

On the Grammar of Teaching Religious Studies

Leslie Dorrough Smith

Avila University

Introduction

Years ago, I had a former colleague who – tongue in cheek – used to tell students that if their parents asked them why they had to take religious studies (or insert any other humanities) courses, they could tell them that there could be a lucrative career going around and winning all of the trivia contests offered at every bar, restaurant, nursing home, and civic center. After the laughter ensued, this was often followed by “No, really, here’s what religious studies classes can do for you....,” and the usual list of personal and social competencies (enhanced social ethics, cultural sensitivity, religious literacy, etc.) were rolled out.

Like many jokes, though, that one stung a bit, but perhaps not just for the reasons you might think. For even though the audiences who heard these things were themselves probably somewhat aware that they were receiving a sales pitch for a class or degree that likely wasn’t on their radar, what always caused me to cringe the most was that I wasn’t sure that my colleagues ever really understood how much they were implicated in their own joke. Indeed, for many university students, religious studies primarily involves the accumulation of intellectual trinkets from exotic places because this is how their professors teach the field, even if such faculty don’t intend for it to be received that way.

Although the field itself is now populated by scholars who, perhaps more than ever before, claim a focus on more theoretical and methodological concerns, we should not confuse this interest with the critical application of method and theory, an issue that was the topic of the NAASR 2015 conference.¹ Indeed, there is a widespread, uninterrogated, essentialist impulse still remaining in the research of many who claim theoretical savvy. I’ve described this as the “accessories” approach, wherein one can treat theory and method in religious studies like an accessory – an academic sidekick, if you will – that can be used or excluded at will with no compromise to one’s research.² This technique has been used by large swaths of our field to claim theoretical expertise that simultaneously does not disturb a number of forces, among them progressive religious groups, several of the preconceived notions of our students, nor the agendas of the neoliberal university setting.

It’s likely that a good portion of that scholarship is generated by people who are relatively unaware of what remains uninterrogated. But my interest in this essay lies more with thinking about how those of us who are very actively committed to anti-essentialist scholarship still fall back on a series of older conventions that may, even in the best of circumstances, take our teaching to essentialized places we do not wish to go. Though part of this more frequent theorizing about religious studies and our classroom teaching will hopefully have already led us

to question the equation of “a good course” with 75 minute-sessions of factoid-vomiting (i.e., the stereotypical undergraduate class), I believe we are only at the beginning of conversations about what critical pedagogies in the religious studies context might look like.

This is not because our field has been uninterested in pedagogy, although as J.Z. Smith argued in the 1980s, the field is so relatively young that it’s to be expected that we’ve come to the pedagogical table later than others.³ But at least since my entry into graduate school in the early 2000’s, teaching statements, teaching certificates, and other forms of pedagogical focus have simply been par for the course as part of graduate professionalization. Much of this emphasis on our careers as teachers has been valuable and has exposed many of us to technologies, strategies, and vantage points that benefit our students. However, at least some of what are marketed as cutting-edge pedagogical perspectives today have been focused on a set of essentialized conceptualizations about who students are and how they learn (“millennials are such and such a way and need this or that kind of classroom,” etc.). Even as we are encouraged to nimbly adapt to a different kind of student in a different kind of situation, we rarely ask what dynamics generate these notions of difference, all of which are often described as inevitable generational or economic shifts.⁴ Moreover, many of us were taught pedagogical techniques outside of a religious studies context, either in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) modules or in those designed more broadly for humanities scholars. It is thus not clear that even in a time of pedagogical focus that many of us are on the same page.

In this essay, I want to indulge one of my curiosities about what forms a more robust religious studies pedagogy might take by grappling with the types of rhetoric we use in our classrooms, considering how our linguistic choices influence our students’ conceptualization of religious studies as a type of inquiry. More specifically, this essay will explore what is at stake if we start talking about the category of religion more frequently in active, if not verb, form. This is not to say that its most common status as noun or object has no bearing, accuracy, or utility. It is to argue, however, that some of the discursive vocabulary we employ may be suitably critical but still not achieve certain educational goals. For the sake of a brief definition, I’m defining critical skills as cognitive tools that provide the ability to recognize and analyze the multitude of ways in which power creates knowledge.⁵ Put differently, these tools foster an awareness of how description, classification, interpretation, argumentation, and other forms of reality-making are informed by the power dynamics of a particular social speaker’s position. My presumption is that our students (not to mention, often, we, ourselves,) are so steeped in perennialist thought that a grammar disruption may well be a useful tool in helping to generate critical thought.

I’ll offer my own insights that come from experimenting with this idea in my undergraduate courses with students who take them primarily for general education credit. Although I teach a variety of courses, our major program is small enough that very few of our classes have prerequisites, and thus most of our students are non-majors who see their religious studies course as one among several harrowing trials they must pass through on the way to a degree. Many of those reading this essay, I suspect, have experiences like mine in the sense that the

student we most frequently teach may not have any particular commitment to the concepts of our specific courses apart from their desire for a good grade and our success at making the topics interesting and timely.

I am hardly the originator of this idea to present religion in its verb form; as I'll shortly discuss, several others have wrestled with the significance of this concept. But the reason that I'd like to re-introduce it in this setting, one where we are talking about how we teach the field, is that student misconceptions (if not misapprehensions) about a critical approach to religion is probably the most consistent teaching hurdle that I face day to day. Even as many of us interested in discursive methods and theories have made clear the importance of thinking of religion as a political strategy, a classificatory schema, etc. – all descriptors that appear to be focusing on religion as something people *do* – it is often the case that so long as religion retains its status primarily as a noun then the discussion has already been framed by a certain folk grammar that lends itself quite well to both reification and mystification. I know this is true in my own classroom, for even though I frequently describe religion as a type of tactic, many of my students find importance in the tactic only because of the things it facilitates or creates, when what I wanted them to see was that the object of interest was actually the tactic itself.

This conversation may seem obvious to some, and I submit at the outset that what I am proposing may look like more a tweak than a sea-change, but tweaks often yield some rather tangible results. Moreover, reviving this conversation seems more urgent to me for a couple of reasons that pertain to the conditions under which we work and the popular conventions that frame our scholarship. First, this is a time of extreme financial deprivation and uncertainty for many colleges and universities. Virtually all of us are aware of the closing of departments, programs, indeed, entire institutions, and even those who are at financially healthier schools are being asked to prove themselves in terms of majors, numbers, and job skills in ways never before. What was already an incredibly precarious job market has become even more so, it seems, and the tiny sliver of those who can secure tenure track jobs will find that they can expect far less from them in many ways than scholars in other times. The economic forces characterizing higher education as of late should confront us with the fact that we likely will, increasingly, have less time with our students. We must thus be impeccable in how we perform our work.

Second, I see this as a time when many of us interested in discursive approaches to religion have achieved at least some degree of consensus around the argument that religion involves strategic acts of classification used by individuals and groups to align their social conditions with their interests. Moreover, I think it's fair to say that many of us have shifted the focus from the strategic acts of certain religious groups to direct that same lens on the scholars who study them. This is evidenced by the fact that our work is quite often about scholarly strategies that fail certain critical tests, a point raised to show how, at times, scholars in our own field are difficult to distinguish from religious insiders. By no means am I arguing that these insights regarding a discursive approach prove that some of us have "figured it all out," but simply that

many of us seem to be interested in similar types of arguments, and thus it might be a good time to collectively consider how we teach them.

In short, my proposition is that there may be something immensely helpful to be gained by thinking about what our students hear when we talk about critical approaches to religion, not what we are saying, or even what we *think* we are saying. Again, I can only talk about my own students (the majority of whom are midwestern Americans, usually in their early 20s, about half of whom are first generation college attendees) with any sort of specific expertise. Yet I suspect if we have learned anything from the scholars before us whose insights into forces such as habitus, interpellation, implicit bias, ideology, etc., matter at all, then we should take to heart that both we and the students to whom we speak are nodes in a web of social creation and contestation that directly influences not just what we say and why we say it, but also speaks volumes to our collective capacity to hear, understand, and apply.

What Should Our Classrooms Offer?

Before working through what is at stake in changing the grammar of how we talk about religion, I think it's important to consider broadly what types of things we think students should be learning in our classrooms, as this undoubtedly should form how we approach the study of religion. Bureaucratically speaking, many of the teaching competencies and outcomes that are used in university documents focus both on facts and skills. This seems a reasonable balance at first glance, for in the simplest sense, most of us recognize certain types of data as worth studying while also identifying a set of skills at hand that aid in the analysis of this data. There is also, hopefully, a conversation about why that data was selected over numerous others and what that reveals about our own scholarly and/or disciplinary interests. Put simply, there is nothing to theorize about if we do not first have data (alongside an awareness of how we selected it as such), and rich, diverse examples of it, more specifically.

But if we were to examine these learning outcomes that dot our syllabi and other documents more thoroughly, we would often find that the verb form (what students will do, and here I submit a stereotypical list⁶: “Learn about,” “Analyze,” “Consider the importance of,” “Account for the development of”) often plays second fiddle to the words on the other end of that sentence (“the world religions;” “global cultures;” “religious tolerance;” “major ethical systems”). So even when we have constructed lists of outcomes that we think are critically robust, we may find that the nouns outweigh the verbs in the minds of many. Why? I would wager that a rather formulaic way of looking at these outcomes is to assume that the words at the start of the sentences are applicable in most every discipline, and thus, because they are more generic, perhaps seem less important. On the other hand, the words at the end of these sentences are often portrayed as more interesting because this is where specific disciplines or fields are recognized; it's what makes us, us. I don't believe I oversimplify the matter when I say that, for many of us, this separation of analysis from data is part of our job security.

So this arrangement may have very practical benefits, but is it pedagogically helpful? As usual, J.Z. Smith has something to say about that. In Smith's essay, "The Introductory Course: Less is Better," he provides a characteristically unique take on what the introductory course should do, which, I would argue, is advice that we can transfer to virtually any other religious studies course. To Smith, the word "religion" is the least interesting part of the concept of "introductory course in religion."⁷ Rather, the function of such a course is to (and here I summarize Smith): introduce students to college level work; train them in the skills of interpretation and self-conscious examination; teach them about argumentation, and specifically the role that "definitions, classifications, data, and explanations" play in argument-building; and teach them all this in the context of comparison, and preferably with examples that reach opposing conclusions so as to challenge students in using their burgeoning analytical skills.⁸ The content of the course, he concludes, really isn't so important, except that you *can* use religion as an exemplar to achieve these ends.⁹ According to this model, critical thinking skills involve recognizing the structures, forms, functions, and uses of human arguments, biases, and epistemologies.

Smith offers this advice, in part, to tell the reader that there isn't one particular topic that must be addressed in such a course so long as one is skill-building in a way that supports critical thinking. Yet arguments like this have ruffled the feathers of many, for, true to the larger gist of Smith's other arguments about the subject of our field, the pedagogical model he supplies here doesn't posit a uniqueness about religion, which is often what sustains its presence in university catalogs. While many of us might agree that religion is just one social institution like any other, I would contend that there still are reasons why these particular skills might be best mastered in places like the religious studies classroom.

My thinking is that there are often dynamics in the religious studies classroom that are not experienced as frequently in most other disciplines. As Russell McCutcheon notes, one of the interesting things about teaching religion is that it may be one of the only educational settings where students are deemed experts at the start – where their experiences with an entrenched cultural perennialism means that they are likely to have already pre-authorized their anecdotal perceptions of what religion is and how it works.¹⁰ This is why we may want to reconfigure the role of the introductory religious studies course as one where we teach students about the politics of categorization and the dynamics of power more generally, so that they learn "how to be curious about the taken-for-granted," as McCutcheon puts it, and have the intellectual tools at hand to do something with that curiosity, no matter where life may take them.¹¹

But there are other disciplines that wrestle with this, as well, and the one with which I'm most familiar is the field of gender studies, where I was co-trained alongside religious studies and where I currently co-teach. It is important to take note of other fields with this same set of issues because it gives us additional places to look for how others have pedagogically responded when their main subject must constantly be de-naturalized in a cultural climate that pushes against this impulse. For those of us who teach gender studies and other critical

identity categories (race, sexual orientation, etc.), the same problems are abundant, for insomuch as a student has formed even a rudimentary conceptualization of where they fit in our society's matrices of identity, their initial interest in the course is often tied to the reinforcement of their foregone conclusions. (More insights from gender studies momentarily).

Thus if we can agree that a large portion of what we owe our students is training in the laboratory of argument, categorization, and the ability to interrogate the taken-for-granted, then there is often no better place to do that than in a topical setting where students often already presume their own expertise. (As an aside, this is why I suspect many of us have students who struggle in our classes. It's not because we are asking them to use conceptual skills they do not have, but because the material isn't what they thought it would be.) The religious studies classroom is ideal (even if not entirely unique) in offering this opportunity, simply because we have a wealth of naturalized, essentialized claims from which to draw.

If we can agree that these are things we want to teach, does this render those aforementioned learning outcomes completely irrelevant? While I suspect many of us look upon such outcomes and their associated assessment cycles as things that are to be endured rather than celebrated, even those of us most cynical about their utility are probably influenced by them. For even if we do not work at confessional schools, many, if not most of us, are subject to other forces (our departments, research supports, and larger philanthropic institutions) that determine the sort of teaching we will do (i.e., what sorts of pursuits will receive funding), and those trickle down quite directly to affect the shape of syllabi.¹² I have yet to find a humanities scholar who has not been called to defend themselves in economic terms, and if they cannot do that, in value-laden terms (in that order of preference).¹³ Undoubtedly, all of us – competing in tight markets, pushed to justify our worth – have an array of sales pitches we use to validate our existence.

For instance, religious studies courses are often described as important because they reveal to students some mysterious element of “the human experience” and/or they expose (if not promote) a “moral compass” common to the aforementioned humans.¹⁴ (Obviously, I place all of these in scare quotes to question their critical purchase). To place this thinking in contradistinction with Smith and McCutcheon's earlier arguments, a very large majority of universities market the skills learned in a religious studies class as those that lead naturally to, or are uniquely in the service of, some idea of the “good life” and the “good society” that enables it. The larger narrative undergirding this marketing technique argues that religious studies is, in effect, a field that is “enchant[ed]” (to use Richard Newtons' phrasing) with special qualities that will resolve major social problems and simultaneously promote social unity. Yet insomuch as this approach presumes that our work is “intrinsically significant,” Newton continues, “we lose the critical distance to question the actions and institutions fostering its appearance as such. Our students do as well.”¹⁵

This presumption of enchantment often shows up in very benign ways, particularly in words that have lost this overt ethical or evaluative tenor but still retain its spirit. These are often codewords for concepts common to progressive religiosity. More specifically, Rebekka King

notes, catchphrases such as “religious literacy, cultural reflexivity, and global engagement” are often the means of talking about otherwise “theological categories [that] have been reshaped in a way that retains their *a priori* mold.”¹⁶ While I read King’s invocation of the concept of ‘reshaping’ to mean that there are other ways that these concepts could be rendered that gives them a more critical edge, it would be naïve to think that these more analytically robust forms are what most audiences tend to hear. What I believe they tend to hear, to put it bluntly, is that certain instances of religion are intrinsically good and thus don’t need analysis beyond knowing certain descriptive facts (“who,” “what,” “when,” “where”). Those deemed not intrinsically good have been “hijacked,” and they get the final, often most critical, question (“why”).

This does not mean that we have no way to construct a rigorous and critical version of religious studies via outcomes such as those mentioned above. It does mean, however, that the ways in which our field has been justified have often been analytically weak and, as such, have often tended to move away from this type of rigor as a means of self-defense. I admit that this may sound a bit oversimplistic, but consider that our largest professional organization, the American Academy of Religion (AAR), has just released guidelines on what should constitute “religious literacy” for two- and four-year colleges. Although that list is ripe for critique if our pedagogical concern is focused on critical thought, for the sake of brevity I will simply mention that two of those items include the ability to “discern accurate and credible knowledge about diverse religious traditions and expressions” and to “distinguish confessional or prescriptive statements made by religions from descriptive or analytical statements.”¹⁷

To the uninitiated ear these may certainly sound like robust educational goals, but we don’t have to dig very far into these statements before we hit the hard (and, I would argue, far more critical) questions, for these are the ones that interrogate power at all levels of human production: Whose versions of a particular instance of religion will be deemed “accurate and credible knowledge”? What forces influence this decision-making process? How, precisely, does one distinguish between the prescriptive and the descriptive, if we know that one feature of power is that it is naturalized to the degree that it becomes relatively invisible? Are we arguing that such a separation is possible, or is this something akin to an ideal type that has heuristic value but perhaps relatively less analytical weight? And are we critically comfortable with granting “religions” such agency that we will refer to them unproblematically as entities that “ma[k]e confessional or prescriptive statements”?

This extremely short list of questions I’ve just posed merely scratches the surface, and, as one might expect, there is plenty to say about the full list, as well as the forces that have contributed to the development of the concept of religious literacy itself. But for the sake of example here, I will simply note that providing our students with a laboratory wherein they can experiment with and deconstruct notions of argumentation, difference, and analysis will almost certainly increase their *critical* literacy, which, for me, is the central goal of my teaching. In this sense, I believe that the aforementioned learning outcomes and other related bureaucratic documents can be quite important, pedagogically speaking, so long as we examine them from a critical vantage point and also give our students a taste of what it means to see those very

statements as part of the power continuum that we all inhabit. Perhaps it goes without saying, however, that the term “critical” may not mean the same thing to everyone deploying it.

On “Religion” as a Verb

Up to this point, I’ve argued that our classrooms should be focused primarily on building critical thinking skills and that our field provides a particularly good venue in which to test them because of the fact that our data involves a larger number of taken-for-granted claims. I’ve also noted that several of the dominant ways in which we market our classes may appear to enhance principles important to critical thought but may, in fact, simply reify certain non-critical concepts. So how can we transform these outcomes into something more analytically sound? For many of us, the answer to this has meant focusing on religion as a type of rhetoric that groups use to achieve certain goals. But as I earlier mentioned, I’m not sure that even when we explain this in what we believe are adequate ways that students are always hearing what we think we’re teaching.

I began to consider this conundrum in my own teaching several years ago when I started to explicitly use the word “tactic” as my go-to synonym for religion in the introductory classroom, which was a switch for me away from other default terms like “discourse” and “institution.” As background, I often start by teaching Lincoln’s conceptualization of religion as a type of discourse that stands out from other kinds in its appeal to a transcendent authority (I boil this down to “an authority beyond critique.”)¹⁸ I couch this discussion in a larger conversation about the processes of reification and naturalization. With those things in mind, I then challenge students to think of religion as a discursive *tactic* used in the service of certain social goals. I equate the term “tactic” with a strategic method of communicating, not unlike other mechanisms of persuasion such as guilt trips, flattery, or logic (and here I list any number of persuasive techniques that may be familiar to them), hopefully presenting them with a correlate that allows them to more easily recognize that the speaker in religious discourses usually has an interest in using that particular method. We then discuss how appealing to a deity, a self-evident ethical obligation, or an invisible reality are persuasive practices in their own right, ones that could be used for an infinite number of ends.

I have now approached religion from this “tactic” angle for two semesters in a world religions class I teach (our department’s bread and butter, as I suspect it is for many reading this essay), and I have done the same for several years in an Introduction to Religious Studies class that I approach more as a primer on critical elements of the field. No matter the course, though, this conversation happens alongside an introduction to how power dynamics in cultures typically operate. While this tactical approach (again, one that takes place within a conversation about order, reification, and power) has certainly helped students become more functionalist in their mindsets, it is still true that a not insignificant minority thinks of the tactic model as what the “bad religious people” do (that is, they “use” religion for selfish gain). Naturally, the “good religious people” are more readily seen as *not* tactical because, presumably, their motives are

pure, or more to the point, aligned with perennialist notions of religion. I don't regard this as a complete pedagogical backfire by any means, for there will always be that minority. But what started to increase my students' understanding of these concepts is when I kept the tactical approach but began to periodically discuss religion in the active, verb tense, as "religioning" or "religionizing" (yes, they're awkward, and not my own terms, as I'll discuss shortly).

Moving into the realm of verbs in the study of religion invites the question: "What's the problem with nouns?" The issue is not so much an inherent problem with nouns as it is a sort of rhetorical tendency that emerges with their use, for without a clear and unequivocal emphasis on the human active, a certain sort of disembodied entity tends to find its way into our work. If our conversation is all about objects, then it's all too easy for scholars and students alike to conceptualize some sort of authentic, core "real" that somehow grounds those objects, leaving us to think that what we should be analyzing is their outer shell.¹⁹ Alternately, students may be able to demonstrate their use of more critical methods in some circumstances but in selective others may differentiate between those things cultures make and other things that "just are," which is one risk associated with the tactical approach just mentioned.²⁰

Several scholars have provided us with models of religion that emphasize an active process and which therefore may be helpful in uncovering what is at stake in we remain in the realm of nouns. Consider Naomi Goldenberg's assertion that religion is the name of a particular type of power play – selectively used just as it is selectively withdrawn – and thus the language of religion as an "it" creates the appearance of an essence rather than acknowledging that it is, instead, an authorizing technique.²¹ When a social group claims to act for religious reasons, she notes, this "is meant as a gesture toward principles of power, regulation and control. In short, the word and its cognates now imply attitudes and practices of making order whether in regard to public institutions or to intimate feelings, habits, thoughts, actions and 'ways of living.'"²² This model is not unlike one of Richard Newton's pedagogical perspectives, which involves using DeCerteau's notion of "scriptural economies." This term denotes the ways in which cultures produce any number of naturalized discourses (texts and scriptures among them) that then become tools through which humans either grant or deny each other authority and thus determines where they sit in a cultural economy of social value.²³ The goal of using this method, Newton notes, is that we might teach students to analyze "the ways humans inflate the worth of themselves and others" through "the language game that is religion."²⁴ Still yet, McCutcheon argues a similar point about activity even more explicitly when he notes that we must "...mov[e] from studying settled nouns to dynamic verbs if we are to do something other than what participants are already doing for themselves —i.e., that we move from studying the meaning of the Bible (a ritual activity, really) to studying how meaning is negotiated and managed *by people*, or how the discursive object "Bible" is created, maintained, and used *by people*."²⁵ The question is how to emphasize the "by people" part without unintentionally creating the outer shell/inner core dichotomy.

While I hope it is clear from this brief selection that scholars are talking about a more active way to describe religion, what I want to consider for a moment are two examples that explicitly take up the issue of moving from the static to the active by proposing a new term through which to describe this process. Malory Nye's now almost 20 year-old essay on the topic of shifting our thinking to conceptualize religion as a verb was inspired, he notes, by Catherine Bell's use of the term "ritualization" in place of "ritual." Bell proposed the former based on her own qualms with the fact that the term "ritual" was used in far too passive, essentialized ways. In particular, Bell was concerned with the popular dichotomization between ritual (understood as "action") and belief (understood as "thought").²⁶ Nye's concern over Bell's choice of the noun form "ritualization" lies with the fact that "...the use of a noun does still suggest something tangible that has its own agency, rather than as a form of expressing the agency of the people who actually do the practice," and thus he's not sure that "ritualization" goes far enough to correct the problem.²⁷

What Nye is pointing out is quite important, for as earlier mentioned, it's possible for problems to ensue in the classroom when we describe religion primarily, if not often exclusively, as a type of social institution. Although I don't disagree with the sociological meaning behind that vantage point, for students that perspective may unwittingly permit them to create a dichotomy whereby they separate the "human form" (the social institution) from the supposedly "real" or "spiritual" foundation that made the institution possible in the first place. So what should we do, instead? For his part, Nye offers the use of "religioning" to bypass the possibility of slipping into the reification of religion as an essentialized entity:

Religioning is not a thing, with an essence, to be defined and explained. Religioning is a form of practice, like other cultural practices, that is done and performed by actors with their own agency (rather than being subsumed by their religions), who have their own particular ways and experiences of making their religiosities manifest. A discourse of religioning also moves away from looking at 'religion' in terms of 'religions' (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.), but instead looks at religious influences and religious creativities, and the political dynamics through which certain conceptualisations of religious authenticity are produced and maintained.²⁸

While I can agree in general strokes with this characterization of religion as a cultural practice, I have two concerns: first, I would not want to make an argument for actors' agency without also commenting on its limits, for social life is never as free as we imagine. Put differently, "religioning" is often not permitted to happen all the time and in every way in specific social circumstances, a fact that is absolutely critical to its portrayal as a type of activity. Second, I am unclear in what way Nye uses the adjective "religious" when he discusses "religious influences and religious creativities." One unfortunate interpretation of this – unfortunate because it amounts to a circular, essentialized description -- might be seen in my students' tendency to keep the sense of activity but deprive it of any critical content, as when they might say that

people are “religioning” simply when they “do religious things” (pray, engage in rituals, etc.). If we are going to maintain our critical senses, it is vital to focus the conversation back on the reasons why a figure or group might choose to use the adjective “religious” rather than presume that what’s really interesting about the adjective is that it has a stable, self-evident meaning.²⁹ To do otherwise – to indiscriminately use “religious” without a thoroughgoing explanation of what role it plays in our own categorizations – is itself a form of reification.³⁰

This concern is shared by Ian Alexander Cuthbertson, who argues that Nye leaves residues of an underexamined “religion” in this definition that is simply being made manifest in his larger argument. While I can surmise that Nye might have been using that adjective as a heuristic tool to designate “religioning” in action, the problem is that it’s hard to tell which option (if any of these) Nye was implying. In response to Nye, Cuthbertson’s recommendation is to propose the term “religionization” (note that we’re back to a noun), or the process by which what he calls “imagined bodies” are used to reframe the stuff of life into a particular classification system.³¹ His more comprehensive definition is as follows:

In referring to an imagined distinction, the category “religion” can be used instead to describe intellectual strategies used for separating human existence into discrete spheres along with the specific consequences these strategies entail. Although religion may not exist as a self-evident object in the world, discursive strategies that rely on “religion” and the distinctions this category implies clearly do. These strategies are not objects, however: they are ongoing processes or events.³²

Here I find resonance between my own talk of tactics and Cuthbertson’s talk of strategies, as well as some of the recognitions of continual renewal and activity that the power dynamics of almost all cultures demand to maintain the status quo. Cuthbertson pushes the conversation further away from reification by describing religion as a series of what start as intellectual strategies. I am not sure that “religionization” is a term that, when explained in the fullness Cuthbertson provides, will necessarily promise the best pedagogical outcomes because it once again situates the topic at hand within the framework of nouns (recall this was also Nye’s concern with Bell’s “ritualization,”). Yet I still find the intention behind it quite attractive in the sense that it denotes an active process, of something happening across time, of one thing continually becoming something else.

But I would be neglecting what, for me, has undoubtedly been one of the most influential perspectives in allowing me to make this shift if I did not mention the degree to which gender and queer theories have helped me to conceptualize the move from describing what are often considered cultural products to cultural *processes*. And perhaps the twists and turns of my own education should give me (us?) pause on how our students’ thinking might operate. When I was a student, I had difficulty conceptualizing religion as a discursive strategy until my exposure to critical theory in the gender studies classroom. At this point, the critical theory backdrop in my own mind was set, so to speak, and I could connect these principles back to my religious

studies training. Like many of our students, my own conceptualizations of religion were so firmly rooted in essentialized, noun form that I needed an analog from another area of cultural life to displace that way of thinking.

So what analogous lessons did I learn? Simply put, I learned that power is often described as inevitable and natural when, in fact, it must be endlessly reconstituted to maintain its authority. To choose a widely popular example of this, I imagine that most of us are familiar with Judith Butler's argument that gender is not a static reality, but a type of ongoing cultural performance of certain behaviors, appearances, mannerisms, and attitudes that are socially constructed via appeals to the body (i.e. sex).³³ We are not born a particular gender, she notes, nor do we so much "become" one, as if one has arrived somewhere after a long plane ride. Butler contends, rather, that gender's fragility is why we must constantly repeat it in front of others via our clothing, our mannerisms, our communication, etc. Students seem to understand gender as an activity when one explains it as a constant process: "I'm gendering when I get dressed, I'm gendering when I walk to class, I'm gendering when I stand before you and speak, I'm gendering when you and I speak, etc." Because it is an always-shifting, and thus precarious, power relationship, gender's continual rehearsal and display must be demanded to legitimize the subjects formed through it as well as to naturalize its existence as somehow inevitable.³⁴

Many of us also know that Butler also questions the naturalness of the category of sex (and thus provides a noteworthy example of how one can avoid creating the outer shell/inner core dichotomy). While she does not, of course, deny that different people have different reproductive organs and genitalia, her larger point is that there are any number of other biological markers that could have been chosen if one wanted to organize humans based on body types.³⁵ This reminds me of Marilyn Frye's argument preceding Butler's, which is that even as we cover our bodies, we are socially pressured to constantly announce what body parts are under our clothing if we are to be accepted by others (again, note the focus on repetition, activity, naturalization). This means that, to the degree that dominant cis-gender norms are followed, our gendered social interactions are an ongoing series of genitally- or reproductively-focused pronouncements: "I know we're talking about how our families are these days, or the state of the weather, but I'm also telling you more subtly about the parts under my clothing."³⁶

Some might conclude from these rather popular examples that I'm simply calling for a renewed application of postmodern critique when I discuss "religion as verb." While that is not entirely wrong, it misses the larger point. I'm actually arguing for an awareness of the shift from object or states of being to active processes (or, from stative to dynamic verbs, for those who like the references to grammar) that postmodernist thought has so successfully brought to our awareness. Borrowing these techniques from postmodern thought and applying them to religious studies should not imply the terrors that some like Leonardo Ambasciano foresees when he argues that doing so will "leav[e] a wasteland of conceptual ruins" in our wake in so much as Ambasciano equates deconstruction with the utter eradication of what appears to be, to him, the entire field.³⁷ In my mind, the only reason one might conclude this is if one was

already, first, overly attached to the ontology of static essences, and second, suffering from a failure of imagination by which one could not see how identifying society's working as a series of shifting, adapting processes is itself a type of reconstruction of critical thought (and not its utter eradication.)³⁸

We could spend considerable time wordsmithing the best (or, as the case might be, least worst) verb form of "religion," but I fear that such efforts would simply in a reification contest of competing terminologies. I am thus not proposing that there is a perfect term for this, as will become quite evident below, nor do I profess to have mastered the technique. What I can say, however, is that my own students' ability to critically consider religion as a certain type of process that leads to certain types of effects has been sharpened substantially the more that I've interjected an active discourse regarding religion into my teaching.

Pedagogical Strategies

In light of these experiences, what I wish to do in the space that follows is to simply offer some suggestions about how we might use terms like "religioning," "religionize," or other variants we might imagine that more decisively place religion in the realm of human creation and activity, one informed by power relations, and in so doing, disrupt the reification process. My emphasis from this point on will be on where I've had pedagogical luck with this practice, as well as what other concepts I've needed to use and/or emphasize to make this idea work in my own classroom.

First, as I mentioned, I pepper in a verb form of religion ("religioning," "religionizing", etc.) in my speech here and there, as well as in my visual presentations. I explain these terms as verbs that designate a much broader series of events, discourses, actors, etc., the function of which is to create an authority claim that appears to be beyond critique (whether situated as the act of a deity, "self-evident" truths, etc.). These terms may sound a bit awkward, but I'm not sure that's entirely bad, since an awkwardness to the term can make it that much more memorable. What I don't want to do is to phrase it as "using religion," because students jump too quickly to the presumption that uses are abuses. "Using religion" is problematic also because it can preserve the idea that there is some idealized version of religion beyond human agendas that represents its pure core.

Second, I go to considerable lengths to discuss religion as a discursive practice so as to offset the overly simplistic "beliefs, rituals, ethics, texts" format, and I include a discussion about human inconsistency alongside that. My goal, in other words, is to be able to describe these "elements" of religion as hardly separate entities, but as different manifestations of a similar, shifting, flexible discursive process that may serve several different social functions at once to institutionalize a particular type of social order. This is in keeping with Lincoln's argument that all of the physical, psychological, institutional, etc. elements of religion are extensions first of its rhetoric.³⁹

The tougher (but for students, often more interesting) work that takes place here is a parallel conversation about human inconsistency. If students can recognize that humans are consistently inconsistent, then they can better understand religionizing as a technique that may appear in one form over here (say, a religious text), but pop up again in what seems to be a diametrically oppositional form over there (say, the choice by a certain group to ignore what a religious text says, all in the name of their religion). Once students can recognize that as human interests change so their religionizing changes, much of the hardest work is done. This is an incredibly important point, because without noting inconsistency as feature of human social groups, it is often very hard for students to mentally avoid charges of hypocrisy or “inauthentic” religion.

Third, where this principle often begins to “stick” for my students is with examples that focus on moments of change and transition. I tend to emphasize the many times when a group claims something is “cultural, not religious”, which invites us to ask a series of questions that we can place in verb form (“This group was religionizing this event, but now they’ve stopped. Why?”). Other good resources for examples are the aforementioned inconsistencies that emerge in every religious group, ones that students are most likely to want to call illegitimate or hypocritical, alongside other moments of inconsistency or difference that do not fit popular stereotypes.

Regarding the rhetoric that something is cultural, not religious, I always start with the precursor that religion is an element of culture, and thus cannot be separated from it. I liken the dominant religion of a culture to a mirror in the sense that the hegemonic religion will usually reflect the qualities of the culture it inhabits. Once I have established that the “culture vs. religion” dichotomy is inherently flawed, I can draw on examples such as these:

- One that I’ve included in my own work is the example of Bob Jones University (BJU), which was one of the last evangelical universities to openly ban interracial dating, something that was policy as late as the 1990s and justified as divine will. When, in the early 2000s, the school rescinded their ban, they explained their previous policy by arguing that it was a manifestation of the “segregationist ethos of American culture” that had also afflicted other Christian groups.⁴⁰ God had been dropped from the argument, in other words.

To my students I might approach it this way: In the 1990s, BJU was religionizing when it came to race, but by 2000s that religionizing stopped. What, culturally, had changed, and does this give us any insight into this series of stops and starts? And what does this tell us, more to the point, about how religion worked for the group in this instance? Why use it in one moment but stop using it in another? The important thing I emphasize along the way is that this is not a shift in the object at hand (a racist policy), but a change in the way that a group describes it. Religionizing is thus revealed as, among other things, a very specific mode of description, but only one among many.

- Another effective example that disturbs the false dichotomies of religion vs. culture or religion vs. politics is Goldenberg’s conceptualization of religion as a category of governance, or a tool “that functions as a key component in the technology of contemporary statecraft.”⁴¹ Goldenberg has shown how nation-states often selectively surrender authority to certain religious groups as a way to manage those very groups, permitting them to engage in behaviors that would otherwise be considered inappropriate if not illegal in exchange for their more general acquiescence to the formal, dominant governing structure.⁴² Often, Goldenberg notes, these behaviors involve acts of violence or harm against women and children in the name of preserving the sense of a private realm free from unwarranted government interference. In one case from 2013-4, Goldenberg describes how New York city Mayor Bill DeBlasio’s campaign vowed to permit the practice of *metzizah b-peh* (oral suction after circumcision) on newborn boys, even though the act – a traditional practice among certain ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups – had been linked with the spread of herpes, and subsequently, brain damage and even death in some infected children. In this case, because the ultra-Orthodox community was highly resistant to regulate this act, and DeBlasio needed the ultra-Orthodox vote to maintain his own power, the practice was allowed to continue under the auspices of religious freedom.⁴³

When considering a case such as this, we can describe both the city government and the ultra-Orthodox community as entities religionizing (i.e., deploying religious discourses) for various purposes. Put differently, we might ask how an act that would be considered child abuse in one realm could get “religionized” into a matter of civil liberties. This query might naturally be followed up with another: when groups or individuals are religionizing/religionizing, what does this do to their relative status and/or power within the subcultures in which they operate? This is an interesting set of questions to juxtapose with instances of faith-healing in the U.S. wherein parents have been found guilty of neglect and homicide in the deaths of their children after refusing to provide them with medical care.⁴⁴ Very simply, there have been times when governments intervene in such acts, and times when they haven’t, and the outcome of these cases often depend on the political impact of the group in question. Closely examining the power relationships at play when groups are religionizing certain behaviors will often reveal the reasons behind the inconsistency.

A second grouping of examples that often work well with students involves inviting them to compare two or more actors whose identities are both described using the same traditionally religious adjectives (in the examples I’ll provide below, “Christians” or “Hindus”) but whose platforms are marked by utter difference or incompatibility. The goal in each instance is to identify the religionizing that is going on and what cultural factors motivate its use.

- In one of my introductory courses, I have students read two articles, both written by self-described Christians, about gay marriage (both were written on the eve of the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision legalizing gay marriage in the U.S.). One of the articles is written by a progressive seminarian who tacitly proclaims his support for gay marriage by liberally citing all of the ways in which the Bible is inconsistent and historically bound (and thus, the argument goes, Christians can and should ignore the few passages that speak about homosexuality). He does quite a lot of religioning. Another article is written by a very conservative Christian Right author who argues forcefully against gay marriage using virtually no religioning at all; rather, her arguments are grounded mainly in nationalist rhetoric, citing gay marriage as a violation of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

I point out to students that both people are religionizing in the sense that they are using some sort of naturalized authority to ground their claims, not to mention their self-proclaimed Christianity. But the fact that they both claim the same label and yet come to different conclusions can be explained as something more than “people have different opinions,” which is where I fear the analysis ends in our students’ minds if we do not push it further. Why would the self-identified conservative Christian NOT be religioning in overt ways when that aspect supposedly defines her identity? Conversely, why would the progressive seminarian focus so heavily on the Bible – engaging in very active religioning – if he’s just attempted to undercut the authority of its literal reading?

Here we talk about intended audiences and persuasive power: the conservative activist needs not attempt to persuade other conservatives, for they are likely already on board with her. Rather, her essay is marketed towards those more likely to identify with nationalist or patriotic labels than religious ones, and the reverse is true for her interlocutor: more progressive thinkers already agree with him, so he needs to focus his persuasion by religionizing in ways that conservatives are more likely to hear. Both are religioning, in a sense, but if we can recognize it as a tactic and the essays we read as part of the persuasive process, then we will be able to see that behind their common label (“Christian”) are different rhetorical processes that benefit them in light of their intended audiences and different goals.

- A final example I might offer is a question that I ask most of my world religion students after having read primary texts from Gandhi on how he represents Hinduism, alongside a series of news reports on the BJP’s own version of Hinduism. There isn’t much unusual about this exercise if we compare it to what other world religions classes often discuss; we contrast Gandhi’s insistence that Hinduism recognizes the value of all humans and all religions with the BJP’s history of discrimination and violence against Muslims and Dalits in the name of this very Hinduism. Almost always, students love

Gandhi and are enraged by the BJP, and this impulse to see Gandhi as more “authentically” Hindu is something we address in a larger discussion on how conversations on authenticity are really a type of social contest.

They are usually quite ready, then, to answer an essay question on how advocates of each side are “religioning” when they represent Hinduism in the way they do, and the social factors that naturalize those different vantage points. To put that differently, they are prepared to see “Hinduism” as an umbrella term that can be used by a variety of different actors for a variety of ends. But that’s not what I ask them. Rather, I ask them how our class was religioning when we wanted to normalize Gandhi’s statements as “real” Hinduism. This throws some of them for a loop, but the majority get the point that if religion refers to a process of making order, of granting “authority beyond critique” to one particular group over another, then scholars (and their students!) can engage in the same sort of rhetorical processes as the people they claim to study.

Like most habits, a change in language is hard. As we know, however, it’s not hard just because we must break out of a particular type of repetition, but because our language is the mechanism through which our cognitive worlds are both formed and shared. Attempting a reinvention of how we use language thus means a reinterpretation of the intellectual frameworks through which we make sense of the data around us. I present these ideas with the full knowledge that implementing them in certain types of courses may be more challenging than in others, but I hope to open up a discussion on what a more active, process-focused representation of religion might look like, how it might be taught, and what it might mean for our attempts to create more critical classrooms.

¹That conference resulted in the following volume: Aaron W. Hughes, *Theory In a Time of Excess: Beyond Reflection and Explanation in Religious Studies Scholarship* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2017).

² Leslie Dorrough Smith, “Theory is the Best Accessory: Branding and the Power of Scholarly Compartmentalization,” in *Theory In a Time of Excess: Beyond Reflection and Explanation in Religious Studies Scholarship* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2017), 179-190.

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Introductory Course: Less is Better,” in *Teaching the Introductory Course in Religious Studies: A Sourcebook*, ed. Mark Juergensmeyer (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 185.

⁴ My thanks to Richard Newton, whose insights here have been particularly helpful.

⁵ I’m tipping my hat here to Foucault’s claim that power creates knowledge, and not the other way around. While this concept is everywhere in Foucault’s work, see, in particular, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995 [1977]), 194 and *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990 [1978]), 92ff.

⁶ These echo Bloom’s Taxonomy, which is often used as the central model for how to structure and assess learning.

⁷ Smith, “The Introductory Course,” 185.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 191. The larger argument of the centrality of argumentation to the introduction course is the theme of the entire essay.

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- ⁹ Ibid., 188, 192.
- ¹⁰ McCutcheon, "Religion" in *Theory and Practice: Demystifying the Field for Burgeoning Academics* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2018), 68-73.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Richard Newton, "Teaching in the Ideological State of Religious Studies: Notes Towards a Pedagogical Future," in *Constructing "Data" in Religious Studies: Examining the Architecture of the Academy*, ed. Leslie Dorrough Smith (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 240.
- ¹³ I'll mention later Richard Newton's excellent essay on the difference between teaching that religion (and its related cognates) hold some type of value, and the very different proposition that the study of religion is the study of mechanisms of valuation. See Newton, "Locating Value in the Study of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 29:4-5, Nov 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341407>.
- ¹⁴ Newton, "Teaching in the Ideological State of Religious Studies," 238.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 236.
- ¹⁶ Rebekka King, "Competencies and Curricula: The Role of Academic Departments in Shaping the Study of Religion," in *Constructing "Data" in Religious Studies: Examining the Architecture of the Academy*, ed. Leslie Dorrough Smith (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019) 249. One could make the same argument about the AAR's recently released "Religious Literacy Guidelines," which I will shortly discuss. By this I mean that they certainly sound less openly perennialist in certain ways, but inasmuch as they presume that there is a certain self-evident truth about various religious groups, they miss how religious discourses are authority moves that groups use for certain ends.
- ¹⁷ The American Academy of Religion, "AAR Religious Literacy Guidelines," <https://www.aarweb.org/aar-religious-literacy-guidelines#academic%20approach>. September 2019; accessed October 3, 2019.
- ¹⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5ff.
- ¹⁹ Russell McCutcheon, "A Tale of Nouns and Verbs: Rejoinder to Ann Taves," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80: 1, March 2012, 238-9. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfr095>.
- ²⁰ Newton, "Teaching in the Ideological State of Religious Studies," 242.
- ²¹ Goldenberg, "Forget About Defining 'It': Reflections on Thinking Differently in Religious Studies," in *Method Today: Redescribing Approaches to the Study of Religion* ed. Brad Stoddard (Sheffield, Equinox, 2018), 92.
- ²² Goldenberg, "Response to the Responses," in *Method Today: Redescribing Approaches to the Study of Religion* ed. Brad Stoddard (Sheffield, Equinox, 2018), 129.
- ²³ Richard Newton, "Locating Value in the Study of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 29:4-5, November 2017, 4, 10 (original).
- ²⁴ Ibid, 10.
- ²⁵ McCutcheon, "A Tale of Nouns and Verbs," 237.
- ²⁶ Malory Nye, "Religion, Post-Religionism, and Religionizing: Religious Studies and Contemporary Cultural Debates," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12(1-4): 468, January 2000, 447-476. Catherine Bell's attention to the concept of ritualization as a verb can be found in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford, 1992).
- ²⁷ Ibid., 469.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 468.
- ²⁹ Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 281-2.
- ³⁰ This argument is present in many places, but one particularly well-known one is Tim Fitzgerald's critique of Bruce Lincoln. See Fitzgerald, "Bruce Lincoln's 'Theses on Method': Antithesis," in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2006), pp. 392-423.
- ³¹ Ian Alexander Cuthbertson, "Preaching to the Choir?: Religious Studies and Religionization," in *Method Today: Redescribing Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Brad Stoddard (Sheffield, UK: Equinox, 2018), 101.
- ³² Ibid., 99-100.
- ³³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 34.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 45.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 8-12.
- ³⁶ Marilyn Frye, "Sexism," *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 23-4

³⁷ Leonardo Ambasciano, *An Unnatural History of Religions: Academia, Post-Truth, and the Quest for Scientific Knowledge* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 142. Ambasciano's rendering of postmodernism's effect on religious studies is, in my mind, highly caricaturized.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 5ff.

⁴⁰ Leslie Dorrough Smith, *Compromising Positions: Sex Scandals, Politics, and American Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2020), 61.

⁴¹ Naomi R. Goldenberg, "The Category of Religion in the Technology of Governance: An Argument for Understanding Religions as Vestigial States," In *Religion as a Category of Governance and Sovereignty*, Trevor Stack, Naomi R. Goldenberg, and Timothy Fitzgerald, eds. Leiden: Brill, 2015, 280.

⁴² Naomi Goldenberg, "Toward a Critique of Postsecular Rhetoric," in *Hijacked: A Critical Treatment of the Public Rhetoric of Good and Bad Religion* (Sheffield: Equinox, forthcoming), 3.

⁴³ Ibid., 10-11.

⁴⁴ As an interesting example of discourse surrounding the legality of faith healing in light of notions of religious freedom, see Jesse Merriam and Robert W. Tuttle, "Faith Healing and the Law," *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life*, <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/08/31/faith-healing-and-the-law/>, August 31, 2009, accessed October 2, 2019.