social structures fit the definition of religion, as they learn about it from their readings, and share their findings with their classmates. They ask: Are “Bronies,” the men who gather to celebrate their enthusiastic fandom of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, a religion? Are online gaming communities?

Lincoln Mullen’s students use mapping techniques to explore the city as a text for exploring religion, and find themselves facing similar definitional questions to Michael Altman’s. Mullen’s students struggle with creating metadata categories through which to best understand the historical religious institutions of Boston, as they work with the information they have collected in “Using Metadata and Maps to Teach the History of” Like Larsen and Benzek’s students, they find discrepancies and disjunctions that speak to the multiple meanings and uses of religious institutions in different ethnic, racial, and religious communities. Rebecca Alpert’s students also focus on the city as a site for studying religious cultures and practices in “Religion in Philadelphia’ for General Education.” Alpert’s students in a general education course explore the city of Philadelphia through a religious lens, and find religious signs and traces in unexpected

places as well as in the churches and synagogues and mosques they tour and revisit. The physicality of lived religious experience takes Rachel Gross and her students outside their classroom to their university's food service kitchen, as they explore the operation, politics, and economics of the kosher dining hall in "Field Trip to the Kosher Kitchen: Religion and Politics in the University Dining Hall."

The issue of students' own religious affinities and beliefs become salient in the classroom in unexpected ways in several essays. Candy Gunther Brown's course on Religion, Illness, and Healing attracted students who wanted to learn about illness and healing, and who brought their own firm beliefs in spiritual healing practices to the seminar room. The course gave them a language and tools to examine them, in "Religion, Illness, and Healing in an Interdisciplinary Classroom." In this issue's photo essay, Melida Rodas also considers the role of spirituality, this time as a meditative, healing, artistic practice.

Erin A. Smith, teaching at a state university in a heavily Baptist area of Texas, nonetheless found that students come to her classes with very different religious orientations in the successive years she's taught the same popular early twentieth-century Protestant novel. The phenomenon of classes responding differently to the same material is a mystery many instructors will recognize. She learns from her classes' responses in each iteration, in "'Jesus, My Homeboy': Teaching Bruce Barton's *Jesus in Twenty-First Century Texas*."

Although James Hamilton's "Teaching Critical Thinking about Media Technologies" is outside our Teaching and Religion theme, Hamilton teaches his students to resist another kind of dogma: the assumption that technology resides in objects, and that it constantly improves. It continues the conversation begun in *Transformations*' earlier Teaching Popular Culture and Teaching Digital Media issues.

The work in Teaching and Religion addresses themes and topics that are vast, complex, and multi-dimensional. At the same time, each author offers pedagogical approaches and practical resources to make religion concrete, specific, relevant, and understandable. Students and instructors in a variety of teaching contexts and who have different experiences with religion will find that these are useful tools for engaging otherwise daunting material.

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