

## METHODS AND TEXTS

## DISPELLING THE MAGIC

*Blogging in the Religious Studies Classroom*

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For most students, the university course is the product of an illusion. Courses like "Western Civilization," "American Literature," and "Religious Studies" appear in the catalog and online registration system magically. As historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith put it, university courses are "mysterious objects, because the students have not seen the legerdemain by which the object has appeared" ("The Necessary Lie" 80). Introductory and survey courses are particularly mysterious. In order to engage students more deeply in our courses, we must reveal the trapdoors, mirrors, and deflections that make up the illusion of "Western Civilization" or "World History." How can our syllabi engage the question, "why this and not that?" How can teachers best invite students to peek behind the curtain?

I have taken up these questions in my "Introduction to Religious Studies" and "History of Religions of America" courses. At first blush, content and its importance appear to be the answer to the mystery of the university course. Religion is important, right? Many people claim it is a universal and fundamental human experience. But content itself does not solve the mystery, because the importance of *this* content versus *that* content is always already assumed. Content is important because it is on the syllabus. The mystery and the magic remain.

To dispel the magic, the pedagogy of religious studies must shift from content to critical thinking in ways that mirror a theoretical shift in the study of religion. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and lasting through the twentieth century, the study of religion focused on descriptive accounts of religions. As Mircea Eliade wrote in his foundational work *The Sacred and the Profane*, "Our primary concern is to present the specific dimensions of religious experience, to bring out the differences between it and profane experiences of the world" (17). Beginning in the 1980s, scholars critical of Eliade's descriptive approach argued that religion, or "the sacred," was not a universal and essential given. Rather, "religion" was a constructed category whose content shifted depending on the circumstances. As Smith has argued, "religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization." Thus, "the student of religion must be able to articulate clearly why 'this' rather than 'that' was chosen as an exemplum" (*Imagining Religion* xi). Scholars of religion have pushed past Smith's argument toward studies investigating the political, racial, social, and colonial ideologies that shape the construction of religion.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Chidester, *Savage Systems and Empire of Religion*; and Masuzawa.

Religious studies courses, then, are really not about religious content at all. Yes, religious studies courses include content about things like Christianity, Hinduism, myth, ritual, Zen, Gandhi, Jesus, Islam, and Gospel music. By studying such content, we expect that students will gain an appreciation and respect for diverse religious traditions and views different from their own. And maybe they will gain something of use to their own self-identities or their religious or spiritual lives. But in the end, teaching religious studies is really about teaching critical thinking skills, creative analysis, and writing. These skills equip students to construct their own definitions and theories for religion and to critically analyze others. Students can then articulate their choices in the construction of "religion," and explain why they have taken an interest in *this* example of religion and not *that*.

I have turned to public blogging in my courses to teach students how to analyze definitions of religion, construct their own theories and definitions, and explain their choices. I prefer public blogs over those hidden behind a learning management system, such as Blackboard, for two reasons. First, students tend to write better when they know that a public audience beyond just their classmates will read the post. Second, I hope it begins to get students thinking of themselves as citizens who think in public. A letter to the editor or letter to a congressional representative may seem less daunting after having written for a public audience in a class.

Most recently in my "History of Religions of America" honors course, I required students to write and publish two posts of about 750 words to a public class blog hosted at Wordpress.com.<sup>2</sup> I passed out a signup sheet at the beginning of the course and students each chose two meeting dates for which they would write a post. It was a very broad assignment: "Find an article, piece of media, news story, anything really, that you think relates to material from our class, offer your own analysis of it, and connect it to our work in class." Since the posts were spread across the semester, students had a variety of material to draw upon depending on when they chose to post. I gave students a list of websites where they might find fodder for their posts but they were free to write on whatever they found interesting. It was up to them, in their posts, to explain how and why the item they chose was exemplary and what it revealed about religions in American history and culture. There was no magic because the students determined what was important and why. They chose *this* and not *that*.

Some students took an existing definition of religion and applied it to unexpected pieces of culture. The very first blog post of the semester analyzed the documentary film *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*, a film about the adult male fans—known as "bronies"—of the *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* children's cartoon television series. As one student, Margaret Patterson wrote, "So, bronies have a moral code, practice universal acceptance, and emphasize charity. Already the parallels between the My Little Pony fandom and organized religions are apparent," (Patterson). She used Emile Durkheim to further

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2. The full syllabus with the details of the blog assignment can be found at <http://rel.as.ua.edu/pdf/rel245altmans14syl.pdf>. The class blog can be found at <http://americanreligioninamerica.wordpress.com>.

analyze how bronies functioned religiously by comparing Durkehim's idea of "collective effervescence" to BronyCon, where "groups of people who were strangers only minutes before are seen singing together, dancing together, and bumping fists (or hooves)." Another student, Emily Vork wrote about a brand new religion that emerged from an online crowd-sourced video game. Twitch Plays Pokémon was an internet project where a community of gamers worked together to play the 1998 Nintendo Gameboy videogame Pokémon Red. Drawing on Catherine Albanese's definition of religion as consisting of "the four Cs: creed, code, cultus, and community," Vork analyzed the religious system that evolved around the community of gamers:

Because of the heavy borrowing from Christianity, the Twitch Plays Pokémon religion fulfills the creeds, codes, and cultus aspects with terminology and practice almost identical to those of Christianity—just substitute the names of major figures. The community facet is the only portion of the religious system that was present even before the religious themes became prominent. The community was there from the very beginning of the game online.

For Vork and Patterson, "religion" was more than the Protestants, Jews, Catholics, and other groups we had been discussing in class. Bronies and communities of gamers also fit their construction of "religion" and both students articulated how and on what terms their examples fit. There was no illusion. They practiced a set of analytical and critical thinking skills as they articulated why these pieces of data exemplified religion and how the category "religion" helped us better understand them.

Other students used their blog posts to pivot from our readings and discussions in class to topics or themes that I had not included in the syllabus. In class we read Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey's *The Color of Christ*, a book that analyzes the racial construction of Jesus across American history. One student, Amber Smith, connected the broken stained-glass window from the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama discussed in *The Color of Christ* with a similar broken window in an episode of the 2003–2004 television show *Dead Like Me*. In both cases, stained-glass images of Jesus were shattered. White supremacists bombed the church in Alabama, killing four little black girls. Rocks shatter the window in the television show after the ghost of a gay man rages against God for making him suffer bigotry and discrimination for his sexuality. Smith pivoted from the social conflict over race described in *The Color of Christ* to contemporary social conflicts over homosexuality. As Smith argued,

While I do not mean to suggest that kids throwing rocks in a TV show and white Christian men actually bombing a church and killing children in real life are similar, the image of the shattered icon clearly still holds meaning today as a symbol of social tension, minority oppression, and (hopefully) change.

I had not made a place for analyzing religion and sexuality in America on the syllabus but Smith's post and the discussion about the post we had in class made a place for it. Smith's blog post made it important. She worked the magic.

Bringing the blog posts into the classroom each class session made this assignment work. We spent at least five minutes discussing each post and expanding on the analysis and conclusions drawn by the author. Because they were on a public blog, I also shared these posts widely through my Twitter account, Facebook, and the Facebook page of our department's student association. I also reposted exceptionally good posts, such as Vork's, to our department's blog. Vork's post was shared widely and as of this writing has had over 700 views. Edward Blum, co-author of *The Color of Christ*, added his voice to the class by commenting on some student posts. Blum even joined the class for a session via Skype. Opening up the classroom in this way did three things. First, student writing immediately improved because students knew their classmates and others would be reading. Second, the class became multi-vocal as blog posts, assigned readings, and commenters blended together.<sup>3</sup> It was not me, the authority, dispensing knowledge in a single voice. Third, students began to see themselves as participants in a larger community of scholars that extended from our class out to other academics and readers. They were no longer just consumers, they were also producers. The class shifted from a course focused on ingesting content to a course focused on solving problems, thinking creatively, and analyzing critically. The students dispelled the magic.

<sup>3</sup> The only moderating I did was to remove spam.

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