Education and Workshops Section:

Entering other Religious Worlds and Wresting with Truth-Claims

The Border of claims of veracity and the Frontier of existential questions: Engaging Student Motivations through bracketing the 'bracketing' of Truth-Claims in the Religious Studies Classroom

"The unexamined life is not worth living." -- Socrates

"A man who stands for nothing will fall for anything." –Malcolm X

Reese was raised in a conservative Christian church, but began to loose interest at around age thirteen. He began to feel there had to be more than a state of forgiven sinfulness. Reese's parents often argued fiercely. What good was salvation, he thought, for these two church members if they could not even get along? Human nature had to be something more than being a thinking, feeling sinner. Things must be deeper, more magical. However, having a good friend who was active in the church youth group, Reese continued to participate off and on. He learned deeper the concept of Grace, but found it too limiting a principle to address all aspects of life. Now age nineteen, in Reese's second quarter at the public university across state from home, Reese has signed up for a World Religions course, hoping to get some answers to these big life questions: Who am I? What is life all about? How do can I be happy? Is religion 'true'? How can people get along? What's the point of heaven and hell if people there stop learning and growing?

Dr. Sanchez was raised Jewish, became skeptical about religious ideologies while in graduate school, but is active with her husband in community volunteering. She has

been teaching courses in Religious Studies for the better part of a decade and is confident in her abilities to assist her students to see religion from an academic lens. Her main goal is to help students develop critical thinking in analyzing the historical, psycho-sociological, and literary dynamics and contexts of the diverse religious traditions. She wants students to become familiar with some of the theories on religion, and also wants students to understand the lexicon of religious studies and the categories common to diverse religions, such as myths, rituals, doctrines, ethics, and institutions (5 of 7 of Ninian Smart's "dimensions of religion").

Reese is looking for help in answering some of his existential questions, while Dr. Sanchez wants Reese and her other students to appreciate the dynamics of religion as a cultural system, produced over time by brilliant but imperfect human beings. Like most sincere professors, she wants the students to be closely engaged with the course content and contribute to a dynamic discussion and analysis. However, unless Dr. Sanchez takes closely into account the moods and motivations of her students, and adapts her pedagogy accordingly, she and students like Reese will be thinking and talking across one another. While Dr. Sanchez introduces some of the basic concepts of biblical source criticism, Reese might be sitting dumbfounded, trying to figure out how these questions relate to his more important ones of how Judaism tries to answer the meaning of life, the nature of transcendence, and how to create a peaceful world. The question then is not whether biblical source criticism is an important learning topic in many religious studies courses, as I would without hesitation affirm it is. The question is how teacher and student can assist each other to reach their goals and create a more productive learning experience.

Before further discussion, we can note that this discussion – like most – is somewhat simplistic. Often there is a much more intersection in the course goals of student and professor than there are in our two ideal-typical characters of this hypothetical story. Students are very often curious on how academic disciplines talk about religion, while professors will want to give students greater appreciative value to the diverse religious perspectives and practices that can indeed substantially enrich students' lives.

Nonetheless, according to research discussed by Barbara Walvoord in her 2008 book *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses*, Reese and Dr. Sanchez represent very typical characters of a religious studies course. This research was conducted by the IDEA Center at Kansas State University, supported by grants from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion in Indiana. The study surveyed students and their instructors in 533 introductory theology or religion courses at 109 colleges and universities – a combination of public, religiously affiliated, and private non-sectarian, in every region of the US. Overall, data was collected from 533 faculty and 12,463 students. Over 50 percent of students at public universities expressed "develop [his/her] own religious beliefs and/or spiritual practices" as an important course goal; meanwhile only eight percent of faculty at public universities expressed similar goals for their students. When rephrased into somewhat less controversial terms – that of "developing a clearer understanding of, and commitment to, personal values" – that 8 percent raised to thirty-six percent for faculty, though still significantly out of line with student goals.

The reasons for these discrepancies are not mysterious. From the research of Erik Erikson, and the more recent research of development psychologists such as James Marcia, we know that adolescents and young adults in the United States (and seemingly much of Western Europe) search to individuate themselves from their parents and even peer group as well. In their socialization they are presented certain views on who they should be, what they should value, what they should do, as well as who are the rightful authorities to interpret the world for them. Instead of just assuming these notions are correct, they wish to have their own experiential appreciation and moral certainty of what constitutes the good life. Furthermore each one – living in a culturally and ideologically pluralistic society, with diverse global connections – is more or less aware that beyond their own immediate upbringing and friendship groups, there are a number of other options for the way to live and see the world. According to Paul Tillich and Peter Berger, these alternative possibilities – as long as they stay a mystery – threaten the youth's moral convictions with serious or even paralyzing doubt or anomy. Meanwhile, according to James Marcia, weak forms of identity and value-commitments can best be prevented and overcome by exploring a number of alternative options than that of upbringing.

Meanwhile, we understand Professor Sanchez's position. Working in a public university, she knows it is not her place to preach the truth or transcendent source of any religion. That would go against the first amendment establishment clause. But perhaps more closely to her approach is an orientation trained in the American Academy of Religion of the "critical need for ongoing reflection upon and understanding of religious

traditions, issues, questions, and values."[1] Religious studies for her is an intellectual endeavor that focuses on human thinking and practices; that sees religion in the light of human beings first, not of God, gods, or the transcendent.

So now, I should clarify the nature of this paper. It is NOT my purpose to define the best approaches to go about religious studies; nor is it my intention to elaborate upon the first amendments application to classes in religious studies; nor do I want to make dogmatic statements on what are best pedagogical practices in our profession. Rather, I will first argue that it is necessary, possible, and efficacious to take into account for framing our teaching methods the development interests of a large quantity of our students. Second, I will suggest a certain number of teaching practices that we can use to directly address those identity-issues of so many of our students. Third, I will argue that the truth-claims of each religious faith cannot be slid over or dismissed; it is the power of symbolic-experiential meanings working on the consciences of individuals and groups that are of the very spirit of the religions themselves; and it is the nature of our profession to be able to teach a more holistic approach to epistemologies from which students can gain keen appreciations of how diverse religions may actually be true or warranted. My argument throughout is that it is not only possible for us to create open avenues for our students to cross *La Frontera* into their existential questions, but that it is imperative that we do so …all the while staying within our proper boundaries as public education instructors.

First, let me suggest that it is natural to the purposes of the field of religious

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[1] http://www.aarweb.org/About_AAR/Mission_Statement/default.asp

studies to address this developmental situation of our students. Religious studies – as defined by many public universities – is a field within the agenda of the college of liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences. It is popular to talk about the aims of this education to prepare students for the utilitarian purpose of getting a job or vocation.[2] Meanwhile, there are a fair number of education philosophers, such as Stanley Fish, who argue that the college has nothing to do with making students into good people. They say that the liberal arts and sciences college is purely to instill in students facts and information, and to develop in them a set of research and cognitive skills,[3] perhaps including rhetorical techniques of persuasion. This is a dramatic shift from how the goals of these same American colleges have been traditionally articulated in their founding: that of the "intellectual, aesthetic, moral and spiritual development of students."[4]

Many deans and presidents of colleges would assert that in theory and practice the moral and spiritual development of students is no longer a central concern of their educational institution, and they would see this change as a sign of progress. Most likely they see this progress as the public university no longer paying clergy and pastors for vindicating the truth of their Christian faith, and in this respect, I would agree with such deans.

To understand the nature of the current climate of liberal arts and social sciences we must put it in historical context. The roots of the public university are the European Enlightenment. While, in the pre-modern period, knowledge and authority were focused

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[2] http://www.ditext.com/chrucky/aim.html
[3] Stanley Fish quoted by Al DeCiccio in his article "Spirituality, the Professorate, and the Curriculum" in Searching for Spirituality in Higher Education, edited by Bruce W. Speck and Sherry L. Hoppe, New York: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 85-86.
[4] Ibid., p. 87

in the traditional learning of monasteries and guild specialists, the Enlightenment made material empiricism, logic, and reasoning the centers of epistemology and authority. In its ideals of political humanism, especially as expressed by those like John Stuart Mills, no one should have the right to impose or prevent the freedom of others to act upon the conclusions of their own conscience, so long such acts did not directly hurt others. Our current post-modern spirit of the age is that the Enlightenment is just another cultural paradigm among other traditional frameworks of knowledge. No system of meaning and knowing is better than others, so long as it is working for its practitioners. While I affirm that this pluralistic lens is generally a sign of progress, the extremes of its viewpoint have created a sense of nominalism and arbitrariness in whatever values one might hold. Our modern approach to education's fierce devotion to the post-modern agenda has actually achieved moral and religious nihilism – a state of affairs that is reeking with moral implications, through and through.

Through our social science methods of positivism, social construction, structuralism, and deconstruction, we have become masterful at training students to spot error, fallacies, and bias. In my observations, what we seem to be strongest at in our emphasis on critical thinking is assisting students recognize inequities, injustices, inconsistencies, and unsupported assumptions, that only elliptically bring us to the value of equity, justice, coherence, and justifiability. However, most of us are not nearly as strong, nor concerned, with assisting students to encounter, discover, and affirm the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Perhaps the reason for this type of focus when we teach Critical Thinking is that

development in the English language in which the abstract idea "Critical" is closely linked with the more emotionally-concrete idea "to criticize." Either way, what we are left with are masses of educated human beings who are super-skeptical and ultra relativistic. The problem with this is that the very purpose of Critical Thinking is not only to identify what is wrong with the status quo in our lives and world, but to have the insight to envision what would be better in place of what is, delineate how we can go about making that happen, and have the moral certainty, the courage, and collaborative skills to make that vision a reality.

How does this discussion of the purpose of the Liberal Arts and Critical Thinking relate to our teaching of Religious Studies? It is a reminder that while we work within our humanistic paradigm for the study of religion, we do not forget that while we assist students to perceive the faults, and short-sightedness, in how brilliant, yet imperfect persons, constructed religious systems, that we also give them the tools, the encouragement, and the open space to recognize what is Extraordinary, what is Profound and Ideal. (Let me note here that this other positive side of the coin of Critical Thinking is already practiced to some degree; what I am pushing for is a greater balance between identifying the imperfect with that of perceiving and affirming the Good).

The good news of-course is that every thing that I am recommending is already practiced to at-least a foundational degree by many of us. The same survey by Kansas State University cited above reports that 92 percent of faculty in public universities hold helping students to "Understand and appreciate a variety of religious beliefs and practices" to be an important course objective. In 2007, the American Academy of

Religion began publishing some of their findings from their 18-month study – funded by the Teagle Foundation – on defining and strengthening the religious studies major across liberal arts colleges. One interesting result of this study is that AAR's definition of the characteristics of religious studies classes is in line with the Association of American Colleges and Universities stated objectives. In 2007, the latter has said that among the four goals for all American college students is "civic knowledge and engagement" as well as "ethical reasoning and action." Meanwhile the AAR stated that the fifth characteristic of the religious studies major is that it:

> "employs knowledge of religious phenomena and the skills of religious studies in the solving of complex problems, including those raised in the personal and social engagement of issues of life, death, love, violence, suffering, and meaning."[5]

What I am suggesting is that we can let our courses go beyond appreciation and allow our students begin and continue a process of self and social transformation, if they so choose to take that journey. Similarly articulated proposals have recently become a central theme in recent article published in the AAR's subsidiary periodical called *Spotlight on Teaching*. In these articles religious studies educators propose goals of letting students perceive for themselves and act upon principles of social justice; of finding oneself in service to others; of assisting students to develop and exercise the highest forms of moral reasoning; of letting students search for truth and act upon what they find convincing.[6]

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[5] http://www.aarweb.org/Programs/Religion_Major_and_Liberal_Education/default.asp
[6] October 2009, vol 24, no. 4; October 2007, vol. 22, no. 4

The move in this direction was articulated decades ago by that religious studies founding father Huston Smith who said: "If we take the world's enduring religions at their best, we discover the distilled wisdom of the human race."[7] Likewise that pre-eminent historian Arnold Toynbee, in his work *A Study of History* perhaps best articulated the supreme ideal towards which this appreciation moves. He says:

> "'All of human history is relevant to present and future human needs.'…We shall, however, have to do more than just understand each other's cultural heritages, and more even than appreciate them. We shall have to value them and love them as being parts of mankind's common treasure and therefore being ours too, as truly as their heirlooms that we ourselves shall be contributing to the common stock."[8]

This movement from the level of appreciation to that of LOVE is crucial if students are to create modes of learning that endow them with the moral courage to envision and create a better world. The end result may actually be that they do not find any substantial wisdom in any religious tradition (or local practice); or even in a synthesis of these varying articulations of what it means to live "the good life." The goal is then: in their rejection of these articulations, in that confrontation with forms of religious brilliance, to articulate for themselves a superior and more substantial expression of life-meaning.

To try to briefly answer lingering doubts that what I am proposing here may be

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[7] Quoted from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huston_Smith

[8] Quoted by Marilyn R. Waldman in her article "Primitive Mind / Modern Mind," in Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies, ed. by Richard Martin, p. 105. She in turn got this quote through Ronald H. Nash, Ideas of History. (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1969), vol. 1 pp. 202-203.

stepping beyond the legal bounds of our roles as public university instructors: my first argument above is that if we do it properly, we are fulfilling the highest ideal of liberal arts education, rather than stepping out of bounds. Secondly, as the methods we use in religious studies can never assert whether or not there actually is a transcendent intelligence, force, or truth to any religious tradition, the most we can introduce is a journey of understanding to "Imagine if…" this is so, and from there let each student search their own consciousness and conscience to decide if it is so, if they please to take that journey.

In other words, our job is to keep a hermeneutical posture of openness to the possibility of transcendent (or fundamental) truth in a given religious tradition. Meanwhile, the instructor will always strive to stick to that ideal of a "neutral enthusiast" for the religious phenomena in question. Here, the instructor will not preach the truth of a particular religious narrative, but rather enthusiastically present the facts of how religious believers understand their particular narrative.

According to the 20 years of teaching experience of Western Illinois University professor John K. Simmons at Western Illinois University, this enthusiastic presenting of the facts will be the central mode by which we also address the concerns of students looking for the deeper meanings in our courses. He is the one who calls this methodology "neutral enthusiasm." In a recent article he published in *Teaching Theology and Religion*, "…religious concepts, even when compressed into religious studies categories, inherently inspire personal transformation." Thus, he says, we have to become not only comfortable with this fact but happy that we have the privilege to teach

within a field of the liberal arts that is inherently so engaging. Simmons argues that just as gender studies often intends to assist students to overcome stereotypes and oppressive structures of human relationships, i.e. ethical guidance; as music or art history aspires to awaken in students greater aesthetic sensibilities; he says: "Since the subject area of religion concerns the spiritual dimension of humanity, spiritual guidance is inevitable just as "artistic guidance" arises in an art appreciation course."

To be sincerely enthusiastic as the other half of our neutrality, I suggest that instructors must regularly engage with, and challenge themselves to understand more profoundly, the religious traditions we teach, even if that is not our specialty of research. By making new efforts to delve into the riches of meaning in symbolic systems, the other side of our pedagogical ideal of neutrality – that of "enthusiasm" – will always be authentic and sincere.

As such, just doing our job description, will reach the developmental interests of students like Reese to some degree. A further step is how we construct reflection questions for both individual student journaling as well as small group – and class – discussion. We should present a variety of questions, some that encourage a student to "think academically," according to typical methods of religious studies; and others that directly offers an open space wherein students like Reese can work through their existential crisis. Thus, a typical question of religious studies as a social science would be: "How are the Gospel Sermon on the Mount and the Qur'anic *Surah of the Cow* each similar to styles of discourse prevalent at their own times and cultures?' A question that might more directly address the development interests of Reese might be, "Reflect on the

verse of the Qur'an in the Surah of the Cow 2:115 that says – 'whichsoever direction you turn, there is the face of God.' Imagine what it would feel like to live with this idea as truth. What do you think that experience for Muslim would be like?"

Thus, the latter question encourages the student to try to make the jump and take a moment to see the world as a Muslim might see it, thus enhancing understanding, appreciation, and perhaps even love for that world-making vision. Nonetheless, we should also note that even the first type of question will be helpful to students like Reese to take a step closer to a "fusion of horizons" – in Gadamer's words: entering the time, place, and cultural world of how some of the first believers in such religion might have experienced it. This is what was proposed by C. J. Arthur – in his brilliant 1985 Gifford Research Fellowship Lectures on the problems of value commitments in a religiously plural world. He described this jump into the religious believer's world as the necessity to "*pass over*" into their world and see and imagine the world as they would, for a time.

In assisting students such as Reese to use Critical Thinking to judge and articulate the merits of a religious system in enriching his understanding of human life, it is imperative that we push the limits of what creates epistemic justification. We must strive for a more holistic epistemology than that which is normatively emphasized in the academy. The first step in this is – what I mention above – about being conscience of keeping a balance between not just assisting a student to see what is missing or at-fault with a certain religious perspective, but to profoundly appreciate what it has to offer.

Second, we must both exemplify and encourage our students to keep a sense of humility about the many other possible modes of knowing besides those that we stress the

highest in the academy: empiricism and Cartesian logic. What, we should ask, is the place of aesthetics and feeling as sources of knowledge? In other words, would the European Enlightenment have looked quite different if Descartes instead of "Cogito ergo sum", had said, "I feel, therefore I am"? Furthermore, is there a latent sense of beauty as a mode of knowledge? Is it that sense of beauty that determines one's epistemic perception of a sunset, a friendship, a well-constructed experiment, the symmetry in a syllogism, or the many lattices of connections in symbolic logic?

Third, what is the role of ethics and virtue in determining epistemic justification? Is it a sense of justice and equity that is at the heart of a rational argument? Is it the unique fusion of the virtues of compassion and detachment that has made the Buddhist system intensely compelling for so many monks and nuns through history?

Fourth, What is the role of intuition? Can intuition be taught or is it constantly being used at every moment by each one of us? Is silence as powerful as verbiage in articulating meaning? Are there objects of consciousness that cannot be described, but only experienced? Is there a category of knowledge called "The Sacred," that is not only the goal of cognition for the religiously minded but is a source of direct knowledge?

This brings me to the heart of my suggestion to directly address the developmental situation of students like Reese with our instructional techniques. We must first acknowledge the time limits to "cover" certain material, and the fact that the classroom can never take the place of interaction with the religious texts, rituals, ceremonies, and the practitioners themselves. However, within these restraints the ideal for the instructor is to put together a diversity of approaches to help the student enter the sacred world of

the religious believer and imagine and feel how that would be, for a moment.

Robert A. Heinlein, in his modern sci-fi classic *Stranger in a Strange Land*, introduces the idea of "grokking." In this story, a human being named Valentine Michael Smith, is raised by Martians, and then comes back to earth where he introduces much of Martian culture, including that of grokking. Grokking is an act of consciousness to gain understanding and create an intimate connection with the world around you. Whenever he encounters something new, he will put the energy of his consciousness into a malleable state in which it can fuse with the energy structure and activity of that entity. He, thus, mostly leaves his own conscious state of being and in a sense becomes that entity of interest, for a time.

It is presumptuous and arrogant to think that we can help the student achieve complete understanding even if we approach our task as assisting our students to grok the religious experience of a believer. Nonetheless, this approach still might help student to get a strong sense of the religious consciousnesses of others. Furthermore, seeing the world through the eyes others for a time might be attained through conscientious and creative integration of providing historical contexts, giving something like Geertz's ideal of 'thick descriptions' for the culture under study, a use of the phenomenological evocative language, anecdotal autobiographies from religious believers, guided visualization, films, discussions in small group and with the whole class, guest speakers, and field visits.

Many instructors have found very helped the use of either assigned or optional JOURNALING by students. One professor's instructions for this Journal said in part that

the "journal should be a record of those things in the readings or lectures that you find stimulating, eye opening, beneficial, disconcerting, scary, etc. …Ask yourself why you think and feel the way you do about the topic(s) that you are considering."[9]

So, in summary, the goal I am suggesting is for us to make central, in our pedagogical considerations, and in our own posture towards our field, how we can let students enter into the state of being of the religious perspective, so that the student can more justly experience and judge what that world-view has to offer. This is crucial to being sensitive to the developmental interests of all students. However, understanding religion according to the academic paradigm is also very important; and what I am offering is that these two objectives can mutually reinforce one another – to address the development of all students in a holistic manner.

We must make use of the benefits of structuralism and deconstruction in understanding societies' diverse knowledge systems, and yet we must not let the final goal be the recognition of human biases and the relativistic nature of symbolic universes. If students are to achieve the moral courage necessary to become positive agents of social justice, we must be hopeful to the possibility that truth and good is not just relative to traditions of cultural paradigms, but that there is the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, that everyone has the capacity to search after and embrace it, that the more it's recognized and embraced, the stronger become one's foundations of knowledge and ethics – of certitude in one's world-view. Relativity comes into play in the humble understanding that one's recognition of the Profoundly Sacred is always a work-in-progress, one always

[9] Walvoord, p. 102

has the capacity for a deeper and more profound appreciation of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, thus being able to transcend to some degree one's biased limitations of being a culturally, historically, and linguistically constituted individual; and from there become a self-directed, self-determined agent of social betterment.

Outline:

I. Two different Interests – student and professor
II. Research that backs, from Barbara
III. Erikson & Successors
IV. Criticism & Skepticism and the Status Quo
    a. Skepticism/Nihilism vs. Moral Certitude
    b. Arnold Toynbee, Huston Smith, & Arkhoun, - religion humanity's collective heritage: the starting point for professors
V. Methods
    a. What we are already doing well.
    b. Knowledge-Systems & Wittgenstein, Geertz & Al-Zein
        i. Hermeneutics of certain commonalities (OK professors)
    c. Neutral enthusiast
    d. "passing over", kinesthesia, or grokking
        i. Enter the religious experience at the heart of ritual, practices, beliefs.
        ii. Religious system vs. Individual Believer, latter key
        iii. Methods/Practices: Historical context, conscientious hermeneutics for a fusion of horizons, Thick description, evocative language, anecdotal autobiographies from religious believers, religious world grokking (visualization journeys), films, guest

speakers, field visits. Journals, small group, and class discussion

e. Holistic epistemology

f. Justification for commitment

VI. Goal is a continuum between strong empathy, respect and appreciation at the middle, and acceptance, dismissal, and/or synthesis at the other end.