

## Forum

## Forum: Insiders, Outsiders, and Disclosure in the Undergraduate Classroom

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**Abstract.** *In this set of essays, three authors provide different perspectives on whether personal religious sensibilities and identities affect the ways we teach religion. Elliott Bazzano discusses how, as a white Muslim convert teaching at a Catholic college, he incorporates selective autobiographical anecdotes into his classes as a way to problematize the meaning of “insider” and “outsider,” and pushes his students to recognize the many layers of identity that any given person embodies at a given time. In the second essay, Audrey Truschke explains why she makes no reference to her own religious beliefs or affiliations in class as part of her strategy to demonstrate how students can study any religion regardless of personal convictions. In the third essay, Jayme Yeo explores the benefits of discussing personal religious identity as a means to resist the categories of “inside” and “outside,” which she sees as heterogeneous concepts that do not always offer explanatory power upon close examination.*

### **Muslim in the Classroom: Pedagogical Reflections on Disclosing Religious Identity** *Elliott A. Bazzano*

#### *Curiosity, Conversion, College*

I converted to religious studies after taking a course on world religions during my first semester of college and declared my major shortly thereafter. In the course, my white male professor told us that we should know he was Buddhist, as it could inform his particular biases and perspectives – including how he taught the material in the course. We covered many fascinating topics – Santa Claus, the Holocaust, acid trips – but the professor’s confessional disclosure remains among my clearest memories from the course. That class, combined with my own late-adolescent search for existential meaning, secured an enduring interest in the religious and metaphysical commitments of my professors.

At the time, I was also riding the high of my own religious conversion to Islam, and at the grand age of eighteen, I somehow felt capable of perceiving the ultimate value of others’ religious commitments. Luckily, that hubris would not last long and my time in college helped me learn that the worldviews of others are much more complicated than I had suspected. Over time, I became increasingly aware of how delicate and fluid religious identity could be. I was surprised, for example, when a professor whom I had pinned as an unaffiliated free spirit, and perhaps a bit anti-Christian, admitted to being deeply influenced by his Christian upbringing. Thus my two life-changing conversions, to Islam and religious studies, heightened both my interest in and sensitivity to realities of religion in

the world. To this day, these two conversions remain so closely intertwined that I still struggle to separate the reverberations of each.

### *On the Other Side of the Classroom*

Fourteen years later, in the swing of my fourth year of full-time teaching in higher education, I find myself continuing to ruminate over questions of religious identity, authority, and positionality in the context of college classrooms. With a bit of world traveling as well as nine years of graduate school under my belt, I am reassured that my naïve eighteen-year-old self was beginning to ask intellectually productive questions. Do the personal, metaphysical commitments of religious studies teachers matter? Should students take interest in these commitments? Is there value in instructors disclosing these commitments to their students? I find myself entrenched in thoughts about religious belonging, moreover, particularly because I teach at a Catholic Jesuit institution (Le Moyne College), where religious symbols and activities permeate the campus environment, and yet where many of the students and faculty are not Catholic.

When I began teaching full-time, even though I had wondered throughout college and graduate school how I would manage issues of religious identity in the classroom, I had no firm plan on how to proceed. Indeed, it was a student who caught me by surprise that ended up shaping my current view on the matter when she asked me if I was Muslim. My immediate reaction was, “Yes, but that shouldn’t matter for this course.” It then felt necessary to explain myself, which took about ten minutes. I did not consider those minutes wasted – to the contrary, it allowed me to communicate some of my deeply held pedagogical views about what it means to study religion in the context of higher education – but it did slightly derail my plan for that day’s class.

Since that encounter, I have decided to tell students in my Islam-related courses that I am a Muslim convert because it allows me to initiate a conversation about how we see ourselves and how others see us. Unlike my Buddhist professor, my goal for sharing impressions of my religious autobiography is not to prepare my students for particular biases, but rather to emphasize that religious identity is a potentially poor indicator of bias to begin with; it is but one facet among many that comprise an individual’s worldview.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the early years of the academic study of religion, Marshall Hodgson made a similar argument: “it is no guarantee of balanced insight, to be a Muslim, nor of impartiality, to be a non-Muslim” (Hodgson 1974, 27).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars see an ethical imperative to justifying their positionality. Mark Berkson (2005), for example, writes as a non-Muslim and criticizes his Muslim subjects for ostensibly not approaching their religious texts according to his ethical sensibilities. I observe tension in this approach because it puts a perhaps undue responsibility on the instructor to assume normative moral worldviews. This, in my opinion, is not generally helpful in a classroom setting. In my classes, moreover, I give sufficient attention to the heterodoxies of religious belief in practice in any case, so usually I see no need or utility for sharing my own positions regarding particular religious debates.

<sup>2</sup> At religiously-affiliated institutions, the rhetorical construction of authority in religion courses becomes more complicated. Regardless of educational and life experience, I would argue that a Jesuit at a Jesuit college, for example, would intrinsically convey authority to students precisely because of his religious identity. This is not to say that said Jesuit would not have first-rate training in his field – but rather that the institutional context makes the marker of religious identity particularly strong.

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Telling students a bit about myself at the beginning of the semester, moreover, allows me to address issues of authority in the classroom, and it helps to preempt particular conversations that could distract from the curriculum as the course unfolds. I want students to know, from the start, that my authority to teach comes from my academic and pedagogical training. As Martin Jaffee has argued, “no matter what religion or irreligion we personally pursue, and no matter what religious tradition we study, we are as scholars outsiders to the thing we are trying to grasp” (Jaffee 1999, 281). As it stands, I happen to be Muslim, and that carries cosmic and political weight on various levels, but it is not tied much to the way I teach my courses.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Muslim is not just a label among labels. It signifies something particularly tangled and entrenched in the American social psyche. Muslims are the bad guys (Ernst 2013; Lean 2012; Rafiq 2015).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, a white Muslim convert and native speaker of English faces different social and political consequences living in the United States than, say, a darker-skinned Arab with an accent, and my religious identity is not visually apparent unlike a Muslim woman or Sikh man who covers their head.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, in our historical moment, religious affiliation of scholars and professors still matters sometimes and undeniably shapes perceptions about their abilities and responsibilities as academics.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Research has also shown that some amount of personal disclosure is effective for building rapport with students (Brookfield 2006, 55-74). Nothing suggests, however, that such disclosure should be about religious identity in particular. Because of the politicized nature of Islam and Muslims, moreover, scholars such as Sahar Ullah (2014) have provocatively referred to the importance of “deprogramming” students in tandem with the seemingly (but not actually) more straightforward project of teaching the course material. For a discussion on the sometimes-threatening landscape of embracing unpopular religious positions as a scholar in the Western academy, see Tazim Kassam (2004). Amina Wadud, moreover, talks about why some remain “closet Muslims” out of fear for professional consequences in the academy (1999, xvi, xix; also see Wadud 2006, 82).

<sup>4</sup> A fourteen-year-old Muslim boy in Texas was arrested for bringing a clock to school, mistakenly (for any number of motives) assumed to be a bomb; this story has some silver lining, however, as national media quickly picked up the story and turned the boy into a hero, including an invitation to the White House by President Obama.

<sup>5</sup> In terms of recent debates about normativity in Islamic studies, which often revolve around issues of identity, a special issue of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* published Aaron Hughes’s “The Study of Islam Before and After 9/11: A Provocation,” (2012b). Five responses followed his piece: Berg (2012), Kelsay (2012), Martin (2012), Mas (2012), and Rippin (2012). Russell McCutcheon (2012) provides an introduction and Hughes (2012a) gives a final analysis and response. Omid Safi later wrote an article that refers to Hughes as “grossly polemical and simplistic” (2014). Hughes then responds to Safi in an article titled, “When Bad Scholarship is Just Bad Scholarship: A Response to Omid Safi” (2014). This exchange prompted *BSR* to host a series of online articles in 2014 under the theme of “Reflections on Islamic Studies.” The articles include the following: Crossley (2014), Curtis (2014), Imhoff (2014), Mas (2014), Schubel (2014), and Stoneham (2014).

<sup>6</sup> Islamic studies scholar of South Asian descent Amir Hussain notes that in the United States, his “primary identity is as a Canadian, and not as a Muslim,” though he concedes that he has found this changing post 9/11 (2005, 261). Hussain’s disclosure proves instructive as it highlights the polyvalence of his social identity, and even how particular contexts shape his priorities and self-understanding. Precisely because of the intertwined nature of identities, moreover, even high-profile publications make mistakes about who is in and who is out. See, for example, the 2009 version of *The 500 Most Influential Muslims*. Its authors mistakenly identify leading scholar of Islamic law, Wael Hallaq, as a Muslim, even though he has said in public that he is Christian. Unlike Hussain, though, Hallaq does not generally discuss his religious identity in his scholarly works.

In the opening days of my Islam courses, I emphasize to students that the meanings of religion come into relief differently on different occasions, and that the social roles that we play, consciously or not, affect the way we interpret the world. Similarly, I invite student reflections on how their own cultural and social contexts affect their approach to the study of religion in general and Islam in particular. Prior to taking my course, students may not have given much thought to the academic study of religion, or Islam in particular, but their positionality at a Catholic college has already inevitably forced them to consider what it means to study religion in a religiously-affiliated environment. To encourage reflection on the myriad ways that we form our worldviews, I facilitate a class discussion about the various conscious and unconscious biases and identifiers that we each bring to the table. Me, for example: I'm male. I'm married to a woman. I'm a father. I'm a first-generation college student. I'm white. I'm a native English speaker. I'm bilingual. I'm American. I've lived abroad. I'm kind of a hippie. And I'm Muslim. All of these facets and more affect my view of the world – and the world's view of me.

### *Identity All Around Us*

By way of introducing the insider-outsider discourse to my students, and asking them to also reflect on how their backgrounds – predictably and unpredictably – shape their approach to their college courses, I incorporate questions about authority, identity, and rhetoric into the fabric of course assignments and in-class discussions – ranging from discussing the implications of a scholar's name (for example, as it might relate to religion, gender, or ethnicity), to how that scholar writes about a given subject, and with what obvious and subtle commitments. We explore what it means to study religion – and other subjects – from the perspective of the inside or the outside, and look no further than our own halls and walls for real-life examples of the overlap between religious identity and professional commitments.<sup>7</sup>

As I noted earlier, religious identity is already visible on Le Moyne's campus in ways that they are not in other institutional settings. For example, there is a special residence on campus where Jesuits live, and three Jesuits work in my department. There are crucifixes in many of the classrooms. Catholic holidays permeate the academic calendar. And there is a chapel in the center of campus, which hosts Catholic as well as Protestant and Muslim prayer services. Therefore, at Le Moyne I see more reason to openly address issues surrounding religious identity and higher education rather than avoid them; recalling our campus environment in the classroom has led to fruitful and challenging conversations about what students expect from their Catholic college, and how those expectations change over the years.

Talking with students about pluralistic identities at a Catholic institution also offers a chance for them to reflect on how religious studies and liberal education impacts the ability to look sympathetically yet critically at any number of religious or cultural

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<sup>7</sup> On a similar note, Islamic studies scholar of South Asian descent Amir Hussain also reflects on his layered identity in the academy, in his "Editor's Note" for the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*: "I wonder what the members of the National Association of Bible Instructors (the forerunner of the AAR) would have thought of their journal one day being edited by a Canadian Muslim scholar of Islam teaching at a Catholic university" (2011, 2). For a more in-depth discussion of the insider/outsider issue in Islamic studies as an academic field, see Bazzano (2015, esp. 43-48).

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traditions, regardless of personal metaphysical outlooks, a skill that can transfer to other academic subjects and life experiences. Especially during election season, moreover, we have no shortage of opportunities to discuss discourses about religion in the public sphere. As high-profile presidential candidates share a variety of provocative or offensive remarks about Muslim Americans (for example, people who accuse Obama of being Muslim, opposing the possibility of a Muslim president), I frequently begin class with a five-minute discussion of current events as a way to regularly emphasize the contemporary social relevance of our subject.

### *Practicing Reflexivity*

One way I invite students to stake a claim in the insider-outsider debate is by showing the now infamous interview between Reza Aslan and Fox News host Lauren Green. For almost ten minutes, Green questions Aslan's authority and ability to write a book about Jesus, because he is not Christian. Green's remarks flagrantly broadcast her unfamiliarity with not only Aslan's scholarship but also his well-known persona as a Muslim public intellectual (Politi 2013). Aslan also gets testy during the exchange, arguing that he has academic training in early Christianity and that this training alone qualifies him to write about Jesus. Even though students are quick to recognize Aslan's annoyance, the absurdity of Green's singular obsession strikes them as uncalled for. When I ask students to evaluate Green's arguments, they almost unanimously agree that they are not persuaded, and readily admit that anyone can be qualified to study religion, provided they have the requisite training. This reality is not lost on the large number of non-Catholics who find themselves in a given course at Le Moyne College.

I have used other methods to invite students into the conversation with much less success – even with opposite reactions. I have at times asked students to role-play: What if, for example, Person A were born and raised in Middle Earth and studied the history of Westeros? (Students love the references to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Martin's *Game of Thrones*). Person A learned its languages, read its chronicles, and studied its political documents, but never set foot in Martin's fictional country. Also consider Person B, who is born and raised in Westeros but is without training in history and was a sub-par student in high school. I then ask students, based on these facts alone, "Who is best equipped to teach a course on the history and culture of Westeros?"

What I continually find is that students seem to be split about who should have authority in the example that I present. Even when I use hyperbolic examples to describe Person B (flunked high school, does not like to read, is a poor communicator), some students still insist that Person B has something to offer in the classroom that Person A does not. Although on one level I find this reaction unreasonable, I can appreciate the view that Person B has a perspective that Person A could not reasonably acquire, and so their insight may be valuable. It does not follow, however, that Person B is capable of presenting scholarly information about the history and culture of Westeros in an academically rigorous manner. So I will sometimes follow up by asking the students, "Have any of you ever met a Christian who didn't know very much about the Bible?" And here a sea of hands goes up every time, which immediately challenges curious minds to reconsider whether belonging to a tradition grants magical insight into that tradition's history, texts, practices, or communities. In contrast,

drawing attention to the numerous Jesuits with PhDs who live and teach on campus also helps to highlight the difference between scholarly and non-scholarly training among Catholics.

One way I account for the disparity in reactions to the Reza Aslan interview and the Middle Earth/Westeros scenario – or even the question about Christians and the Bible – is that the fantasy-based situation comes across as too theoretical, even though I couch it in terms of a college classroom. In contrast, the Aslan interview aired on a major news network, was viewed by millions, and usually elicits some chuckling as well as eye-rolling among students. It is much easier to see the stakes unfold in a real-life scenario. I find that abstract examples in conversation with real-life scenarios help students appreciate the logic of arguments for their own sake without, at the same time, losing sight of their practical, everyday applications. Setting up this contrast also helps students identify disparity in their own logic, even when considering parallel thought experiments.

### *Assuming Identities*

Another way I guide students in forming opinions about insider-outsider issues is by encouraging them to walk a mile in an unfamiliar pair of shoes. To this end, I regularly oversee in-class debates that require students to explore contentious issues – gender segregation in mosques, for instance – while role-playing as Muslims or non-Muslims. These exercises inevitably force some students to argue for political and religious positions that they do not personally hold, and invite them to reflect on the relevance of identity. These debates help students understand the difference between the sometimes mutually exclusive projects of constructing logical, evidence-based arguments vis-à-vis making normative claims based on pre-existing axioms.

When we debate the issue of separate spaces for women in mosques, I assign a “pro-barrier” and an “anti-barrier” team. Students almost always have difficulty sympathizing with perspectives that support gender segregation, but this often changes when my students, nearly all of whom are non-Muslim, attend a mosque service (as a required assignment in my Islam-related courses), especially if they talk to Muslim women and hear their perspectives in person. In one memorable iteration of this debate activity, a student on the pro-barrier team emphasized that his team was not pro-barrier as much as they were “pro-purity,” an argument we had discussed in a group debrief following a mosque visit. Even though he likely disagreed with the views he espoused, his in-character performance allowed many other students to see parallels in discourses about gender in religions other than Islam. Despite the impassioned performance of the pro-purity team, many students still considered his arguments misogynistic and logically unpersuasive. His unwavering appeal to larger principles with strong Christian resonances such as purity, however, caught the other team off-guard and prompted them to fumble through a response that might have otherwise come across more smoothly.

Requiring students to construct and follow coherent arguments in character gives them the opportunity to exercise their own ability to make arguments about religions that exist beyond the realm of their own particular religious persuasions. The exercise also demonstrates that different types of arguments become valid for some groups and not others, because of different epistemologies. On the other hand, visiting mosques and talking with Muslims always leaves an impression on students and challenges them to more seriously entertain views they disagree with than they might in other circumstances, including academic articles or even in-class debates.

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### *My 18-year-old Ideas, Revisited*

Reflecting back on my time as an undergraduate, I think it would have disappointed my eighteen-year-old self that I later determined that particular metaphysical dispositions toward religion may not be a defining feature of a religious studies professor's thought or scholarship. When I began college, not only did I feel that a professor's religious identity was a critical feature of his scholarly self, but, like many of my own students today, I felt that my perceived connections to particular traditions and metaphysical realities gave me special insight into the academic study of religion. I see now that those connections gave me not so much special insight into the study of religion as curiosity to learn.

My own opinion on this matter now differs from that of my Buddhist professor because I have become increasingly skeptical that teachers can know how religious commitments ultimately influence their teaching. I find it even less likely that students can straightforwardly identify how the various commitments of their professors influence a given course, and I acknowledge that the influence of these commitments fluctuates as it interplays with other aspects of identity. For me, the key to engaging the insider-outsider discourse in the classroom is to take the focus off of me, as the instructor, and to instead put the focus on the broader methodological questions at stake – through in-class activities, the rhetoric of the material we study, and the approach we take to studying it. Thus as a white Muslim convert, teaching Islam-focused courses at a Catholic institution in the United States, I find value in disclosing this identity to students, mostly to enable them to explore what this question means for themselves, because it does not necessarily matter, in ways that students might reasonably surmise, if I am Muslim or not.

### **Imaginative Outsiders: Empowering Undergraduates to Analyze Religion**

*Audrey Truschke*

#### *Beginnings*

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, I took a course on the New Testament. At some point a student asked the professor if she was a Christian. The professor replied that such information was irrelevant, and could we please get back to the serious, scholarly work at hand of comparing versions of the resurrection in the four gospels? In class we did just that. But for the remainder of the semester I frequently retired after class with several partners-in-crime to the Divinity School coffee shop to speculate about the professor's religious affiliation, personal beliefs, and upbringing based on her remarks that day. We never figured it out. But, for me, the exercise ultimately drove home the professor's pedagogical point all along: her personal religious identity need not be publicly or intellectually relevant to the academic study of religion.

#### *Teaching Hinduism as a Presumed Outsider*

Years later, after I earned a PhD and began teaching South Asian religions in the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University, I decided to model myself after this professor. I do not overtly discuss my religious background or opinions in the classroom. But this experiment has unfolded rather differently than I initially expected, owing in large part to my area of expertise. I am a scholar of Indian religions (primarily Hinduism, Islam, and Jainism), and nobody seems to think that I look the part in ethnicity, name, or

dress of any of these traditions. As a result, students generally assume that I am an outsider to the religions that I teach, and a rash of positive and potentially troublesome pedagogical implications has followed. One episode during a course on the Hindu epics brings the virtues and vices of my presumed outsider status and its pedagogical scaffolding into sharp relief.

One winter term at Stanford, I taught a course on the two Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, that are generally identified with Hinduism (there are also Jain and Buddhist retellings of the stories). With my permission a student brought her Hindu mother, who was visiting from Delhi, to class. We discussed the *Mahabharata* that day, an awesome tale of war and kingship, and focused on variant versions of several episodes. A few weeks later the student came to my office hours and relayed to me that her mother had been ecstatic to witness how I treated the Indian epics as literary works that had been retold many times and could be analyzed, interrogated, and even criticized. As my student put it, reporting her mother's speech, "It is so great that Audrey can talk about the *Mahabharata* freely in ways that we cannot because, for us, it is a matter of faith."

### *Virtues of Becoming an Outsider*

In part, this episode signaled that I was doing my job effectively. One hallmark of the academic study of religion as opposed to theology is that the former enables us to pursue ideas without consideration of their implications for faith.<sup>8</sup> Of course, this clear-cut division between studying and practicing religion does not always stand up to scrutiny. Regarding the Indian epics, for instance, some modern Hindus feel threatened by scholars exploring the fluidity of these tales and interpret such academic activities as theological attacks. In 2011 a well-known essay, "Three Hundred Ramayanas" by the respected Indologist A. K. Ramanujan (1991), was scrapped from the history syllabus at Delhi University over allegations that its inclusion of certain variant tellings hurt Hindu sentiments (Firstpost staff 2011). But, despite the messy and often unsustainable division between thinking about and practicing religion, I invite my students to be scholars of Hinduism for the term. By modeling an outsider approach, I teach that as academic observers we can be deeply interested in the internal logic and contexts of movements that seek to restrict scholarly efforts, but we do not temper our investigation of texts and ideas out of deference for religious sentiments. My student's mother seemed to understand and appreciate this approach.

However, rather than expressing admiration, I want students to walk away from my classroom empowered to even-handedly approach a diversity of traditions, regardless of where they come from or what they personally believe. I frequently encourage students to develop what Mark Berkson (2005) has dubbed an "imaginative insider's perspective," wherein they try to see the world through the eyes of specific religious practitioners. I assign many primary sources and often give assignments that require students to seek out and read articles by and about religious individuals and organizations. I have taken students to visit places of worship, such as a local Hindu temple where a lay community leader gave us a detailed tour and answered questions.

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<sup>8</sup> In separating religious studies from theology, I largely stand with Russell McCutcheon (2001). However, I disagree with McCutcheon's insistence on placing religious studies above theology and characterizing religion as only a social phenomenon.

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But I also teach that students ought to be able to step out of empathetic viewpoints (including their own), not to judge religious ideas and practices but to analyze their contexts, sources, and implications. In this regard, I want students to cultivate an imaginative outsider's perspective from which they can identify and unpack social, cultural, economic, and political contexts relevant to specific religious communities, texts, and activities. These sorts of analyses that seek to examine religious ideas and practices using all available tools of philology, literary criticism, and so forth are, as I see it, the core work of religious studies. By adopting such methodologies, we all become (temporarily, at least) imaginative outsiders to specific religions who are then positioned to exercise a particular type of critical thinking regarding those traditions. The appreciative comment from my student's mother indicates that my teaching effectively communicated the virtues of this approach.

### *Navigating the Perils of Being an Outsider*

However, the comment from my student's mother also brings up the problematic assumption that I am well poised to carry out critical analysis of Hindu religious texts precisely because I am an outsider. This is a potentially distressing lesson for my students. If my authority on Hinduism is located in my perceived position outside of the religious tradition, then what of my Hindu students? Is it a disadvantage to be an insider? I strive to communicate to my students that everybody can approach religion as a scholarly outsider, even if they are internal to the tradition. Your religious background and identity need not define you as a scholar. Your religious upbringing may largely determine your depth of knowledge about a given tradition and the comparative examples available to you, but these realities can be altered through education. Ultimately how you delineate and approach religious texts and topics, not who you are or what you profess, is the crux of the academic study of religion. Yet I wonder if, by looking to me as an example, many in my classroom intuit that a scholarly approach is easier to cultivate for somebody outside of a given religion.

In part, I address the general complexities of being an insider or an outsider by approaching the entire topic from a cultural rather than a religious angle in the classroom. Starting on the first day of all my religious studies classes, including my Indian epics course, I talk extensively with my students about the presumptions that we all bring (generally without recognizing them as such) to the study of religion. While some scholars share their religious autobiography in order to get at this key point that all perspectives are a view from somewhere (Schaeffer 2004), I emphasize wider cultural biases. Especially for Hinduism, I discuss ideas and value judgments concerning monotheism versus polytheism. When I teach Islam, I name and confront head-on stereotypes about the unchanging nature of the tradition, its violent edge, and its treatment of women. I frequently circle back to definitions of religion and how the category is, in many ways, a Western construct (Nongbri 2013). These sorts of blatant and yet often hidden presumptions are different than personal religious identity, perhaps most importantly by being more widely shared among students (and professors) than any individual's religious story. In contrast to a personal identity approach, I find that highlighting cultural perspectival issues allows students to more easily move beyond their own religious identities and also more accurately identifies major biases regarding religion among twenty-first century students.

### *Teaching Hinduism to Hindus*

Despite my best efforts to model for all students how to be imaginative outsiders, some students are uninterested in cultivating this approach. Especially at secular institutions, how ought we to accommodate students for whom the academic study of religion serves a personal, even spiritual end? During the same course on the Hindu epics, a student approached me after the first class and asked whether I thought the course would be edifying for her, a self-identified Hindu who wanted to learn more about two texts central to her religious tradition. The question took me aback. After a moment of thought, I answered (truthfully) that I would not have devoted much of the last fifteen years of my life to studying these two epics if I did not think that they were incredible and enriching. That being said, it was up to her alone to make any connections between studying these works in my classroom and her personal life. She took the class, made excellent contributions to class discussions, and got an A. Unlike my student's mother who respected my analytical approach but preferred to proclaim that, for her, the epics were a "matter of faith," this student had little problem intertwining the two perspectives.

On a practical level, many of us would experience a severe drop in numbers if we drove away students who took our classes because they were engaged in some search for answers and insights regarding how to live and what to believe. Some might even say that pursuit of personal betterment is the core of the liberal arts. While in the case of the Hindu epics I found it easy (and harmless) to see overlaps between a student's religious investment and my own scholarly love of these two magnificent texts, I teach many topics on which such convergences would be more problematic. For instance, I regularly teach about Hindu nationalism, a project in which some students may be invested but which I would not care to deliberately advance through my teaching. Should I break my own rules and condemn such viewpoints? Such questions point out a place where the value I place on equanimity perhaps begins to crack.

### *The Politics of Being an Insider Elsewhere*

When I taught the Hindu epics at Stanford, it did not seem to matter (so far as I could tell) to any of my students, who bothered to think about it, where I was on the outside. No student ever directly brought up or asked about my religious background. In contrast, my presumed separation from Hinduism was mentioned and alluded to several times as enabling me to have an insightful approach to Hindu religious works in the classroom (I discuss the most overt instance above). Accordingly, I suspect that my students do not merely assume that I am not Hindu, Muslim, or Jain but moreover that I am a religious blank, somebody outside of religion altogether. I wonder, however, if my teaching would be received differently if I disclosed a specific religious identity. If I told my students I were an Evangelical Christian, a Reform Jew, a Buddhist, a staunch atheist, or any other of a myriad of religious options, would it change their experiences in my classroom? I fear so.

If I were to share my religious autobiography, I fear that its specificity (like the specificity of all such narratives) would likely alienate many students. My courses generally attract a diverse group of undergraduates in terms of ethnicity, religion, and country of birth. Most notably, like many Indologists, I regularly have a certain number of students of South Asian descent. There are many challenges to teaching Indian religions to a class that includes people who have had personal experiences with Hinduism and Islam since birth as well as those who cannot even place India on a map. If I told a religious narrative about myself, would all students in such a wide-ranging group see connections and parallels with

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their own story? I think not. Even more problematically, admitting that I too have a view from somewhere in particular within the religious landscape would potentially brand me an unreliable and unqualified scholar, who is unable to pursue analytical questions free of theological shackles, at least in the eyes of some.

My anxieties on this front, unfortunately, have been reinforced by recent events. Most prominently, Wendy Doniger, an influential scholar of Hinduism, came under heavy fire and had her book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* pulled and pulped by Penguin India because of allegations by a right-wing Hindu nationalist that the book violates an Indian law that prohibits offending religious sensibilities. One specific accusation is that Doniger wrote her book with “Christian Missionary Zeal” (Doniger 2014a, 2014b). In part, this revives an old (and, during British colonialism, partly realized) apprehension about foreign scholars learning about Hinduism to discredit the religion and convert its followers. But this denunciation also plays on criticisms of any outsider scholarship on religious topics. After Doniger (2014a) pointed out to some of her detractors that she grew up in a Jewish family, she was met with anti-Semitism in the form of endorsing Hitler’s Final Solution. Hindu nationalist critics also found Doniger’s scholarship objectionable for other reasons. But being able to locate her in a specific and (to their eyes) non-Indian tradition was a gripping way to express their concerns that required little further elaboration. Similar situations (admittedly, usually slightly less volatile) arise commonly in college classrooms, especially when somebody perceived as non-Hindu claims authority to teach about Hindu traditions.

For Hinduism in particular, hostility to being analyzed by outsiders is frequently fueled by being non-Indian as much as it is by being non-Hindu. Such concerns are also not limited to the study of religion. On a racial note that runs parallel to concerns about religious identity, a tenured history professor once asked me during a job interview: “Audrey, given that you are clearly Caucasian, how do you presume to teach about modern India?” My answer then was the same as it is now, namely that I claim authority to teach on the basis of what and how I have studied rather than personal identity. I want to impart the same philosophy to students in my religious studies courses. We all have perspectives, but we can and should choose which ones to emphasize and forefront in our approaches to making sense of religious ideas, texts, and practices. Especially in the college classroom, I decline to disclose my own religious identity as part of a wider pedagogical attempt to model for all students how to ask questions and seek answers about religion that are pertinent far beyond their own backgrounds and beliefs.

### **The Fictional Gap: Teaching beyond the Insider/Outsider Binary**

*Jayme M. Yeo*

One of my students recently asked me if John Donne, who was Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London during the 1620s, was influenced by Buddhism – an unlikely possibility given England’s limited intercultural contact at the time. The course was “Early Modern Devotional Poetry” (I specialize in pre-modern English literature) and my student, a self-defined practitioner of Buddhist meditation, was struggling to interpret Donne’s unfamiliar theology. “I know Donne wasn’t a Buddhist, but his poetry seems so radical. It reminds me of eastern mystical texts. Could he have read any Buddhist writings? Did Christians accept Donne’s writing as orthodox in his time? How do they respond to it today?”

I appreciated the curiosity that motivated my student's questions. Although she correctly realized that the connection between Donne and Buddhism was improbable, she seemed driven by a real desire to understand. But what were the grounds of her understanding? As an "outsider," she recognized the limits of her own personal knowledge, but nonetheless felt a sort of sympathy with the text. At the same time, she suspected that "insiders" would also have trouble interpreting Donne's "radical" writings. Her questions undermined the putative knowledge of both outsider and insider to Donne's work, troubling these simplistic categories and exemplifying a major concern I have with the insider/outsider problem. Namely, our formulation of the problem establishes an impossible binary that gives inadequate purchase on the complex issues we face when studying and teaching religion.

### *Intimacy and Difference*

The terms "insider" and "outsider" imply a fictional gap that reduces our scholarly approaches to a series of oppositional forces: emic or etic, description or redescription, sui generis or constructivism.<sup>9</sup> But in fact, personal religious identity and scholarship are connected by a network of subtle affiliations and antagonisms that give way to multidimensional interpretative possibilities.<sup>10</sup> Recent responses to the insider/outsider problem have moved away from dichotomizing, emphasizing the interrelated nature of scholarship and personal identity, or even the possibility that research might function as an interreligious dialogue (Knott 2005, 255). My own take on the insider/outsider problem borrows from this trend and begins with the notion that we can all to some extent claim intimacy with the subjects we study: we are all affective, embodied, social beings. But of course we share affectivity, embodiment, and sociality differently. This landscape of intimacy and difference places us simultaneously inside and outside – while ensuring that we are never fully either.

My approach to the insider/outsider problem in the classroom is to give my students assignments that purposefully complicate the insider/outsider binary, asking them instead to reflect on how their own understanding of a religion both enables and restricts their comprehension of a text (McCutcheon 2005, 8-10). While I rarely discuss the terms "insider" and "outsider" explicitly, by asking students to confront the opportunities and limits of their own personal experiences, I hope to equip them to navigate the landscape of intimacy and difference. I want them to be aware of the complex relationship they have to the ideas they study.

My pedagogical approach is partly informed by my institutional context. The university where I teach (Belmont University) is a non-denominational Christian institution, but it welcomes students of all religious identities and supports a growing amount of religious diversity. Given the religious focus of my institution, I do not want my students to feel forced to bracket their personal identities as they examine the material (an impossible task in any event), but rather to learn how to marshal disciplinary tools to build on and challenge their initial responses to an idea. In addition, given the school's diversity, I want to

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<sup>9</sup> There are, of course, other ways of formulating this problem; particularly useful is Clifford Geertz's (2005, 51) notion, borrowed from psychologist Heinz Kohut, of "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts.

<sup>10</sup> See Merriam et al. (2001) for one example of this complexity within the social sciences.

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provide students of all backgrounds with an open field for exploring the relationship between personal identity and scholarly activity.

While I make no efforts to obscure my Christian identity from my students, I rarely discuss it in class. I do this for two reasons: first, I do not want any student to feel left out of our conversation. And second, I want students to focus on their own individual encounters with a text, not mine. I cannot tell my students where their blind spots are or know what kinds of personal insight they will bring to bear on a text, but I can help them make these discoveries on their own.

### *Literary Expectations*

Literary studies affords a unique perspective on the insider/outsider problem because it offers readers what appears to be a privileged view from the inside through allowing access to the thoughts and emotions of a character: consider Shakespeare's intimate monologues or the modern novel's stream of consciousness (McCutcheon 2005, 2-4). The literary "inside" of a text is therefore analogous to, and for devotional literature often consonant with, the "inside" of religious studies – and equally problematic. While critics such as Martha Nussbaum (2008, 147) believe that this insider's perspective has the potential to promote productive, even political, sympathy with a character or narrator, it can also lead to mistaken assumptions about a text; readers often make snap judgments about characters or events they feel close to without fully engaging the material. I want students to be attentive to the proclivity all readers have for misinterpreting elements of a text they do not immediately understand.

In order to help my students become aware of their own misconceptions, I employ what Roger Schank (1983) calls "expectation failure" as a pedagogical strategy. Expectation failure involves a situation in which students' existing models for understanding the world lead to incorrect conclusions, forcing them to reevaluate those mental models. As a pedagogical approach, expectation failure responds to a larger trend noted by educational research that indicates that our students often leave our classes having failed to grasp or apply the underlying principles that our disciplines rely on, gaining instead only a short-term ability to reproduce formula or utilize vocabulary.<sup>11</sup> In my classes, I often place students in situations that require them to formulate ideas based on expectations that are likely to be faulty. Put simply, I set my students up for productive failure so that they can confront and ultimately change how they approach a text.

Expectation failures compel readers to be cautious about applying personal knowledge to an object of study, to respect the distance between a reader and the material she engages (whether literary or religious). I employ this method not to estrange students from their own thinking but rather to demonstrate for them the value of methodologically sound pathways for academic analysis. I therefore supplement expectation failures with tools for approaching literature that help students to read with a multiperspectival lens – to learn to balance intimacy and distance. While this approach is intended to replace inadequate theorizing based on assumptions about what it means to be inside a text or religious system, my deeper pedagogical goal ultimately lies elsewhere: I hope that by questioning their own knowledge, students learn how to ask questions more generally, to cultivate an attitude of generous curiosity (an idea to which I will return later) about the world around them.

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<sup>11</sup> For a brief overview of the research on expectation failure, see Ken Bain (2004), chapter 2.

### ***Setting Students Up for Productive Failure***

I invite my students to fail before they even enter the classroom by assigning pre-class writing that provides a low-stakes environment for making mistakes. Pre-class writing is of course a standard pedagogical practice for many, but my assignments are designed not to test reading knowledge, so much as to invite disciplinary engagement with material. Assignments like the two below, from an introduction to British Literature course, often encourage students to draw on assumptions they have about premodern religiosity:

List Margery Kempe's (c.1373-1439) arguments for herself as a religious authority. Which of these arguments are in line with what you understand to be medieval Church teaching, and which seem unorthodox? Why do you suppose her arguments succeed?

How would you expect an early English Protestant to describe Satan? How does John Milton (1608-1674) portray Satan in *Paradise Lost*? How do you account for the difference (if any) between the two?

These exercises complicate the insider/outside binary on multiple levels. First, they prevent students who might think of themselves as religious insiders from gauging the theological elements of these premodern texts against their own modern religiosity. In this sense, one possible productive failure occurs when students realize they cannot assess Kempe's or Milton's theology on its own terms. In another way, however, these exercises also challenge students who believe themselves to be literary insiders (a group that overlaps with religious insiders) by exploiting common misconceptions about premodern Christianity that are held more generally. These misconceptions rely on a reductive model of history that overemphasizes the institutional control of medieval Christianity or oversimplifies early modern conceptions of evil. Productive failures therefore also occur when students misidentify the motivations behind Kempe's arguments, or believe that Milton's sympathetic and complex depiction of Satan is incommensurable with early modern Protestantism.<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that the point here is not to shut down entirely any approach that might use personal knowledge to understand a text, but rather to show students when the intimacy they feel with a text, whether religious or literary, hinders their ability to recognize difference.

### ***From Failure to Success***

In order to give students new models for approaching material, I conduct class using a format that I repeat with some variation throughout the term: drawing on students' prewriting, we identify the most salient textual moments and list interpretive possibilities for them before assessing the relative validity of each interpretation. This is designed first to help students see where their thinking went awry, and second to redirect that thinking toward disciplinary methods that will help them make stronger assessments of a text in the future.

In a recent class session on Geoffrey Chaucer's (c. 1343-1400) "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" from *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, I opened the discussion by asking

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<sup>12</sup> A development on this assignment might ask students to articulate why they believe what they believe about early Christianity. Known as metacognition (thinking about thinking), these reflective tasks are particularly effective for cultivating deep learning (Chew 2010).

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students the same question I had set in their writing assignment: “What, if anything, surprises you about the Wife of Bath’s religious devotion?” I suspected students would notice the Wife’s proclivity for using Biblical texts to support her arguments in favor of licentiousness. And indeed, this is the first thing they mentioned. I asked students to speculate on interpretive possibilities: “Why do you suppose she does this? What does this accomplish in the text?” I wrote students’ ideas on the board and asked them to re-examine the tale in pairs in order to determine which interpretations were best upheld by the text.

The value of this activity is that it yields ground for students to respond personally to a text as insiders while ultimately channeling those responses into a set of clear methodological guidelines that places them outside the text, giving students a disciplinary platform for reexamining their own thinking. In the course of this activity, students discover when their initial reactions were mistaken and they revise their thoughts accordingly. They often blend or change interpretations. They write entirely new interpretations. They find nuances in the text that they had not noticed earlier. And they do this through a process of discovery that they direct – I do not tell them which interpretations are likely to be the most accurate. In fact, I am often an active participant in this process; more than once, students have found compelling support for an interpretation I viewed as weak. I always point out when this happens; I want them to see when my own expectations fail. I want them to know that we are all always learning.

### *Exploring Similitude*

While expectation failures can help students learn to interpret devotional literature with sensitivity to difference, I also want to give students opportunities to find points of contact between their personal identities and the texts we study. This is particularly important for students who approach a text as radically other, either because they do not share the religious affiliations of the author or characters, or more simply because they are unfamiliar with early modernity. And so, to supplement the teaching approach I describe above, I also give pathways for understanding uncanny resemblances between my students’ lives and the literature we read – an activity that does not approximate an insider’s perspective so much as it explores similitude.

Generally, these activities involve comparative work around a relatively stable set of questions about the human experience: What are the grounds for forgiveness? How do we conceive of an equitable society? Is it possible to truly welcome the other? My goal is to generate multiple encounters with these questions in order to explore the resemblances and dissonances that emerge from them. I might teach Andrew Marvell’s devotional poems on gardens alongside Wendell Berry’s work on nature, or I might compare Katherine Philips’ language of intimate friendship with language we use to describe friends today. In a recent class, we spent a course module exploring hospitality through reading poetry and philosophy before volunteering at a local kitchen.<sup>13</sup> I caution students against looking for a single “answer” to these questions among the texts we study and activities we engage, encouraging them instead to focus on how different responses develop within their specific contexts.

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<sup>13</sup> While it is not my primary goal, I hope that these activities also promote student sympathy with the ideas and people they encounter. In this sense, my pedagogical aims have affinities with (but are not the same as) Mark Berkson’s (2005, 91) desire to cultivate in his students an “imaginative insider’s perspective.”

### *A Generous Curiosity*

I ask more questions than I answer in my classes, hoping that my students will learn to do the same. In fact, while I seek to train my students in the analytical methods we use to study texts, my primary (and more difficult) pedagogical goal is to foster lifetime habits of learning characterized by a generous curiosity.

As a pedagogical goal, curiosity is slightly different from the more traditional objectives of liberal education. Theorists from John Henry Newman to Stanley Fish have posited various aims for liberal education, including cultivating knowledge, social responsibility, practical or critical skills, or disciplinary expertise.<sup>14</sup> But curiosity is not a skill to master or a set of ideas to learn. In fact, it is not generally thought of as the end of education at all, but rather its beginning. And it is precisely for this reason that I find fostering curiosity a valuable pedagogical aim; it ensures that the project of learning extends far beyond the university setting.

More to the point, I suspect that an insatiable interest in the world also provides the best form of release from the fictional binary of the insider/outsider problem by reframing the issue as a scholarly constant: no matter what we know, we will never know everything. Our proximity to the religions we study may facilitate different approaches or bestow different kinds of knowledge, but the basic project – to understand better – remains unfinished and challenging regardless of where we stand. To attend to curiosity is to seek greater reflexivity about who we are in relation to the subjects we study and to cultivate greater sensitivity to what they tell us. Curiosity, in other words, encourages greater accuracy over time than any methodology at our disposal. Ultimately, by reframing the insider/outsider problem in my classes, I aim for students to recognize the complex relationship between their personal identities and the subjects that they study, and to be empowered to examine religious traditions and communities with an inquisitiveness and self-questioning that is never fully satisfied.

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<sup>14</sup> A very abbreviated list might include John Henry Newman (1907) on knowledge, Martha Nussbaum (1998) on social responsibility, and Stanley Fish (2008) on disciplinary expertise. At first blush, "practical skills" seems more aligned to "servile" than "liberal" models of education, but I include it here as part of a growing, if possibly problematic, trend to highlight the professional and economic viability of a liberal arts education. See for instance the Association of American Colleges and Universities' LEAP Initiative, which encourages liberal arts institutions to develop internship opportunities and emphasize practical skills for students.

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