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Diversifying Knowledge Production: The Other within Christianity

Zayn Kassam, Guest Editor

From the Editor’s Desk

In order to grapple with the question of how to diversify formations of knowledge in the academic study of religions, Zayn Kassam, the guest editor of this issue of Spotlight, has brought together a group of scholars to reflect specifically upon the Other within Christianity.

The experiences of the contributors underscore the importance of paying ongoing attention to constructs of the Other (or others) built into the center/periphery discourses of and in academe. The basic premise is that by defining what constitutes knowledge, “Western” academia sustains hegemonic practices that subject and subordinate epistemologies and insights stemming from “other” racial, religious, and gendered identities.

Elizabeth Castelli points out that the concept of “Other” presents a dilemma in as much as it “threatens to reinforce precisely the terms it seeks to disrupt.” The Other also has many others within itself as illustrated in this issue of Spotlight. The concept of “minority” suffers from a similar problem. Such labels tend to rely on the dominant structures that strange, marginalize and dehumanize.

Yet another issue pertaining to the concept of Other(s) is that of representation: who may speak for whom? Expressing the frustration of many racial minority scholars who feel “boxed in,” Kwok Pui Lam calls into question the postmodern claim that one can write and speak only from the position of one’s own racial, sexual, etc., identity.

Skeptics view minority studies as consisting of special interest groups that have given rise to divisive identity politics. They argue that in order to achieve the common good for the nation as a whole, we must transcend the particularities of what we are à la Rorty, who makes a distinction between what we are (our race, gender, etc.) and who we are (our aspirations as citizens).

The feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff counters reductive readings of identity politics as discourses of special interest groups doomed to politics of confrontation. In her book Visible Identites: Race, Gender and the Self (Oxford, 2000), she argues that identity is not just a concept that can be transcended or waved off with a magic wand. The fact is that people perceive, know, and interact with each other through their physical embodiment which is marked by race, gender, religion, and so forth.

Thus, any paradigm of knowledge that requires a surrender or erasure of embodied identities causes harm — social, economic, political, as well as psychological and spiritual. To quote Charles Taylor, “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and any person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion … misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.” (Amy Gutmann, ed., Multiculturalism: Charlie Taylor, Princeton: 1994, 25).

This truth is amply illustrated by Miguel A. De La Torre’s agonizing outrage for “doing scholarship from the margins” and Stacey Floyd-Thomas’s experience of double jeopardy as a turncoat in her African-American religious community and a racialized, discriminated other in her classroom — so blantly expressed in the question “What can a black woman teach me?” Andrew Sung Park and Erin Runions expose the logic of the Other as despotic and demonic at another level: the ways that theology is used by some Christians to signify as Other not only those who are not Christian, but also Christians gone astray. Park rejects the righteous self that is constructed by exclusive claims to an absolute, all-powerful God, and commends instead the spiritual exercise of “dialectical emptying” so as to focus on ethics versus theology.

Querying the dialectic of Christ/antichrist, Runions exposes the racialized and homossexualized Other created by apocalyptic narratives popularized especially by right-wing Christians. Their antichrist is not only a dark, sinister, violent devil, but also sexually perverse. African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and now all Muslims generalized as terrorists, must be feared and — emboldened by Rumsfeldian strategy and Huntingtonian ideology — converted by force, if necessary, to adopt rational norms of Euro-American “civilization.”

Simeon Ilesanmi, Gastón Espinosa, and Andrea Smith address the wider legal, economic, and social structures that impact academic discourses in religious studies. In his analysis of immigration and First Amendment laws, Ilesanmi shows how rules of deference on the one hand make foreigners of immigrants (otherize), and on the other hand require their religious identities be interreflectingly treated as sui generis (self-authenticating).

Smith focuses her critical lens on the traditional grading system in higher education. She argues that it mirrors the impervious capitalist credo of meritocracy, a credo that denounces and marginalizes the poor and unsuccessful as lazy and irresponsible, and thus abandons them to their sorry and “deserved” fate.

Espinosa’s historical overview of the long and winding road taken to establish the subdiscipline of Mexican-American religious studies gives hope in terms of diversifying the production and expansion of knowledge in religious studies. And in this vein, Linda Alcof’s theory of race, ethnicity, and gender as dynamic social identities that function as interpretive horizons provides a compelling epistemological basis for extending hospitality to knowledge of and from Other(s). Thanks to Zayn Kassam for bringing together the authors in this issue of Spotlight to illustrate the complex challenges involved in diversifying knowledge production in religious studies.
THE OTHER is most commonly viewed as someone who stands outside oneself, against whom one defines oneself, self here being understood as one’s race, gender, culture, religion, etc. Three decades ago, in his analysis of media coverage on Islam and Muslims, Edward Said sounded a warning about the consequences of systematically otherizing particular races, classes, or religions:

“Carefully fostered fears of anarchy and disorder will very likely produce conformity of views and, with reference to the ‘outside’ world, greater distrust: this is as true of the Islamic world as it is of the West. At such a time — which has already begun — the production and diffusion of knowledge will play an absolutely critical role” (Coversing Islands, 153).

In preparation for the Annual Meeting last year, the Committee for Racial and Ethnic Minorities at the American Academy of Religion decided to turn the question of the Other and of knowledge production on its head, and to ask the question uppermost in our minds: How do we as academics living and working in the hegemonic space of the ‘West’ reflect upon the Other within, and how do we diversify knowledge production in that hegemon? To that end, we held a Special Topics Forum in Washington, D.C., at the AAR Annual Meeting in November 2006 on the subject of “The Other Within: The Study of Religion and Diversifying our Knowledge Production.” The panelists were Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Erin Runions, Andrew Sung Park, and Gismon Espinosa, with Grace Kim as respondent.

Given the enthusiastic reception to the forum and the energetic discussion that followed, we invited several others to reflect on the subject of the panel in the hopes of bringing the theoretical issues to the attention of scholar-teachers. The reflections featured in this issue of Spotlight on Teaching may stimulate further thought about the Other in our courses.

In order to focus our lenses, we invited only scholars of Christianity to reflect on the Other within. One question we asked was how might academics who study and teach about a tradition such as Christianity — considered to occupy a hegemonic space within the academy — reflect upon and contribute to knowledge production about the Other within the academy? We felt that such reflections would prove to be thought-provoking for all those engaged in the study of religion more generally, and with particular faith traditions specifically, because in a globalized world, every religious tradition has no choice but to interact or contend with the economic, political, military, and ideological power of what continues to be perceived by much of the world as the largely Christian “West.”
Redemptive Difference: What Can a Black Woman Teach Me?

Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, Brite Divinity School

As a Seminary Professor, but one who is not a preacher, I am occasionally confronted by someone at church asking me, “Why are you wasting your time working at that cemetery?” This question stems not from an academic circles denigrated (let’s allow) the black church, but rather from a very reasonable hermeneutic of suspicion that: 1) questions whether the study of religion should ultimately lead to the weakening or demise of one’s faith; and 2) resists the notion that something as sacred as one’s faith should be exposed and subjected to the dehumanization and devaluation of all things black, which they perceive to be characteristic of predominately white institutions. In my academic context, when I enter the classroom as a professor of Christian ethics and black church studies, the first thing that many students engage is neither my mind nor my religious matter, but rather the fact that I am a black woman. My very embodiment creates dissonance for many students who (as I’ve been told) immediately ask themselves, “What can a black woman teach me?” (Floyd-Thomas, 2002).

Further, as a black Christian, and a woman, in the academy, I function within a professional realm that is inclined to view my “racialized-engendered religiosity” as a three-fold impediment to my ability to engage fully in the “objective, critical” study of religion. I am either a little too much this or a little too much that; a kind of academic purgatory that serves to exclude me from being considered entirely legitimate. If we apply this to the faculty taxonomy that prevails in most predominately white schools, I would be regarded as too Christian whereas the seminary/divinity schools would likely regard my Christian orientation as too black, and on both fronts too womanish.

Therefore, as a black scholar and black Christian, I function somewhere on the margins of two institutions, each of which exerts pressure on me to compartmentalize my life as a Christian from my life as a scholar. In this view my faith has a connection with suspicion. This is the reality for many of us who identify as racial-ethnic minority scholars who both study and practice our religion or faith. How do we respond and process to being treated as dopplegangers for “real scholars” in the academy and/or as “sell-outs” as people of faith in our religious communities? Such is the conundrum and curse of the tertium quid, described by W.E.B. DuBois (1935) as one straightforwardly foreordained to walk within the Veil. To be sure, behind the thought lugs the afterthought, — some of them with favoring chance might become [human], but in sheer self-defense we dare not let it, and we build about them walls so high and heng between them the light a vel so thick, that they shall not even think of breaking through.

This crisis is the inevitable extension of the relationship between my personal convictions as a black Christian and my voca- tional goals as a scholar-teacher. However, this life is not mine alone, but it is the life of many religious racial-ethnic minoritized (REEM) scholars who are wedded to religious praxis and religious scholarship. It is this determinate, insider outsider exis- tence that enables us to mine the resources and cultivate the wisdom necessary to navigate these two worlds, and even transform them.

Many black scholars enter the ranks of the academy holding fast to the value of reli- gion, along with the promise of education, thinking that the academy presents an ideal and viable context within which to teach religion so as to redeem the legacy of black religion. Disillusionment, howev- er, comes fast and furious in the face of what Bible scholar Fernando Segovia calls the “alien” and “alienating” academic cul- ture of deception that permeates theolog- ical education and religion scholarship. Many REEM scholars who experience the deception and alienation are torn between the hope of their religion and the promise of their education. Some scholars, such as Renita Weems (2005), are very careful and intentional in naming and identifying the hermeneutical dilemma: As a Hebrew Bible scholar and preacher, I reside in two homes — the academy and the church. These two are jealous, demanding lovers that insist upon my undivided attention and unwavering loy- alty. They unremittingly ask, “Which one will you be — a preacher or a scholar?”

This struggle is representative of the dynamic tension between modernism and postmodernism. In modernity there have been two things that have been objectified and in which the modernist tradition has constructed itself: dark peo- ples and religion. This negative objectifi- cation has served as the quintessential “other” against which white Western intel- lectual identity has been constructed. Modernity has been imbued with a Calvinistic orthodoxy that accepts the pre- destination of social stratification that sep- arates a chosen elite from the disenfranchised masses. Conversely, postmodern rhetoric advocates a civic humanism that purports the primacy to their own faith, profess- ing a secular vision of equality for the pre- viously disinterested. Modernist institu- tions have adopted postmodern agendas as their modus operandi, in order to advance into the next millennia (Giddens 1991).

Although couched in postmodern rhetoric, colleges, universities, and even seminaries hold unwaveringly to mod- ernistic objectives, having undergone only a superficial transformation to combat the liberating potential that religion holds for marginalized people. The educational institution as a “learning machine” is the most instrumental means of doing this, in that it is more concerned with optimizing social roles than dealing with human personhood (Foucault 1995). Thus, the self-reflection required for autonomy and agency is prohibited for minoritized groups. Consequently, their professional options are not self-deter- mined, but rather imposed. Simply put, rarely do institutions grant the freedom and autonomy to their one and only pro- fessor of Asian studies, black church stud- ies, Islamic studies, Jewish studies, Latino/a church studies, or Native- American studies to apply her/his exper- tise to design her/his positions or racial- ethnic programs. Therefore, REEM schol- ars find themselves in a double-bind: They are often precluded from offering their expertise toward shaping core courses that have become normative fields within a Eurocentric model while simultaneously their efforts to design programs for which they are the only experts in the institution are stymied, constrained, and resisted by the status quo.

Therefore, REEM scholars have found it necessary to construct a minoritized reli- gious humanity outside the realm of the modern/postmodern categories of race and religion. The goal here is not to erase racial-ethnic or religious identities, but rather to act with the same authority on behalf of our religions and religious com- munities as have white religious scholars such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As REEMs, we should be able to expect to do the same for the broad spectrum of our religious traditions.

Toward this end, What constitutes the faith- ful pursuit of our profession as REEMs? To quote Martin Jaffe, a scholar-practi- tioner of Judaism:

“For religious scholars who are situated socially at the margins of both our faith communities and Eurocentric academies, our vocational task is not merely to reside on the margins and manage our two competing worlds but rather to use the episte- mological insight of being a tertium quid to change those worlds (Freire 1981). This entails undertaking a risky process of maturation and fortitude, a rite of passage marking not only a coming of age within our communities but also a coming to grips with their perceptions — racism, ethniccentrism, misogyny, elitism, and xenophobia. To assist with this arduous labor as a source of grace for the journey, offer the following four womanist tenets as crit- ical insights for REEM scholars:

A) Claim radical subjectivity. REEM scholars must unapologetically claim our insider/outside vantage point, utilizing it as the point from which to teach and speak on behalf of our communities. Our pedagogical imperative is to allow our presence to serve as a reminder of the need for change and growth while simultane- ously facilitating and enabling it.

B) Cultivate traditional communalism. Develop the ability to bridge both the academic and religious community in such a way as to use the practical wisdom of each to evaluate the qualities of the other. Of fundamental impor- tance is to dispel the myths of “colle- giality” and “political correctness,” that are routinely adiposed to main- tain a veneer of civility, but in actuality serve more to undermine the for- mulation of authentic, effective community (Copeland 1999).

C) Practice redemptive self-love. Redemptive self-love is the assertion of our humanity authentically as REEM scholars in contradiction to white solipsism and religious anti- intellectualism. It is the practice of self-care in the midst of excessive scrutiny wherein we may protect ourselves from internalizing images of ourselves that suggest we are inferior, incompetent, heretical, or sacrile- gious.

D) Seek critical engagement. Critical engagement is the unequivocal belief that we are agents of change who play a profound role not only in the liber- ation of our religious communities, but also in the true enlightenment of the academic study of them. A holistic and integrated sensibility can transc- end the imposed system of social stratification by seizing the freedom to be ourselves.

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A SPOTLIGHT ON TEACHING

Therefore, as a black scholar and black Christian, I function somewhere on the margins of two institutions.


Why Mexican-American Religious Studies?

There has been a flurry of scholarship in the field of Mexican-American religions over the past 35 years. Despite this fact, the field has largely been subsumed under the rubric of Latino religion. People of Mexican ancestry have lived in the Southwest for more than 400 years — since 1598. Their history in the American Southwest predates that of the Pilgrims and Puritans in Jamestown in 1608 and Plymouth Rock in 1619. They have a number of rich and unique religious traditions (e.g., New Mexican popular Catholicism, Chávez's critique and faith-based activism had a profound impact. His writings were widely cited and followed in Chicano periodicals such as El Grito del Sol (1968) and by a number of Chicano and Latino scholars and theologians such as Rodolfo Acuña, Octavio I. Romano, Francisco García-Tiempo, Virgilio Elizondo, Juan Hurdado, Antonio Soto, Moisés Sandoval, Anthony M. Steven-Arroyo, and later by Andrés Guerrero and others. Chávez’s efforts, along with that of the African-American, Chicano, American Indian, feminist, and other liberation movements, inspired an emerging generation of Mexican Americans and U.S. Latino scholars to use their scholarship to fight for social, political, and economic justice.

At the same time that Chávez, Tijerina, and others were fighting for social justice in the United States, Catholics and Protestants were engaged in a similar struggle in Latin America. Catholic bishops, priests, and scholars met at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, where they began to articulate a theology of liberation. Liberation theology grabbed the imagination of Mexican-American scholars when the Peruvian priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez asked his colleagues if their theology would “be a theology of development (i.e., capitalism) or a theology of solidarity?” Gutiérrez’s A Theology of Liberation (Spanish, 1971; English, 1973). This question directly affected Mexican-American scholars like Virgilio Elizondo, Yolanda Tarango, Andrés Guerrero, Jeanette Rodríguez, and many others. Gutiérrez argued that the authentic starting point for any Christian theology is commitment to the poor, the “nonperson,” and that conscientization, contextualization, and praxis are the keys to realizing this liberation. He called on scholars and clergy to focus on the importance of economic factors in oppression.

Chicano Catholic Influences

Virgilio Elizondo also played a pivotal role in the birth of Mexican-American theology and religious studies. A native of San Antonio, Elizondo was convinced that Chicano historian Jesús Chavarría was right when he stated, “As long as you do not write your own story and elaborate your own knowledge, you will always be a slave to another’s thoughts.” This was one of the reasons why he co-founded and used the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, to publish such scholarship on Mexican-American and U.S. Latino religions as editor Moises Sandoval’s Frontiers: A History of the Latin American Church in the USA Since 1513 (1983). He went on to write other non-clasist-church books: Christianity and Culture (1975), La Morenita: Evangelizer of the Americas (1980), Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise (1985), and The Future is Mestizo (1988).

Elizondo’s academic writings signal the formal birth of Mexican-American theology and religious studies. He was one of the first persons to argue that Chicano/a scholars should create their own field of study and publish revisionist theology and church history that is academically “objective,” rigorous. His mestizo paradigm contended that Mexican Americans are like Jesus because they are religious outsiders who are rejected by the racial and religious establishments for being from a racially and theologically impure multicultural region of Galilee. For this reason, Elizondo called on all American to be proud of their mixed racial and popular Catholic theological heritage. The work of Elizondo and other U.S. Latinos contributed to what Ana María Díaz-Stevens and Anthony M. Steven-Arroyo called a resurgence in the study of U.S. Latino religions.}

Chicana Feminism, Women, and Religion

Gutiérrez and Elizondo directly influenced (along with other women like Gloria Anzaldúa) to varying degrees the rise of Chicana feminist and later Chicanx feminist theology through the work of Chicana Mari Pilar Aquino, Yolanda Tarango, and Cuban-born Ada María Isasi-Díaz. Díaz and Tarango wrote Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church (1988), one of the first U.S. Latina feminist theologies. They, along with Jeanette Rodríguez, in her book Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment Among Mexican American Women (1994), sought to create a Hispanic cultural, feminist, and liberation theology that captured the sentiments and struggles of women. They saw their work as scholar-activists “militantly” fighting against Anglo-American and Latino multilayered sexism, patriarchy, classism, and economic oppression. Their work was methodologically important because it called for: a) a sharp critique of Latino sexism, classism, colorism, and patriarchy; b) Latino men to share leadership and the theological enterprise with women; c) more inclusive theologies; and d) Latina agency and a sharp critique of “orthodoxy” (right belief) to “orthopraxis” (right practice).

David Carrasco and the Decentering of Mexican-American Religious Studies

The intellectual and methodological development of the emerging field of Mexican-American religious studies comes to its maturity in the work of David Carrasco. His work marks the methodological crystallization of a Mexican-American religious studies paradigm that expanded the theoretical boundaries of the field. His scholarship shifted the focus away from the orbit of liberation theology and institutional church histories to the theoretical pluralistic framework of religious studies. He analyzed Mesoamerican and Mexican American/Chicano religions in light of transcultural categories that included: sanctuaries, sacred spaces, world-making, world-centering, world-newing, and what

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IN THIS ESSAY, I make a case for the inclusion of Mexican-American religions in the religious studies curriculum, as the Other Within that has for too long been at the margins of the academy. I propose that an ethno-phenomenological method and approach is one of many possible alternatives to interpreting Mexican-American religions at secular colleges and universities where they are required by the state and/or college mission statement to promote or endorse a theological or religious worldview.

The Latino community in the United States has doubled from 22.4 million in 1990 to 44.3 million in 2006, making it the nation’s largest minority group. The dramatic upsurge in the population and in scholarship on religion has created a need for new courses that take into account the changing demographics of American society. Despite these demographic shifts, little has been published on the history and theory of Mexican-American religions and even less on how to approach and discuss the subject at state and public universities that serve the U.S. Latino population, where restrictions on the separation of church and state are in full force.

This essay offers one approach to Mexican-American religions by examining the rationale for the field based upon the demographic and religious profile of the community, a working definition of Mexican-American religions, and an ethno-phenomenological theoretical approach to interpreting Mexican-American religions that may help bridge the growing chasm between religious and theological studies. This essay is an outgrowth of my larger study on “History and Theory in the Study of Mexican American Religions,” in editors Miguel La Torre and Gabriela Monroy’s Rethinking Latino Religions and Identity (2006).

Chicano Catholic Influences

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One of the outside institutions with which immigrant religious communities have to deal is the law of the host country, and in the context of this essay, the U.S. law. Although every individual immigrant to the United States, especially a legal immigrant, must deal with this institution, the religious communities face a special challenge because of certain religion-related provisions in U.S. immigration law. An examination of these provisions and how the relevant organs of the state interpret and apply them provides us with an interesting picture of a dynamic interaction between two cultural complexes: the religious “other” (the immigrant) and its construction by an institution other than religion. The secular state, through the avenues of law and other administration agencies, joins religion scholars in the wider debate about how to understand religious organizations and the privileges that should accrue to those organizations as its guardians.

In this essay, I will discuss the provisions on religious workers in U.S. immigration law to illustrate the relationship and tension between these alternative structures of meaning and cultural systems. The tension exists not only between the state and religious communities, but also among state institutions themselves, particularly between traditional curators of law (the courts) and the administrative agencies in charge of immigration matters, whose decisions determining the status of aliens are not judicial review is warranted. I argue that the rule of deference that the courts have articulated when adjudicating on religious visa applications has important implications for scholarly debate about the nature and public understanding of religion. When Congress enacted the religious worker visa program in 1990, the intent was to allow U.S. religious denominations to fill positions with qualified religious workers from abroad. Historically, however, the practice of hiring foreign ministers to staff U.S. religious congregations is as old as the country (Hoge and Okure 2006). But until the 1990 legislation, religious organizations had limited success in hiring nonministers to staff religious communities abroad because of their inability to meet the stringent visa requirements imposed by law. The Immigration Act of 1990 simultaneously relaxed the requirements and expanded the definition of religious workers, encompassing clergy and lay religious workers, with eligibility for visa on either a temporary or permanent basis (Aleinkoff et al. 2004, 26, 30). The new law was thus a welcome relief for many religious denominations, including the Catholic Church, Protestant churches, as well as Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and other communities that rely heavily on the religious worker visa program to maintain and serve their communities.

The eligibility hurdles faced by petitioners for religious workers revolve around broad inquiries that USCIS officials are required to make. The first is whether the petitioner employer is religiously qualified; that is, whether the place where they are to be filled is a religious vocation or occupation; and the third; evaluates the religious qualifications of the visa beneficiary (Aleinkoff 2004, 26, 30). Because Congress did not provide the criteria by which religious may be qualitatively appraised in these religious respects, many applications have been denied on the ground that they do not meet the test. On the religious character of the employer, for example, USCIS sometime may have rules that petitioners must show that they have been classified as a “church” or are a subsidiary of an organization so classified. Specific elements in the definition of some form of ecclesiastical government, a recognized creed and form of worship, religious services and ceremonies, etc. An important question is whether the decision of USCIS officials to turn down determinations regarding the character and qualifications of religious employers and workers hired for religious jobs is absolute. The position of the courts is that the authority to make these determinations must be exercised within the constraints of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which limits governmental authority over religious institutions and religious exercise. In 1871 in the case of Watson v. Jones, the U.S. Supreme Court argued that the deference rule is required by the Constitution of the United States to determine their own religious identity: “The law knows no heresy, and is committed to the support of no dogma, the establishment of no sect. The right to organize voluntary religious associations to assist in expression and dissemination of any religious doctrine... is unquestioned.”

Applying this rule to religious workers’ visa appeals, the courts’ reasoning should be motivated by the suspicion that government officials may sometimes intrude too far into the religious doctrine, governance, or qualifications of petitioners and applicants. This may particularly occur in situations involving minority religions or religious occupations unfamiliar to the adjudicating officers. Immigrant religious communities, as well as mainstream religious denominations, are all benefiting from this hospitable judicial outlook.

A representative example is Jin Soo Lee v. Immigration and Naturalization Service, a case involving the criterion of religious organizations to select their leaders, and the training required of leaders within a religious organization. The court reversed an INS decision that a beneficiary was not a bona fide “religious worker” under the applicable regulations. Acknowledging elsewhere that “The task of distinguishing a religion from something else (e.g., a delusion, a personal credo, or a fraud) is a recurring and perplexing problem, and the outer limits of what is ‘religious’ may be ultimately unascertainable,” the court observed that “INS officials, no more than judges, are equipped to be oracle of theological verity, and it is unlikely that either Congress or the Founders ever intended for them to be deans of religious orthodoxy even for aliens.” In short, INS must accept the good-faith explanations of applicants for religious jobs as to whether they qualify function within a religious occupation of that order.”

The judicial rule of deference is instructive for how the study of religion is conducted, especially the effort to understand and ‘re-present’ the religion of the ‘other’ in the context of our teaching. The rule vests the right of representation in the religious practitioner and grounds this right not only in the practitioner’s subjectivity, but also in the prescribed autonomy and self-consciousness of the religious sphere which requires a distinct logic of understanding. The instrumental significance of representational right lies in its being a preconceived and inherent interest and promise of mediation of social goods, such as being approved for an immigrant religious visa. For, when the right is vested in an agent other than the beneficiary, it is difficult to stake, the court fears misrepresentation and arbitrary adjudication as the likely outcomes. The deference rule thus preempts the temptation to impose exogenous constructions of reality upon the subject of inquiry and legitimizes the subject’s prerogative to draw the boundary within which matters germane to the subject’s identity and interests are articulated and settled.

The rule of deference privilege experience in explaining the contours of religious worldview and validates this experience in determining how religious considerations should bear upon public policy. Hence, it thrives itself into the perennial debate about methodology and interpretation in the academic study of religion. By conceding that scholars are entitled to draw the outer limits of religious nomenclature, whose claim to methodological fame is anchored in its twin tenets of emic and etic vision that enjoin scholars to suspend their own assumptions of empathy and openness to experiential immersion (van Leeuw 1938, 1968). In effect, the rule relies on an understanding of religion as sui generis and restricts the qualifications to spiritual guides to either devotees or scholars with an appreciative view of its intrinsic value, although it is silent on the issue of which dimensions of religious practice (ritual) — should receive scholarly and interpretative attention (Godlove 2002). It is therefore not surprising that some scholars have challenged the logic of this approach to the study of religion. Not only is the insider-outsider dichotomy considered simplistic (Westerlund 1991) in that it overlooks the importance of the relationship of the practitioner’s subjectivity, but also in the practical conditions and functions. Certainly, there are scholars who see the issue of representational right as a way of reducing the normative reflections of historical and contextual conditions and functions. Therefore, there are scholars who see the issue as an issue of the right of religious practitioners to ‘represent themselves credibly before the adjudicating officers. Scholars of religion are possibly unique among intellectuals in being among the few who seek to

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Whose Religion? Immigrants and the First Amendment

Simeon O. Ilesanmi, Wake Forest University
Racialized Enemy as Antichrist

Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden have of course been designated as possible candidates for antichrist by conservative Christians like Jerry Falwell (2001) and Hal Lindsey (Kinsella 2005). But since these figures are no longer visible or viable candidates, both the Jewish and Christian milieux cannot have taken their place. Armageddon! Books sports over a dozen titles produced since 2001 that situate Muslim terrorism within the timeline of biblical prophecy. These include: Christianity and Islam: The Final Clash (Robert Livingston, 2004); Muhammad’s Monsters: A Comprehensive Guide to Radical Islam for Western Audiences (David Bukay, editor, 2004); War on Terror: Unfolding Biblical Prophecy (Grant R. Jeffrey, 2002); and The False Prophet (Ellis H. Skolfield, 2001). In this discourse, the racialization is not precise, but Islam does seem to stand in for brown.

In the naming of the Muslim terrorist as antichrist also operates in coded fashion in Bush’s speeches. For instance, in a speech on the war on terror (October 6, 2005), without ever mentioning the antichrist, Bush painted an apocalyptic and antichristic picture of “the enemy.” The speech began with an apocalyptically drawn recollection of 9/11. Within this frame, the enemy was described as “Evil men, obsessed with ambition and unburdened by conscience,” who in “their cold-blooded contempt for human life” are “the enemies of humanity.” The description of these men as “part of global, borderless terrorist organization” taps into the fear in apocalyptic thought that the antichrist will establish a one-world order (see, for instance, Kjøs). Gay Antichrist

Another strand of apocalyptic biblical interpretation has recently informed Christian thought that the antichrist will be gay (hence a threat to the family). The antichrist’s probable sexual orientation is derived from a particular way of translating one verse in the book of Daniel — whose metaphorical depictions of Antiochus Epiphanes IV as a boastful, apostate ruler have been interpreted in apocalyptic Christianity to be describing the antichrist. One such text, Daniel 11:37, has been translated as follows: “He [the proud ruler] will show no regard for the gods of his fathers or for the desire of women” (NASB). With this translation in hand, TV and Internet evangelist David Reagan (one among many) interprets this verse saying, “Daniel indicates that [the antichrist] will be a sexual pervert, most likely a homosexual. As Daniel puts it, the Antichrist will show no regard for the desire of women” (Daniel 11:37). Indeed, some commentators blame the antichrist’s sexual orientation for the problems facing marriage today. So for instance, Joseph Chambers of Paw Creek Mission (North Carolina) protests that marriage is under threat from the antichrist and his “sodomite” followers:

In what follows, I would like briefly to look at some appearances of the racialized homosexualized antichrist, then to problematize the exclusion of this figure by showing the family resemblance to Christ, and finally to indicate how I approach this material in the classroom.

Satans is on a rampage to defile the family of God and the future order of the redeemed. . . . I do not believe that there is any question but that the Antichrist will be homosexual. The Word of God is clear about this. His male homosexual nature is so obvious that Solomon says, “he is anything but demonic.”

So racialized and homosexualized antichrists act as a threat to the nation, to the family, and to Christians’ final future.

Filitations

One is tempted to ask if the antichrist’s lack of regard for the desire of women proves that he will be gay, what does that prove about a person? In the Christian myth, the lack of regard for women (as, for instance, manifest in much commentary on The Da Vinci Code) What difference is there really between the sexuality of Christ and the antichrist?

More substantively though, the figure of the antichrist represents strands of Antichrist. In what follows, I would like briefly to look at another place in Daniel (7:1–14), which is elaborated in the apocalyptic interpretation of Daniel in the Christian Testament, and subsequent uses of Daniel in defining the antichrist. Along the way, I ask students to think about the relations between the various figures, in the hopes that they will see the connections between Christian figures and Antichrist. In the text, the antichrist is not a figure of European origin, but rather one that is an ethno-imagery. For instance, the antichrist is characterized as a “man who comes upon the clouds, in victory over the arrogant and deceitful little horn. It is possible, as John J. Collins argues (1997), that in Daniel, the Antichrist is renamed and symbolized as the Son of Man. Of course, in the Christian tradition, Daniel’s Son of Man becomes Christ. Not to put too fine a point on it, Baal becomes Christ. Yet Baal is also a chief rival to Yahweh for highest rank in the Canaanite pantheon. Baal is the god of iconolatry (see 1 Kgs. 18:25–26). As such, he becomes associated in another way, in contemporary and apocalyptic interpretations, with the antichrist. The Canaanite Baal, then, gives rise both to the antichrist beast and to the victorious Son of Man figure, who becomes the divine-human son of God.

The antichrist shares a cultural history with the Christ. The recognition of cultural difference in the Christ must at the very least be understood as the shadow of the threat of the other. If, in some virulent, xenophobic, anti-Islam sites, Baal has been associated with Allah and with the antichrist, what happens to this insult if Baal is another form of Christ?

In the Classroom

Because students are defensive about the Bible, I find it best in my “Biblical Heritage” course to let them make the connections themselves, for the most part. Thus, I reverse the order presented here to begin with the Ancient Near Eastern precursors to apocalyptic, moving to apocalyptic texts more broadly, then to Daniel, the interpretations of Daniel in the Christian Testament, and subsequent uses of Daniel in defining the antichrist. Along the way, I ask students to think about the relations between the various figures, in the hopes that they will see the connections between Christian figures and Antichrist. In the text, the antichrist is not a figure of European origin, but rather one that is an ethno-imagery. For instance, the antichrist is characterized as a “man who comes upon the clouds, in victory over the arrogant and deceitful little horn. It is possible, as John J. Collins argues (1997), that in Daniel, the Antichrist is renamed and symbolized as the Son of Man. Of course, in the Christian tradition, Daniel’s Son of Man becomes Christ. Not to put too fine a point on it, Baal becomes Christ. Yet Baal is also a chief rival to Yahweh for highest rank in the Canaanite pantheon. Baal is the god of iconolatry (see 1 Kgs. 18:25–26). As such, he becomes associated in another way, in contemporary and apocalyptic interpretations, with the antichrist. The Canaanite Baal, then, gives rise both to the antichrist beast and to the victorious Son of Man figure, who becomes the divine-human son of God.

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Bibliography


Dialectic Emptying: Self and the Other Within

Andrew Sung Park, United Theological Seminary

The Method of Dialectic Emptying

A dialectic emptying is to locate a true soliarity between I and the Other. It is dialectical fertility between I and the Other, which is dynamically and dialogically interactive through emptying. To transform our power-worship world, we need to empty our self and our images of the Other. This dialectic emptying involves three movements.

First, “I” cannot be the source of truth, but I can empty myself to host truth. “I” cannot grasp truth in solidarity with the Other alone. Before solidarity, emptiness creates room for truth coming in and filling in the relationship between I and the Other. The Other within also finds room in I only in the act of emptiness. The dialectic emptying is not only to pour out the agenda of “I,” but also to understand the agendas of the Other. The emptying self is different from I. This emptying self is not a substantial being, but a relational entity interacting with the divine Spirit. It is coming from “beyond,” not self-producing or self-creating. The emptying self pours “I” off daily and relieves itself by receiving the divine Spirit. By opening the self to the Spirit, the emptying self emerges to empty “I.” Thus, emptying oneself is opening oneself. By opening myself to the Spirit, “I” open room for the Other. By relating to the Spirit, “I” begin to understand the Other. Understanding the Other does not aim at grasping the Other as an object and constructing one’s own knowledge.

Dialectic emptying also finds my true self in me. By removing all the internalized and projected images of myself, I can see who I am (existence) and who I ought to be (essence). For Kwok Pui Lan, “The diasporic imagination recognizes the diverse experiences of Chinese in the world. Although there is no permanent essential self set before me, I strive to find my true emerging self through emptying myself in interaction with the Other.”

Second, dialectical emptying means to negate the distorted image of the Other including God. We need to deconstruct the popular image of the Other as either superior or inferior to us. We measure up others into hierarchical categories as we meet them. In the popular mind, arising from a mindset of conquest, there is a hierarchical cosmic totem pole. Generally speaking, from its top are God, angels, white males, white females, white children, ethnic males, ethnic females, ethnic children, animal, plant, and soil. This mindset of hierarchical order discriminates against the weaker, as seen in the natural moral order of the right-wing worldview. Dialectic emptying means to negate the hierarchical rank of such a “natural” order.

Dialectic emptying also tears up the image of God as the Almighty Strict Father and through idol of the Strict Father God and through building up the communities of openness, fairness, care, trust, freedom, and peace.

Bibliography


I mindyou, I was invited to fill the slot of New York, to play only “Chinese” music. “Asian Christianity” in this speak or write only from the perspective of funny that, for a long time, behind the mask can be considered academic and “objective.” It is religious studies that should be accompanied by Persian bamboo flute and other musical instruments along the Silk Road, but is this possible these days?

“The problem is that we are not making music you might say. And this is precisely the problem in our field of religion. Our thinking and our identity politics have boxed us in. It is time to give our selves a break!”

No wonder one of the leading intellectuals of our time, the late Edward W. Said, was an avid music lover. Think about con- trapuntal music, which has two or more independent but related melodic parts sounding simultaneously. If we can cultivate this capacity to hear more than one sound in a single time frame, we will learn to interpret history differently.

Toni Morrison, too, loves music, and she likes jazz. The study and writing of religion should be lively because that is the aspect of culture which makes people “sing.” Yet, we have created boxes, paradigms, and subdisciplines to make sure that our work is boring enough to be considered academic and “objective.” It is funny that, for a long time, behind the mask of objectivity stood a white man sticking his nose into other people’s religion and fitting things into his scheme.

It is equally hilarious to think that we can speak or write only from the perspective of our race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other finer details within our ensemble of identities. It would be absurd to restrict Yo-Yo Ma, who was born in Paris and grew up in New York, to playing only “Chinese” music. Mind you, I was invited to fill the slot of “Asian Christianity” in this Spotlight issue. Fortunately the invitation also says “or as she sees fit,” which prompted me to write about the Trans. . . I do need to tell the readers that one of the most aggravating conversations I have had in recent years was talking about Scholtz-macher’s Aftekt Theology with Tshidzini.

I first attended the AAR Annual Meeting as a graduate student in 1985. All the new things that my women colleagues were doing fascinated me. The womanist group was forming. Carol P. Christ was talking about her initiation into the Goddess. The Asian and Asian-American feminist doctoral students were finding each other. The sense of exploration and excitement was palpable in the air. What was charming that we were not afraid to take risks and make mistakes, because we knew that we were probably saying something that had not been said before.

Now I must say that the annual meetings and the production of knowledge in the field of feminist and womanist studies in religion are less enticing. Often they are too predictable or repetitive. Someone this predictability has to do with the fact that the works of a selected few pioneers have been “canonized” or “codified” to the extent that new scholars must begin with culture or go through them — either expanding or critiquing their ideas. How many times do we need to read about Alice Walker’s four-part collection of “Womanist” ghetto—bed—food—band? How tedious to read repeatedly that white women have universalized their experience when doing theology? It would save a lot of ink if they simply call their theology white woman’s theology, to avoid false advertising.

There is also the persistent inertia in religious studies that results in a time lag between theories produced in other fields and their applications in our field. Poststructuralist theory had lost its critical edge and was on the wane when religious scholars began to catch on. A quarter of a century lapsed between the publication of Orientalism and the first books on post-colonial theology. No wonder our collegues in the university would think that we are the curators of the Buddha, or Jesus, or Mohammad, or whatever — most useful for the occasional exhibit such as the box with the inscription of James, brownstone. But for almost two centuries, our quaint wares can be best left where they are — in museum display boxes.

Religion, derived from religio, means to bind together. And in our world of frag- mentation, strife, and a widespread sense of homelessness, the study of something that binds or is loosening its binds should be very appealing. Religion has direct bearings on war, violence, immigration, civil society, transculturalism, support, flexible citizenship, and even clean water for all. We should be fascinated by how religion is being reconfigured, reimagined, and lived out when peoples and cultures collide, coexist, and commingle. Yet when bright young students want to do such kind of research work, they bump against a very rigid, departmental discipline and disciplinary structure in our graduate pro- grams. Or they are simply told not to be too daring if they want to get a job.

Can our religion departments or divinity schools serve the needs of the twenty-first century? I often wonder. Recently I was asked to speak to the Asian students’ society of a divinity school on the East Coast and I asked them if their courses or curriculum pay any attention to the issues in Asia-Pacific. I am befuddled that this geopolitical area featured so prominently in the discourses on “the Pacific century,” “the clash of civilizations,” “the world is flat,” and even “the axis of evil,” receives so little attention in our divinity schools.

In the weekend section of Financial Times last April was a feature article on “A Tale of Two Cities” — and it was about Hong Kong and Shanghai. Has anybody found the “fast forward” button yet for revamping our curriculum?

We would hope that new things will emerge because of sheer luck. Pasteur’s assistant went on holiday, and the culture was spoiled and did not kill the chickens. A light bulb blinked in Pasteur’s mind, and he discovered immunization. In the field of humanities, creativity is a much slower process and is often the result of cross-fertilization of ideas and the meeting of unlike minds. We will need to cultivate a reading habit outside our field to catch up with the world, since study of religion is so backward looking. I would not have written this piece if I had not accidentally picked up Telling True Stories on Narrative Journalism at the Harvard Coop. If our scholarship is to have some intellec- tual appeal, broadening our scope and updating our subject matter is crucial. The articulation and the embodying of the new must also be refreshing. Here I want to say something about the writing of new knowledge. In her recent book, Emilie Townes is not satisfied with the objective description of evil in society, and turns to narratives, especially those written by African-American writers, to probe “the deep interior material life of evil and its manifestations” (2006, 5). Townes has been experimenting with writing disjointed lines that suggest poetry, and she includes this genre in her book. She uses this device when she asks us to imagine what happens when Topsy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin speaks. Her poetic words become subjective and intimate, opening a win- dow to the interior life she is trying to convey in the book.

Catherine Keller writes about postepistemes. Her work Face of the Deep exemplifies a new genre, which may be called postmodern postepistemes. She selects a great idea, chaos, and runs with it, sprawling the Bible, theology, literature, science, and spirituality along the way. This is not a tourist guidebook with maps and easy markers to help you find your way: If you have not been joined by the work or if you could summarize it in five or four axioms, the work would have completely defeated its purpose. The book’s theopoetical form embodies the ideas of chaos and creatio ex profundis. When God Is a Rich White Woman Who Does Not Walk or “Gustavo Gutiérrez Goes to Disneyland” and get away with it (2004)? Ever since she put “Indecent Theology” on the map, those of us doing vanilla or decent theology are so frightened to have our theological skirts lifted. And we seem to think that one can’t wait to see what she will do next in poking fun at our theological voyeurism. Similar to Gayatri Spivak, she can write Derrida, Marxism, and feminism within one sentence. But thank God (literally), she is so queer.

These days I appreciate more and more what Barbara Christian has said that theo- ry by people of color is “in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (1990, 38).

But I am also drawn to the silences or what has been said. In 1988, when Frederick Douglass quoted “the surface of the book like ancient stones overwhelmed a world of words” (1988, xvi), it’s only when I had a chance to learn about “articulate silence” in Asian-American literature (Cheung 1993) that I began to hear the sound coming between the ancient stones and the new grass. What is not fully said allows readers to imagine words of their own. The Los Angeles Times reports, “With Ma, the cello found its access in an active, a world posses- sing tremendous technical brilliance and musicality.” If we are not satisfied to be tech- nicians of the sacred, we had better make sure that our works “sing,” too. Think outside the box, color outside the lines, and say it well, with gusto!

Bibliography
When I told a friend of mine about this writing assignment, she said, “The ‘other’ within Christianity? Do you mean ‘God’? Gibb and provocative at once, her question sparked a longer reflection on the status of the assignment itself: who, indeed, is the ‘other’ within Christianity? The question is a perilous one, of course, since it threatens to reinscribe precisely the terms it seeks to disrupt — otherness itself, the term always constituted in relationship to that which is not other: selfhood, sameness, identity. Approached in this way, who is the other within Christianity? The heretic? Woman? The postcolony? Who is the other within Christianity? The ‘other’ within Christianity? The question is a perilous one, of course, since it threatens to reinscribe precisely the terms it seeks to disrupt — otherness itself, the term always constituted in relationship to that which is not other: selfhood, sameness, identity. Approached in this way, who is the other within Christianity? The heretic? Woman? The postcolony? Who is the other within Christianity? The ‘other’ within Christianity? The question is a perilous one, of course, since it threatens to reinscribe precisely the terms it seeks to disrupt — otherness itself, the term always constituted in relationship to that which is not other: selfhood, sameness, identity. Approached in this way, who is the other within Christianity? The heretic? Woman? The postcolony? Who is the other within Christianity? The ‘other’ within Christianity? The question is a perilous one, of course, since it threatens to reinscribe precisely the terms it seeks to disrupt — otherness itself, the term always constituted in relationship to that which is not other: selfhood, sameness, identity. Approached in this way, who is the other within Christianity? The heretic? Woman? The postcolony?

The Friary apostolics construct their Christian identity by means of a signifying practice that claims to be unmediated/immediate. At the same time, they have generated an indigenous theoretical idiom that critiques the domination of European missionaries and colonialism and rejects what they see clearly to be the quintessential material artifact of that domination: the Bible. They do so by rejecting the idea that the Bible is a material object, a thing that becomes “stale” and “falls apart,” a document transmitting the propaganda of Europeans, a dangerous artifact. As Engelke analyzes it, the Friary apostolics’ elevation of immateriality is no simple asceticism: “To say that the apostolics want a faith in which things do not matter is not to say that they are renouncing the world. It is, rather, to suggest that they are making specific claims about how God becomes present through words, objects, and actions that exist with in a hierarchy of significative and expressive forms. The semiotics of live and direct faith hinge on the assertion of immateriality.”

The Friary apostolics’ example invites us to collapse biblicism with the lived experience of Christianity, the legacy of Christian practices of biblical reading — to open one’s own theoretical assumptions to critique and revision.

Still, the Friary apostolics occupy an extreme end of the continuum along which the exploration of biblical afterlives might be mapped. For if the Friary apostolics position themselves and their religious practice as unmediated, others embrace rather different strategies of theorization and mediation (and remediation) in their enactments of biblical afterlives.

Take, for example, Marie José de Abreu’s recent work on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement in Brazil (2005), focusing on the media-savvy effort of Padre Marcelo Rossi, former layman and physical education teacher turned priest, to reorganize for his followers their notions of the universe and their own subjectivities, using scripture as the template. For scripture to be the template for such a project is far from unusual; but Padre Marcelo’s techniques for achieving this are profoundly performative and embodied — a practice that is profoundly performative and embodied — come a radius of religious practices. Padre Marcelo establishes a complex connection between technology and scripture, body performance and inspiration, and his own star power and the remaking of subjectivities among his large numbers of followers. (The uneasy relationship between Padre Marcelo’s celebrity status in Brazil and traditional church authority was recently displayed when the Pope visited Brazil in May of this year; see Rohrer and Fisher.)

Padre Marcelo’s pneumatic techniques and his ease with the practices of media emerged, as de Abreu explains, in a context of syncretic blend of Christianity and contemporary cultural changes.

Patel also shows how the missionaries’ technical bricolage is matched by their willingness to exploit the psychic, social, and economic tools that lie at their disposal: taking advantage of the homesickness of migrant workers in Mexico by offering gospel stories in their mother tongues, using the “five steps of selling” as a marketing model for missionary work, allowing interviewees encountered in Indian shanties to believe (mistakenly) that the evangelistic interviewers have come from the government to help them.

“The Tailenders” — those communities who are the last to be touched by global efforts at evangelization by Christian missionaries, who sweep up the remains of multiple global flows: globalization, evangelization, and mediaization. How they theorize the experience of the disembodied voices speaking in an uncanny, unrecognizable idiom but translating the selected contents of a book inscribed in a temporally and geographically distant place remains the unknowable part of this story. Perhaps this unknowable quality is also a suitable place to suspend this discussion, with the recognition of our own lack of mastering the theories of others.

Bibliography


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Dismissed by some other Zimbabwes Christians as “primitive” and “mad,” the Friary apostolics nevertheless take their rightful place in a long historical lineage of Christians who have struggled over the meaning of the Bible as a written and mediat ed revelation. And whereas students of Christianity might be tempted initially to dismiss the Friary apostolics as a heterodox aberration in the ethnographic exception, Engelke challenges such facile responses by elegantly showing how this community articulates, embodies, and inhabits a complex posseccional theological stance, what Engelke calls “the semiotics of immateriality.”

Along with this mode of signifying practice — a practice that is profoundly performative and embodied — comes a radius of religious practices. Padre Marcelo establishes a complex connection between technology and scripture, body performance and inspiration, and his own star power and the remaking of subjectivities among his large numbers of followers. (The uneasy relationship between Padre Marcelo’s celebrity status in Brazil and traditional church authority was recently displayed when the Pope visited Brazil in May of this year; see Rohrer and Fisher.)

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I teach a broad range of classes at the University of Michigan, including "Introduction to Native American Studies," "Native American Religious Traditions," "Advanced Topics in Native Religious Traditions," and "Gender/Race and the Christian Right." In teaching religious studies classes that also focus on the dynamics of race and gender, I have come across a number of challenges. These challenges are compounded by how I am also gendered and racialized in the classroom. The nature of these challenges was exemplified in my first experience teaching a lecture class, "Introduction to Native American Studies," at UC–Davis. I thought that I explained the subject matter in a very balanced fashion. However, I soon received a flood of hate mail from my students (one went so far as to send me a computer virus) complaining about the political indoctrination of the class. I became very discouraged, and blamed the inchoate racism of the students for this experience. After reflecting on the pedagogical strategies that I had learned in my masters program, as well as through my experiences teaching popular education as a grassroots organizer, however, I decided to employ alternative approaches when teaching my next classes at UC–Santa Cruz. These students responded positively, and I received some of the highest course evaluations for those semesters.

The overall question that helps me guide my pedagogy is not what material do I want to teach to students, but what would enable students to learn and engage the material? The students I teach are quite diverse. In one class, the majority of my students were in engineering; in another class, the students were self-described evangelical Republicans; in another class, I had a sizeable number of students training to be dental hygienists; in another class, I had all women of color. To do student-centered teaching, I am thus forced to engage in a considerable amount of experimentation because pedagogical approaches that work with one group of students will not work with another group. My commitment to experimentation means that some experiments work better than others, while some fail miserably. Ultimately, I am always open to trying new approaches, even radically changing my teaching direction during the course of a semester if my approach does not seem to be effective. Learning from my teaching mistakes enables me to teach more effectively in the future. Every class poses new challenges for me, but I will describe just a few of them, along with the strategies I have employed to address them.

**Student Performance Anxiety**

My teaching goal is to incultate into students a passion for learning. I feel that if they develop this passion, then they are more likely to have academic success throughout their career. However, I began to see that my process of grading students was actually interfering with their learning process. That is, students were starting to focus more on what they thought they needed to do to receive an "A" rather than on really learning and engaging the material in my classes. So I decided to take the risk of experimenting with my grading strategies. I now see grading not as a strategy to monitor what students have learned, but as a strategy to encourage them to learn. In some classes, where the work is organized around group projects, I have relied on student peer grading. In other classes, I have graded their work on effort and improvement. In other classes, I have relied on student grading contracts whereby the students contract to do a certain level of work for a certain grade. I have noticed that very few academics, including those who see themselves as having radical politics, question the traditional system of grading. It is important, it is frequently argued, to grade strictly in order to ensure that students work hard. However, curved grading systems are structured such that, even if every student works hard, many will have to fail because not everyone can receive an A. In this respect, the grading system mirrors the system of capitalism. Everyone can get ahead if we just work hard enough. But in reality, a capitalist system requires that only a few people can become truly wealthy. Because of the fiction of meritocracy that structures both systems, those who do not become wealthy in the capitalist system are deemed the undeserving poor, just as those who do not reach the top of the curve, no matter how hard they work, are deemed academic failures. Those who do not succeed become disqualified as subjects who can speak about its capitalist logics. The poor are complaining simply because they are "lazy" and want a "free ride." Those who do not receive an "A" are complaining because they are bad students.

In the end, however, it is not clear to me that grading promotes learning. I found that students actually worked much harder under nonpunitive evaluative structures than when they performed for a grade. I set up individual meetings with all my students to ascertain their learning development. About 80 percent of my students in these meetings tell me that the real challenge they face in my class is that this is the first class in which they were required to think! (And these students are often graduating seniors!). They inform me that even in humanities classes, they feel that they are not encouraged to develop their own analysis but merely to recite the instructor's analysis. I have always been able to get bad grades often inhibits students from exploring new ideas and analysis. I find students learn more when I emphasize process over product.

### The Fear of Political Indoctrination

I often hear students complain that gender and ethnic studies classes are sites for political indoctrination. This complaint is particularly acute in classes that fulfill distribution requirements. When students fear indoctrination, they can become unwilling to entertain ideas and analysis that differ sharply from their own. My challenge then is to promote a learning experience where students become open to engaging with diverse intellectual and political viewpoints.

The first strategy I employ is to rely less on lecture-style teaching approaches and more on interactive strategies. I have frequently noticed that there is nothing more frustrating for students than to have to listen to political opinions with which they disagree for an extended period of time with no opportunity to speak their own minds. Students invariably wait until such a time when they have the opportunity to complain to administrators or write scathing evaluations. Thus, even in large lectures, I find it necessary to devote a significant portion of lecture time to student discussion. Using a variety of strategies, such as organizing debates, using small group discussion, in-class reflection papers, and so on, I try to create a space for students to express their views, particularly dissenting views, so as to minimize student frustration. In doing so, students become more engaged with the material even if they disagree with it. In fact in one lecture class, I brought in a friend as a plant to start a disagreement with me. When students saw that it was okay to disagree with me, they started participating much more freely and complained much less about political "bias" in the lectures.

My second strategy that addresses this project is my previously described approach to grading. I have noticed that students will not freely express their opinions if they feel their potentially dissenting viewpoints might negatively impact their grade. When students are under a grading system where they can feel secure in voicing opinions that may be very different from my own, they feel freer to share what they really think. When they can make their own meaning, it is possible for me and other students to...
DE LA TORRE, from p. ii

To give expression to these four womanist principles, one will have to embody what social critic bell hooks (1994) describes as engaged pedagogy. She claims:

That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred, who believe that there is an aspect of our work that is that not merely to share information but to share the intellectual and spiritual growth of our [communities]. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our [communities] is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.

We are called, therefore, to knowledge production that does not detract from our religious heritage, racial-ethnic identity, or academic training, but to lend the expertise of each to infuse the other so as to make these worlds livable and legible again. The RRIM scholar’s demonstration of merging previously antagonistic realms actually offers a demonstration of a more inclusive, imaginative, and intimate production of knowledge about the sacred.

Bibliography


FLOYD-THOMAS, from p. iii


ESPINOSA, from p. iv

Carrasco calls “center/periphery dynam- ics.” Unlike early cultural anthropologist Manuel Gamio’s negative view of Mexican Indian influences on Catholicism, Carrasco celebrated the cultural and religious hybridity of the Mexican-American religious experience.

Toward a Working Definition of Chicano Religions

At the 1996 New Directions in Chicano Religious Conference, Charles Long challenged the participants to define what they meant by Mexican-American/Chicano religions and to then explain how it differed from any other religious phenomena. I argue that the Mexican-American cultural blending, religious practices, and aesthetic variations in the United States gives them a Mexican-American or "Chicano" identity in their very real and imaginary universes. Perhaps by so doing, we can transform the Mexican-American religious experience as the Other Within into a robust and rigorous academic field of mainstream scholarly inquiry.

Ethno-Phenomenological Approach to Religion

One approach to interpreting Mexican-American religions is an ethno-phenomenological methodology that seeks to bridge the open hostility between religious studies and theology. Such a method listens to and draws upon the important discoveries and insights from religious studies, theological studies, and the above-noted disciplines and influences. Scholars using this approach seek to analyze the world of their subjects on their own plane of reference through a methodology that respects the balance between the subjective perspectives of the skepti- cal, religious, and noncommitted secular outsider and the devout and committed religious insider. An ethno-phenomeno- logical approach offers a scholarly framework that engages in what Ninian Smart has called "bracketed realism," whereby the scholar’s religious beliefs are neither required nor ideological political positions are bracketed or suspended and not superimposed or projected on to their subjects. While personal subjectivities and values are unavoidable, a scholar should nonetheless try to describe and analyze the religious phenomena in such a way that is not only critical but also recogniz- able to the practitioner. The ethno-phenome- nological approach desires to gener- ate new scholarship that examines the way ordinary people find hope and interpret their very real and imaginary universes. Perhaps by so doing, we can transform the Mexican-American religious experience as the Other Within into a robust and rigorous academic field of main- stream scholarly inquiry.

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delegitimize the very object of their intellectual investment in the name of methodological sophistication and theoretical elegance. That religion can cloak nonreligious interests is not in dispute, but to assert that religion is nothing more than this seems exaggerated. As Wayne Proudfoot has argued, while scholars of religion may explain religious experience “in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his approval” (1985, 197), he warns that the subject’s experience “must be identified under a description that can plausibly be attributed to him” (194–195). As such, “to describe an experience in nonreligious terms in which the subject himself describes it as religious terms is to misunderstand the experience, or to attend to another experience altogether” (196). Avoiding what Proudfoot characterizes as “descriptive reduction” seems to be the same danger against which the rule of deference is designed to guide us.

Endnotes

1 In addition to the courts, the other relevant state institutions vested with the power to administer the religious workers visa program are the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly known as the INS) and the USCIS service centers (formerly known as Administrative Appeals Office (AAO).

2 See also Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States, 143 U.S. 457 (1892).

3 8 CFR §214.2(12).


5 541 F.2d 1383 (9th Cir. 1976).


7 Ibid.


RUNINS, from p.y


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