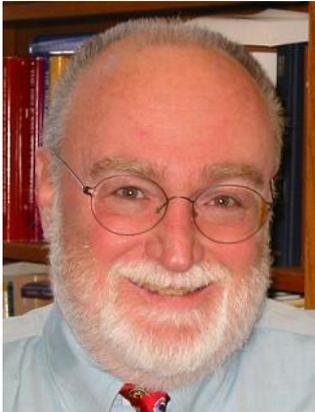


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My original statement centered on the promotion of “religious literacy,” particularly among those students — by far the majority of those I teach — who are taking a single course in the study of religion to satisfy general education requirements. Stephen Prothero has now made a similar case much more fully and urgently in *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn’t*. In my reading, Prothero’s book should begin a conversation rather than end it. He offers a lot of detail about what beginning college students do not know and sketches out a historical account of how that has come to be. But, aside from very broad suggestions that both high school students and college students need to take at least one course about religion, he does not venture very far into just what such courses should look like. So the question becomes how to design that one course that would give most college students their only opportunity to develop some minimal religious literacy. (On course design in general, the comprehensive treatment I find most helpful is by L. Dee Fink). At several points, Prothero suggests that basic factual knowledge about the Bible and the history of Christianity, particularly in the United States, should definitely be part of such a course. It is not immediately clear, however, precisely how the transmission of such factual knowledge can become the animating principle of a college-level introductory course (see Fink; Gallagher 2009, 208–221).

Questions can be posed about the centrality of factual knowledge from various angles. Jonathan Z. Smith, for example, has argued strongly against the very notion of “coverage,” and suggested that introductory courses should focus on arguments about the interpretations of specific issues or problems. Such a focus, he adds, will also help students develop their capacities for thinking, writing, and speaking. On that score, at least, Smith has lots of company. Barbara Walvoord’s recent survey of the teaching of introductory courses in religion and theology (2008) highlights how frequently faculty members mention the development of their students’ critical thinking skills as their primary goal in teaching. Walvoord also reports, however, that students more frequently mention other goals as primary for them, especially the development of their own religious or “spiritual” sensibilities.

Thus, there are multiple factors that complicate the translation of Prothero’s general imperative that college students need to develop some sort of religious literacy into the actual design of courses that are likely to accomplish this general goal. Among them, for example, are broad situational factors, such as institutional missions (not only at religiously affiliated colleges), that impose heavy burdens on introductory courses that fulfill general education requirements. Also, faculty members articulate a wide array of goals for introductory courses, ranging from the delivery of specific information to the cultivation of specific skills. In addition, it is not at all clear that students come to introductory courses on the study of religion substantially interested in improving their own religious literacy. Thus, while I still think that encouraging religious literacy is a good way of capturing my general purposes as a teacher, the recent work of Prothero and Walvoord, among others, has deepened my appreciation for just how difficult that process is when specific syllabi have to be crafted to meet such general goals. The wide variety of ways in which teachers actually design introductory courses, made particularly evident in the syllabi assembled by the AAR’s Syllabus Project (see www.aarweb.org/Programs/Syllabus_Project) and in the series of workshops sponsored by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion to follow up the Walvoord study, only underlines that difficulty. I would hope, then, that the AAR capitalizes on the momentum of various recent conversations about how to introduce the study of religion and what it should accomplish by making a space for sustained consideration of such issues in its regular programming. For many of us, the introductory course is a central teaching responsibility; Walvoord and Prothero show that it can be a central object of reflection and even research.

Some of the classroom phenomena that I’ve become more perplexed about can be gathered under the general heading of student resistance. That resistance can take a variety of forms: reluctance to subject one’s own convictions or tradition to academic scrutiny, unwillingness to conceive that certain types of actions might even be considered religious, or an inclination to treat certain religious traditions as objects of humor or derision, for example. A relatively recent essay about student motives for participating in or withdrawing from class discussion casts the first form of resistance in an interesting light. Those results would seem to stand in some tension with the findings of both Walvoord and a recent UCLA Higher Education Research Study, which tend to cast students as relatively open-minded seekers (see Astin, et al.’s HERI

report). At the very least, Carol Trosset's findings indicate that some students may not be so much seeking to develop their own religious sensibilities as they are seeking simply to express and confirm them, and, if possible, to reinforce them by converting others to their point of view. She reports that in her study "the main reason students gave for wanting to discuss a particular topic was that they held strong views on the subject and wished to convince others" (Trosset, 46). Compounding that perspective was students' tendency to see personal experience as the (only) source of legitimate knowledge and to perceive challenges to their views as personal affronts. If those attitudes are as widely held as Trosset suspects, it certainly complicates any efforts to get students to take seriously religious commitments other than their own, let alone to discuss them in class with the goal of constructing knowledge and arguments about them.

A second type of resistance involves the refusal to see as religious certain practices that admittedly depart from the mainstream, no matter what their proponents aver. In my experience, this crops up most frequently in discussions about sex and violence. My students, for example, find both the celibacy of the Shakers and the plural marriages of the early Mormons and contemporary Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints difficult to comprehend. Even more so, they struggle to see the actions of figures like Paul Hill, the radical Christian anti-abortion activist who was executed in 2003 for the 1994 murders of a physician and his escort at an abortion clinic, and the September 11, 2001, hijackers as in any way religious. At least a couple of reasons underlie this sort of resistance. First, students appear to hold an unarticulated, pretheoretical understanding of religion that associates it with the promotion of "good" behavior as they implicitly understand it; hence "bad" behavior cannot be associated with religion; it must be something else. Frequently related to that position is the assertion that actors like Hill and the author of the "Spiritual Manual" of the September 11 hijackers, when they claim to be motivated by foundational, authoritative scriptural texts, have somehow "manipulated," or "taken out of context" the texts on which they rely (see Kippenberg and Seidenstickler). Underlying such assertions, again, is the pretheoretical notion that "such stuff just can't be religious." Such expressions of opinion are difficult to cope with in the classroom precisely because they do not rise to the level of arguments. That is, their fundamental assumptions and premises remain unarticulated; their persuasiveness depends solely on assertion rather than the assembly, analysis, and interpretation of evidence, and their conclusions are presented as self-evident. Dale Martin has critiqued the implicit understandings of texts that animate such views. Countering the metaphors that portray texts as boxes that contain meaning that the skillful exegete can unpack or agents that somehow "speak" to their attentive readers, he offers instead the bracing slogan that "texts don't mean; people mean with texts" (Martin, 31). Taken seriously, Martin's slogan opens up the possibility that people can "mean with texts" in a variety of ways, some of which others may find challenging, difficult, or just plain wrong. But the burden of classroom discussion is always to have students articulate why any reading of any evidence is preferable to another; that is, to engage in argument. Martin's argument about the reading of texts can also lead to a revised understanding of "religion" itself. Precisely because the range of readings of texts is limited only by human ingenuity, it follows, in Bruce Lincoln's formulation, that "religious discourse can recode virtually any content as sacred, ranging from the high-minded and progressive to the murderous, oppressive, and banal" (Lincoln, 6). So, a form of resistance that refuses to acknowledge certain practices or beliefs to be religious, even when

their proponents assert that they are, is “good to think with” in the classroom precisely because it raises fundamental issues about how texts acquire meaning and what the nature of religion might be.

A third form of resistance occurs when students reflexively reproduce negative judgments of religious traditions that lie outside their personal experience of the mainstream. Among the perceptions given voice in this category are the frequently encountered assertion that Roman Catholics are distinct from “Christians,” the notion that rituals in traditions other than the students’ own involve the worship of “idols,” and the verdict that members of small, minority, or alternative religions, known popularly as “cults,” are either nuts, scary, or both. More than representing a failure of imagination, I’d say, such judgments reproduce, largely unwittingly, powerful social efforts at boundary maintenance. By speaking on behalf of an implicit status quo, students end up reinforcing a variety of strategies that separate an “us” to which they implicitly belong from a “them” to which they emphatically do not. Such a rush to judgment, however, frustrates one of the fundamental purposes of education in the liberal arts: to situate students’ experience in the “here and now” in terms of multiple instances of “there” (other cultures) and “then” (other times). Attempts at comparison that simply assert unbridgeable difference, e.g., “they’re nuts” and, implicitly, “I’m not,” leave little room for discussion, argument, and learning. So, the challenge in responding to various forms of resistance is how to create opportunities for students to undertake complex and nuanced comparisons that both recognize complex patterns of similarities and differences and attempt to account for them. Such comparisons are the gateways through which learning in the liberal arts takes place.

In my thinking about how to respond to student resistance I’ve found some suggestions from Peter Elbow particularly helpful. Elbow taught both English and writing at a number of institutions and has been an important voice in discussions of teaching and learning. He has argued that although the pervasive academic employment of a hermeneutic of suspicion, or what he calls “methodological doubting,” has frequently yielded real insight, for fuller understanding it needs to be balanced by an equally rigorous process of “methodological believing” (see Elbow 1986, 254–304, and 2000, 76–80). He proposes that “thinking is not trustworthy unless it also includes methodological belief: the equally systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to believe everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem, to find virtues and strengths we might otherwise miss” (1986, 257). Elbow suggests that methodological belief can be employed “to find a valid sense in words...to transmit an experience, [to] enlarge a vision.” He refers to both methodological doubt and methodological belief as constituting “games,” emphasizing that both are provisional approaches that can be tried out on the material at hand or temporary stances that can be adopted to see what they might yield. In short, they can be played with. Both games invite their participants to entertain seriously, but for a limited time and without making a personal commitment, a range of possibilities for making meaning about a particular body of evidence (Elbow 1986, 278, 261; see my development of Elbow’s ideas in relation to a course I teach on new religious movements in Gallagher, 2007). Elbow’s seriously playful approach to making sense and meaning of any kind

of evidence could be particularly productive in the religious studies classroom. Rather than directly challenging students either to state and justify their own convictions and practices or to wrestle directly with the convictions of others that may initially challenge and affront, Elbow's approach, as I would appropriate it, entices students to entertain a variety of "what if" questions that can provide multiple points of entry into the religious worlds of others. That process of entertaining seriously how others make meaning of the world through their religious acts and convictions, much more than the factual knowledge it yields, is the beginning of religious literacy.

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