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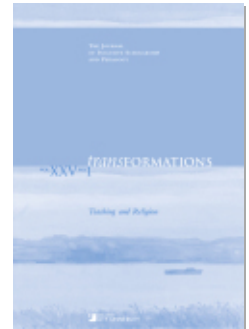
## Exploring New Ground for Religion in the Classroom

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Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy,  
Volume 25, Number 1, Spring/Summer 2014, pp. 14-24 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tmf.2014.0001>



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## GUEST EDITOR INTRODUCTION

## Exploring New Ground for Religion in the Classroom

In their December 31st 1999 issue—the final issue of the millennium—*The Economist* wrote an obituary for God, boldly pronouncing him dead. After recounting the wide impact of religion in preceding centuries and acknowledging that, even in a post-enlightenment world, “the corpse just wouldn’t lie down,” the editors concluded that the time had finally come to bury the dead. Religion, they declared, had become largely insignificant (“Obituary”).<sup>1</sup>

As it turned out, the death knell was premature.<sup>2</sup> Just a few years later, with the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the conflation of national identity (or national allegiance) and Christianity emerged with renewed zeal.<sup>3</sup> For many Americans—including Muslim-Americans—these events intensified their previously held commitments and the degree to which their religion informed their worldview and sense of self. At times, intensified religious identifications have led to division and tension between religious groups in this country, sometimes erupting in violence. But, at the same time, these events have prompted in many Americans a desire to learn more about religious traditions other than their own and the media, scholars, and Islamic organizations have responded to meet this demand. Oprah, for instance, devoted a full episode to “Islam 101” and Larry King invited a series of Muslim guests to his show. News outlets humanized Islam by running features on Muslim Americans, from Girl Scouts to comedians (Helms; Lee). Scholars published popular books that analyzed the new religious landscape in America and that illuminated the perspectives of Muslims abroad (e.g., Lincoln; Lawrence and Howarth).<sup>4</sup> Finally, mosques and Islamic organizations across the country hosted educational events as well as interreligious dialogue. So while fear and distrust have created fissures between some religious communities, a newly educated public has also begun to forge new interreligious understanding and relationships, revealing another feature of American nationalism: religious tolerance and freedom (Eck).

In addition to playing a role in national identity and foreign policy, religion is also an increasingly significant indicator of political affiliation. (See, for instance, a recent Pew Center report on the coincidence of religious right membership and support of the Tea Party [Pew Research Center, “The Tea Party”].) Religious logic and rhetoric is also a persistent feature in domestic policy debates, most notably around gay marriage, abortion, and stem cells (Pew Research Center, “Religion”).<sup>5</sup> So,

1 The editors echo the common refrain of proponents of the “secularization thesis,” such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, who argued that as society becomes increasingly more rational and modern, it is slowly eclipsing its need for religion.

2 By 2007, *The Economist* recognized their error and issued a retraction: “O come all ye faithful,” Likewise, scholars have begun to abandon the Secularization Thesis (e.g., Stark and Iannaccone; Norris and Inglehart).

3 Charles Kammer III calls this phenomenon “Christo-Americanism” (Blake).

4 Two important scholarly contributions are Lincoln’s incisive *Holy Terrors* and Bruce Lawrence and James Howarth’s translations of Osama Bin Laden’s speeches.

5 The report is careful to note that, while most members of the religious right support the Tea Party, only 46 percent of Tea Party supporters are members of the religious right.

although I hesitate to say that we are living in a time when religion exerts more influence than in prior periods, I would suggest that the public has become more sensitive to the importance of religion and to the multifaceted roles it plays in our society.

Our students and their parents are particularly cognizant of the fact that they need to study religion in order to navigate a world diffuse with religious perspectives. While they may study religion in a range of disciplines, in the field of Religious Studies in particular, enrollments have surged (Gibbs; Marcus; Miller). In the past decade, the number of world religions courses has grown by more than 30 percent and majors in Religious Studies have increased by 22 percent, making it the fastest growing field in the Humanities (American Academy of Religion 51).

That the public and our students *ought* to be convinced of the importance of religion is not surprising to academics. Across the disciplines, we have insisted that we cannot understand our subjects without a firm grasp of religion. We know that in many cases students would not be able to appreciate the meaning of a novel, the structures of a society, the policies of a nation-state, or the rhetoric of an advertisement without first understanding how religious ideas, behaviors, or traditions undergird and shape these aspects of our world.<sup>6</sup> The people we study think, write, speak, and act through religion, whether by conscious decision or simply because religious ideas are shot through the ideological and discursive frameworks they inherited. We regularly encounter moments in our teaching when our students lack basic religious literacy and we thus need to give an off-the-cuff lesson on a religious story, idea, or logic (such as the story of the Exodus, the four noble truths of Buddhism, or Ramadan) in order to illuminate the texts, images, or people we are examining.<sup>7</sup>

### *Pitfalls and Landmines in Teaching Religion*

Even as instructors find great value in teaching religion, we also know that it is treacherous terrain, filled with pitfalls and landmines. At the most basic level, we struggle with issues of definition: What is this thing we're talking about? What is "religion"? This is a question that has exercised scholars for the past half century.<sup>8</sup> Some of the early definitions, such as Clifford Geertz's, "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence" (90), have been roundly criticized for taking the basic structures of one religious tradition—Protestant Christianity—and projecting them onto religious traditions that are not organized in the same way. For instance, Geertz's emphasis on interiority (religion manifests in moods and motivations) and individuality (the personal experience of religion is paramount) elides religious traditions that are oriented more significantly around embodied and communal practices. As Talal Asad has persuasively argued, scholarly definitions like Geertz's are inaccurate, and muddle rather than clarify our understanding

6 Although the proposal was eventually defeated, a preliminary report of Harvard University's Task Force on General Education (2006) recommended a new "Reason and Faith" requirement because, in their estimation, "few would disagree that religion is supremely important to modern life" (Seward). Princeton considered a similar requirement in 2004 and 2005 (Lacayo).

7 On the diminishing religious knowledge in this country, see Prothero; Pew Forum, "US Religious."

8 See, for example, Smith; Guthrie; Asad; Boyer; and numerous articles on this topic in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

of diverse religious traditions. Still more, Asad continues, these definitions are coextensive with the Western, colonial project in that they privilege and normalize certain aspects, dimensions, and components of Western scholars' religion, which then became the standard against which other religions are assessed or imagined (Asad 27–54; cf. King; Masuzawa).

Additionally, early definitions of religion have been inadequate for the boundaries they erect around religiosity: namely, limiting religion to formal sacred spaces, events, and doctrine, and failing to perceive both the diffuse nature of religion—how aspects of the sacred bleed into so-called “profane” worldviews and behaviors—and failing to adequately acknowledge how the domain of religion comingles with other domains of society, including economics, political culture, consumer culture, and popular culture. Several recent studies, however, have illuminated how religion structures and controls seemingly mundane and secular aspects of our culture. (See for instance the exciting work by David Chidester on the religious work of baseball and Disney, and by Kathryn Lofton on the iconicity of Oprah, who peddles her own version of American spirituality.)

Most scholars of religion agree: religion is a messy thing that defies a stable definition and resists easy categorization. It is difficult to pinpoint where it begins and where it ends. It is variable in that it manifests in historically and culturally specific ways. And it is constantly in a state of changing, adapting, and transforming. So, how do we teach such an amorphous thing?

Several of the essays in this issue offer an easy solution to these vexing theoretical and methodological problems: concentrate less on devising neat definitions and classifications and rather focus students' attention on the messiness and unwieldiness of the thing. In his essay “Using Metadata and Maps to Teach the History of Religion,” Lincoln Mullen describes an assignment in which his students collect and organize metadata on nineteenth-century religious institutions in Boston. As the students encountered data from, for instance, an African American church, they queried how to classify a community that is, at once, religious and racial and how to indicate overlapping identities in their taxonomies. Mullen's class considered how their use of certain types of data—mostly institutional data—rendered invisible other forms of religiosity operating in Boston at the time. The assignment provided an occasion for students to think critically about the decisions that theorists and historians make when creating definitions and taxonomies of religious groups, to understand the intellectual and political implications of such definitions and taxonomies, and, ultimately, to recognize the limitations of—and, some religious scholars might say, worthlessness of—the enterprise of definition and classification itself. Similarly, Rebecca Alpert (“Religion in Philadelphia for General Education”) uses Philadelphia as a field through which to interrogate definitions of religion. Her central aim, however, is to push students to see where and how religion lives beyond houses of worship, to extend their perception of religion outside conventionally recognized boundaries. As

students track religion “in window displays, street signs, historical markers, schools, murals, restaurants, bumper stickers, markers on people’s bodies,” etc., they are alerted to the permeable borders between the sacred and the secular and they become sensitive to religion as a diffuse and living phenomenon. Finally, Rachel Wagner turns her gaze beyond the “real world” to virtual reality. In her essay, “Gaming Religion: Teaching Religious Studies with Videogames,” Wagner explains how the religious underpinnings of our society map onto the structures that organize reality in video games, as well as the structured behaviors of players. Her students thus perceive not only how religion pervades physical spaces, but also our imagined and play space as well.

In addition to facing problems of definition, when we teach religious material or topics we can also bump up against students’ personal beliefs. We all have likely encountered a student whose intractable commitment to a religious idea or a religious way of evaluating evidence is at odds with our disciplinary conventions. We can deal with these conflicts by explaining that there are multiple ways of approaching a subject and our task is merely to teach them facility in our discipline’s approach; we acknowledge that, outside of our class, they may opt to approach religious ideas or material from a confessional perspective. More and more, however, this tactic of asking students to suspend or segregate their religious beliefs from the classroom is becoming unsatisfying to them. And, according to a multi-year study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, we should expect more of these encounters in the future. At this time in their life, the study reports, students are fashioning their sense of self and exploring how aspects of religion (or spirituality) can be cobbled together in service of their developing identity (Higher Education Research Institute; cf. Lindholm; Christian Smith).

When I first began teaching in Religious Studies at two secular institutions, Duke University and Occidental College, these sorts of encounters with students were exceedingly frustrating for me. I was intent on erecting neat and clear boundaries between the academic study of religion and the practice of religion. I aimed to clarify for students how the approaches of academia and of faith communities were distinct (for example, the questions raised, the types of evidence consulted, the logics that were considered valid). As importantly, I also aimed to clarify for students how my task as an academic was distinct from the task of religious leaders; I battled with students who perceived me to be an appropriate person to whom they could confess their religious traumas and struggles and I battled with students who evaluated me in terms of my ability (or inability) to foster their personal faith. As many faculty members in Religious Studies know, these blurred expectations are persistent in student evaluations even when they are not explicit, making it challenging for us—and our review committees—to assess our teaching accurately.

I also avoided students’ personal religiosity because it was terrifying to encounter students as people. I was comfortable in my role and relation

with them as teacher and student, taking it as my task to teach them about my field of expertise, to teach them reading, writing, and thinking skills, and to assess their competencies in these areas. Were I to encounter a student as an ordinary person—say, for instance, a person I met at a cocktail party—and were that person to confess to holding a belief I found outlandish, it might require of me an appropriately decorous suspension of judgment or response. In such a situation, would I pull a disapproving face or make a judgmental comment? Would my urge to dispel inaccurate information or an inadequate perception of the world outweigh my respect for the person’s religious autonomy? But in my role as teacher, conditioned to offer (sometimes withering) feedback on students’ work, it might be hard to suppress such reactions and responses. Better—safer, that is—to avoid the conversation altogether, right? The irony that many of us aspire to teach religious tolerance for some religious traditions and yet hold deep contempt for others is not lost on me.

Over time, however, my insistence on the division between the academic and the personal has relaxed. In part the shift mirrors the shifts of my professional status: I am now a tenured faculty member with an established reputation as a rigorous teacher. In short, I am perceived to have more authority in my area of expertise, so, with sure footing, I am willing to give up authority in other areas. But the shift also stems from deeper reflection on my pedagogy. I realize that students grasp more firmly the wiggly phenomena of religion when they are standing in the midst of it. It is one thing to ask them to occupy the roles of observer and interpreter and analyst, sending them on field trips to take detailed, descriptive notes or to interview religious subjects or to write analytical papers on a religious Other. But it is an altogether different thing for them to be players in the drama of religion. Moreover, if, in our classrooms, we sideline, suppress, or extinguish students’ personal investments and experiences of religion, are we not guilty of the very sins committed by Geertz: are we not rendering invisible the aspects of religiosity that potentially exist in our classrooms insofar as they exist in our students themselves?<sup>9</sup>

As I urge instructors to open up spaces in our classrooms for students’ religiosity, I immediately wonder what that looks like and how it can be done. I wonder how many of us are up to the task of facilitating religious disclosures and self-assessments that do not devolve into therapy sessions or religious testimony.<sup>10</sup> I am also immediately cognizant of the risks involved. Many of us might worry that we are treading dangerously close to violating our legal obligations to “separate church and state.” In this regard, the paper that opens this special issue, Brendan Randall’s “Reinterpreting Schempp: Is Teaching Spiritual Identity Development in the Public Schools Possible?,” is a helpful guide.<sup>11</sup> Randall queries the limits of how much and in what manner faculty can discuss religion in their classrooms, especially in public school classrooms. He reviews the Supreme Court’s 1963 decision in the *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* case, which has conventionally been interpreted as drawing a clear distinction

<sup>9</sup> My thinking on this topic is inspired by Lofton, “Review.”

<sup>10</sup> Readers can find some preliminary answers to these questions in Diamond and Chickering.

<sup>11</sup> See also First Amendment Center; American Academy of Religion Task Force on Religion in the Schools and the curated list of resources prepared by Ithaca College.

between the academic study of religion (which is permissible) and devotional religious instruction (which is impermissible). Randall is interested in exploring the gray area in between: specifically the legal permissibility of pedagogies that, while not advocating a particular religious position, involve and even develop students' spiritual identities.

Heather Hill ("Embracing Resistance: Teaching Rhetorical Genre Theory in a Christian College") discusses how she channeled students' initial, religiously-based resistance to her course material into a resource that could draw them into composition theory. Hill was teaching students that effective rhetorical arguments cannot be fixed or singular, but must be adapted to persuade different audiences. In the context of a Christian university where students are encouraged to bring their religious selves into the classroom, she received pushback from students who believe in absolute truth. She explains how she has leveraged students' resistance—positioning it within pedagogical strategies of resistance that have long been valorized in composition studies, as well as positioning it within the Christian tradition which has been characterized by resistance—and helped them strategize how to express their resistance through writing rather than removing themselves entirely from the academic discipline and community. Hill's approach demonstrates the transformational capacity of religion when integrated thoughtfully into the classroom (though, admittedly, this approach may not be appropriate in some of our institutional contexts).

### *The Religiosity of the Professor and of the Institution*

As instructors ponder how to work critically and carefully with our students' religiosity, we also must be mindful of how our own religiosity is inflected in the personas we construct and the work we do as teachers. We might ask: How has our own relationship with religion informed our pursuit of a particular field of study or our choice to work at a particular kind of academic institution?<sup>12</sup> How much, in what way, and why do we choose to disclose aspects of our religiosity or religious history to our students? What effect would it have on our teaching if our religiosity were more or less exposed? Would it effect the material we study, our perceived identity as teacher-scholars, our relations with our students and colleagues?

We must also be mindful of how religion informs the mission, values and policies of our institutions and what effects that has, directly or indirectly, on our teaching. While some readers, with Hill, are allowed or even expected to draw on students' and faculty members' religiosity in the classroom, others of us teach at secular institutions where historical affiliations with religious traditions have long been abandoned. Yet, historians of American higher education are quick to remind us that the values held dear by the academy—such as the monastic nature of study and the importance of making education accessible to all—are remnants from the Christian traditions that structured our institutions, so the influence of religion in our institu-

12 Some data has been collected on the coincidence of faculty members' spiritual proclivities and academic disciplines. See Lindholm and Astin, 81.

13 On Protestant influences, see, for example, Ditz.

tions remains durable even if it is now more difficult to perceive.<sup>13</sup>

Two of the essays in this special issue speak directly to these topics. In her photo essay, “Art as a Spiritual Experience,” Melida Rodas elucidates the comingling of her religious and professional identity with subtlety and sophistication, imagining her artwork in terms of a religious experience. The ritual movements of the body and mind focus the artist on the moment, heightening her perception of the sights, sounds, and smells around her. The energy that animates the world flows through her, uniting her to it and to all other creatures in it and forging connections even across difference. Through vivid words and images, Rodas casts her artistic work and artistic self as thoroughly religious.

In the Teachers Talk feature, I have a conversation with three trans\* professors about the entanglement of gender and religion in their experience of teaching. They discuss their views about the appropriate place and time in which they disclose their identities to their students and the relationship between that disclosure and their ability to be fully present in the classroom. They deliberate the politics and risks involved in being openly trans\*, especially as it relates to interactions with their colleagues and their institutions and as it relates to challenges of the job market. Despite the ever-present, and sometimes stifling issues they face, they also detail the transformative engagements with students that can occur when a trans\* professor is fully present in the classroom.

### *Innovative Approaches to Teaching Religion*

In the past few decades, the approaches to teaching religion and the resources available to teachers of religion have proliferated. In 2010, a task force of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) compiled a useful introductory guide that outlines some potential approaches to teaching religion (including “snapshots” of practical exercises) and provides suggestions on how to support teachers’ ongoing education on topics related to religion (American Academy of Religion Task Force). Perhaps more useful for the readers of this special issue, the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion has curated a wide variety of resources—including electronic texts, websites, bibliographies, and software—on its “Religion on the Web” page<sup>14</sup> and the AAR and the Wabash Center have joined forces to host a collection of syllabi that can be mined for course materials and assignment design. (American Academy of Religion AAR).<sup>15</sup> Data sets to work with are available from the Pew Research Center, Religion and Public Life Project.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the Wabash Center also publishes a peer-reviewed journal, *Teaching Theology & Religion* that is dedicated to working through pedagogical approaches and issues in the teaching of theology and religion.

In this special issue, our contributors add to this wealth of material with insightful and innovative approaches of their own. Lillian Larsen and Stephen Benzek, in their essay, “Min(d)ing the Gaps: Exploring Ancient Landscapes through the Lens of GIS” discuss a series of assignments they

14 Available at: <http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide-headings.aspx>.

15 Available at: <https://www.aarweb.org/programs-services/syllabus-project>.

16 Available at: <http://www.pewforum.org/data/>.



devised that employ both low-tech hand-drawn maps and high-tech Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping techniques. They argue that their use of a “geographic hermeneutic”—pairing critical mapping with close readings of biblical sources—sensitizes students to the links, as well as the gaps and cracks, between texts and their contexts. For her course on the politics of Jewish religion and food in the United States, Rachel Gross (“Field Trip to the Kosher Kitchen: Religion and Politics in the University Dining Hall,”) describes an on-campus field trip to her university dining hall to get a close-up look at industrial *kashrut*, and she discusses how this field trip provided her students, many of whom were Jewish, with a new appreciation for a food practice with which they thought they were already familiar.

Inspired by the insights and creativity of our contributors, it is my hope that readers of this special issue will experiment with new ways of introducing religion into their classrooms. It is my hope also that such experimentation will refine students’ and instructors’ understanding of the nature of religion, will expose further the many roles religion plays in our world, and will alert us to the everyday impact religion has on us as teachers, and in so doing, humanize the endeavor of teaching.

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