

Practicing What We Teach – Critical Religious Studies in the Classroom

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Introduction

“Is creativity important and necessary in the field of Religious Studies?” Twenty-year-old Jae Doe exhales and nervously stands at the front of the class, looking at her classmates without tilting her face up from her laptop. “I don’t get theory. I want to learn about people.” She continues her senior capstone project presentation, making a compelling argument that by moving towards so-called scientific understandings of religion, Religious Studies has neglected the ways creative skills (art, storytelling, dance, etc.) can contribute to the discipline. “We need to start doing things differently – communicate differently.” Her classmates nod in approval. For her and students like her, these are skills that connect embodied, dynamic, social practices to concrete emotions and experiences. Creativity, in all its many forms, is the necessary foundation for critical thinking about religion. Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand’s seminar erupts in applause.

We agree with Doe. Not only because best practices in teaching support it, but also because decades of disciplinary critique within the academic study of religious studies supports her claims. It is our contention that we do not merely do critical religious studies in “the field” but in the classroom. When we grasp opportunities to integrate the needs of our students with critiques of the discipline of Religious Studies and scholarship on teaching and learning we create a more accessible and equitable classroom that better presents our discipline to students. By doing this bridging, we develop a variety of teaching techniques that resonate with our students, reflect the disciplinary critiques of our field, and accord with evidence-based research on teaching and learning.

Research shows millennial and post-millennial generations are on track to be the most highly educated generations in U.S. history, and post-millennial students are the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in U.S. history (Pew Research Center, 2018). They are well suited to understand the fluid, contested, and constructed nature of religions. While our students may intuitively know this, they still need the Religious Studies tools to draw out this understanding and use this knowledge that explicitly names what they know.

Despite this need, many scholars of religion continue teaching religion with antiquated methods, even though these methods have long been critiqued within our discipline. The result: as scholars of religion we think *against* power, but we teach *with* it. At best, we are sending our students mixed messages by misaligning our pedagogy and content with disciplinary critiques and academic best practices in religious studies on the ground today. At worst, we are perpetuating the very disparate and oppressive power structures we teach about in our classrooms. We need to stop.

In this essay we see critical religious studies as a multimodal, multisensory, multispatial, multiperspectival, multimethodological analysis of lived religion with a particular focus on power. The practice of critical religious studies is necessarily embodied, dynamic, and social, accounting for and challenging the diversity of religions past and present, here and there, authoritative and heretical, and spoken and ineffable. When we frame the study of religion in dialogical terms, as a process through which meaning evolves from the way scholars of religion (not only us, but also our students) interact with the rituals, stories, and experiences of practitioners of religion, our students and the religious people we study become co-creators in our knowledge of the study of religion. All participants' voices, perspectives, and worldviews are not only valued, but integral to a *critical* study of religion.

Thinking about the role of “critique,” we have found that our stance towards critique aligns with that of the Undercommons. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten write in *The Undercommons*:

To distance oneself professionally through critique, is this not the most active consent to privatize the social individual? The undercommons might by contrast be understood as wary of critique, weary of it, and at the same time dedicated to the collectivity of its future, the collectivity that may come to be its future. The undercommons in some ways tries to escape from critique and its degradation as university-consciousness and self-consciousness about university-consciousness, retreating, as Adrian Piper says, into the external world. (2013, 38)

We too are wary and weary of critique that distances us from our students and their lived realities, and we also gravitate to the undercommons—“the nonplace that must be thought outside to be sensed inside.” (Harney and Moten, 2013, 39) We have found ourselves moving to a more constructivist approach that seeks resonance instead of resolution, that is dialogic rather than dialectic. Instead of a critical theory that individualizes and isolates, we engage in critique as a social endeavor. How might we continuously ally ourselves with those who have been marginalized and rendered invisible, bringing their knowledge and lifeways into our classrooms? How might our students, and their lived experience, continuously facilitate a collective critique in the study of religion? Taking our learning from integrating critical theory into pedagogy, we hold that there are implications for conceptualizing Religious Studies. Each author of this paper explores how integrating critique into their teaching opens new avenues of study in a religious tradition.

What do we do with the bodies? Embodied Learning

Foundational to critical thinking is the questioning of assumptions. Is it a problem to *teach* our students to critically examine hegemonic power structures, norms, and relationships and then uncritically *replicate* those structures in the classroom? We say it is -- not because it is hypocritical and undermines the content of the class. That statement is too simplistic, although not without merit. Critique is more than an intellectual exercise. It is a lived embodied practice. What critical religious studies challenges us to conceptualize is how our bodies both constitute and are constituted by the critical theory we teach, verbalize, enact, perform, and inhabit over our lifetimes.

Just as we train our minds to become scholars of religion, so too we train our bodies (LaMothe, 2008). It is a practice. It is an action. It is motion. As Kimerer LaMothe explains, becoming a scholar of religion “involves creating and becoming the patterns of sensation and response that enable us to navigate the double movement towards and away from what appears to us as ‘religion’” (589). The actual practiced “movements we make are making us” (588). We become scholars of religion in physical relation to our object of study in a process that is never fully complete. Similarly, we become professors of religion in relation to our students. When we approach teaching as critical theory in bodily practice we understand Plato’s allegory and free ourselves from simply looking at shadows. We see our craft in three dimensions.

In the classroom we are not decontextualized amorphous forms depositing knowledge into our students’ heads. Paulo Freire challenged this oppressive “banking” model of education over 60 years ago in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Classrooms where the instructor serves to input knowledge and skills through repetition, memorization, and busywork stifle creativity, prevent critical thinking, and replicate systems of oppression. Students become docile receptacles of knowledge rather than embodied co-creators of knowledge (Freire, 2020, 72).

As co-creators of knowledge, students are no longer assumed to arrive in our classrooms with an educational deficit only we can fill. This helps us avoid what Lilia Bartolomé describes as a “methods fetish,” where instructors uncritically adopt teaching methods, tactics, syllabi, and curriculum without examination of the fact that “methods are social constructions that grow out of and reflect ideologies that prevent teachers from understanding the pedagogical implication of asymmetrical power relations among different cultural groups” (1994, 177). In other words, instructors uncritically replicate systems of power that identify groups of people based on race, class, disability, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. as operating at an intellectual or educational deficit in the classroom and search for the correct method to aid in the acquisition of appropriate critical skills, failing to examine or even acknowledge the various expertise and critical skills these students have and bring with them to the classroom when they walk through the door. This failure reproduces inequality and dehumanization in the classroom. It is imperative to reflect upon your position and every student when you enter your classroom, keeping in mind that many of the discriminatory and marginalized experiences of the students will be invisible to you.

But, how is this possible? What are we going to do with all those bodies in our classrooms? The first step is to acknowledge the bodies are present, including our own. While the body is not the only way of knowing and being known, it is our most powerful vehicle for navigating, sensing, responding, and communicating with the world around and within us. It is a way of knowing accessible to all students. For Diana Gustafson, embodied learning “contests the primacy of

androcentric, Eurocentric, institutionalized knowledges” as the only ones that matter (2013, 250). In doing so, this pedagogical approach signals to *every* students that their whole embodied selves – selves informed by their cultures, abilities, class, identity, and more – are valued in the learning community (Rendon 2014; Berila 2016).

Practicing what we teach as scholars of religion helps us on the road toward, what equity and justice scholars call, full participation. Full participation “is an affirmative value focused on creating institutions that enable people, whatever their identity, background, or institutional position, to thrive, realize their capabilities, engage meaningfully in institutional life, and contribute to the flourishing of others” (Tucker Edmonds, 2011, 3). Joseph Tucker Edmonds reminds us that marginalized students face extra hurdles to full participation. He explains, “in order for Black students to learn to fully participate, they must engage the dominant as well as the subversive or fugitive curricula” (2011, 34). Tucker Edmonds identifies participating in both the undercommons (necessary for survival) and the dominant curriculum as a tax which disadvantages Black students and faculty. He challenges the religious studies classroom to become a space that centers Black joy as an equity-based pedagogy beneficial to all learners (Tucker Edmonds, 2011).

There is no one way to approach embodied learning. Central to the approach is questioning. Embodied learning requires “unlearning,” questioning the disembodied norms by and through which we teach and learn the classroom. In addition, it requires an “inviting” process to figure out how to access our embodied knowledge and align it with our courses. This is an ongoing iterative process with endless possibilities (Zubko, 2022, 27). Kate Zubko explains:

“Embodied learning overlaps with or is related to active, transformational, experiential, place-based, feminist, anti-oppressive, liberatory, and culturally responsive learning strategies, to name a few. It involves identifying and inviting assignments that attend to movement, sensory information, physical-emotional responses, and might include artistic or theatrical activities such as drawing, body sculpting, and role play (especially, but not limited to non-verbal) and other ways to decenter discursive and cognitive analytical habits, language, and approaches” (2022, 23)

No matter the teaching tactic or approach, the most vital component is listening to and empowering all student learning by facilitating connections between their embodied knowledge and the course content. We contend that when scholars choose to teach religions without bodies and utilize disembodied pedagogical practices, they are not teaching the academic study of religion. These scholars are not conveying adequately the dynamic, messy, tasty, repulsive, sensual, undefinable nature of religions. Furthermore, their purposeful lack of pedagogical reflection replicates the systems of power criticized in critical religious studies making them accomplices in the replication of systematic oppression.

Is it Possible to Teach Religion? – Dynamic Dialogue

The move to disembodied learning is a pedagogical disservice on two fronts. The first front is educational. It recognizes only one particular method of learning. The second front is connected to the content. Disembodied learning lends to unitary constructions of religion, when much of the

diversity within religions is expressed through practice. To be internally diverse is to be constantly dynamic. Religious traditions are constantly self-making, through processes of affirmation and ascription.

One of the principles of religious literacy is that religions are internally diverse. There are a myriad number of ways to get students to understand how religious traditions became so diverse. A potential method is to talk about contestations of authority: who is struggling to speak for a tradition, why are they speaking the way they are, and who benefits from a particular understanding of the tradition. This method works for both internal assertions of what a religion means, and external ascriptions of what a religion means, and the possible interplay between the two. (Moore, 2007; Ernst, 2003)

For example, in Muslim traditions, we can talk about the differences between Sunni and Shi'i traditions. There is strong historical evidence that the Shi'i community, as we understand it today, formed significantly earlier than the Sunni community. However, because of the presentism of Religious Studies, since Sunnis are a majority now, they are read as the normative tradition (Madelung, 1997; Daftary, 2014). That same presentist preference may focus on Rabbinic Judaism, without exploring how the end of Temple Judaism contributed to the particular development of Jewish movements (Cohn-Sherbok, 1999). One could also layer on the move from theological anti-Semitism to Enlightenment anti-Semitism, and Jewish responses of self-construction to that move. The rise of the modern Hindutva movement is arguably tied to the colonial construction of a religion called Hinduism, which may not have been recognizable as one religion to the adherents of Shakti, Vaishnava, and Saiva groups (Flood, 1996).

This presentist preference emerges, we argue, from a perspective of a Hegelian dialectic, that assumes a resolution to how religions perceive themselves, or are understood by others, is the way religions will continue to be. There is an underlying assumption, for teaching purposes, that religions are now static; that we must approach them synchronically. The synthesis point is the static normative of a religious tradition. Even assuming an iterative approach to the dialectic, that a synthesis will turn into a new thesis, and be transformed again, assumes a steady state in the process that permits the construction of a true understanding of a religion. The dialectic assumes a position of power, and peers of power, discussing what religion is. However, to teach with religious literacy principles should undercut this framing of a resolution of what a religion is.

A better model is the Bakhtinian dialogic. There is no concept of a resolution, but an ongoing conversation that acknowledges the role of power in defining the self. It neatly integrates both affirmative and ascriptive expressions of religious identity. The dialogic allows one to consider how religious language is commodified and integrated into culture and politics, and in the case of marginalized religions, how majoritarian culture markets it, such as yoga, Rumi, and Buddhist malas. The dialogic explicitly acknowledges power, and seeks to subvert it.

The notion of dialogism, which owed much to Hegel, must not be confused with Hegelian dialectics, based on a triad and thus on struggle and projection (a movement of transcendence), which does not transgress the Aristotelian tradition founded on substance and causality. Dialogism replaces these concepts by absorbing them within the concept of relation. It does not strive towards transcendence but rather towards harmony, all the

while implying an idea of rupture (of opposition and analogy) as a modality of transformation. (Kristeva, 1986, 58)

The dialogic approach inherently emphasizes the dynamic nature of religion and the constant state of self-making. It aligns much better with the idea of religions being discursive traditions. A strong critique of the discursive traditions approach is that it produces religious traditions in the plural, such as “Christianities,” “Hinduisms,” and “Islams,” suggesting that there is not a core that binds these religions together. (Tareen, 2020) While we do believe that this critique has been addressed in the field, as an approach the dialogic supposes defined systems in contact with one another, in a larger bounded system. As a result, as scholars, we can take a discursive approach to religion, to reveal the dynamism of traditions, and change perspectives to focus on internal power dynamics or external power dynamics.

Hussein Rashid’s Islam courses starts with the question of method: who benefits? Starting with the work of Edward Said (Said, 1979, 1981), he discusses Orientalism and how to rethink approaching people on their terms rather than on ours. After further methodological considerations working with Tomoko Masuzawa and Diane Moore (Masuzawa, 2005; Moore, 2007), he lays out his own approach to asking “who benefits” as an organizing principle for the course. As a class, they discuss contestations of authority as the vehicle through which they look at different interpretations and practices of Islam (Rashid, *Diverse*, 2021). These communities are thus placed in constant communication with one another both in terms of power and “authenticity.” As a guiding question, it moves neatly into the context of the United States and explorations of defining Islam in the context of that country (Rashid, *Cult*, 2022).

Works in popular, or lived, religions are doing much of the work of exploring discursive embodied traditions. We argue that the dialogic framing grants an organizing element to the variety of lived religion approaches. These approaches emphasize people: what they believe and what they do.

What are we doing? Teaching Lived Religion

The method and pedagogy of Lived Religion brings attention to religious people, places they live, practices they engage in, and projects that they pursue. It focuses on the way “religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives.” (McGuire 2008, 12) It examines their rituals, experiences, and stories, paying special attention to the embodied, material dimensions of religion in everyday life (Ammerman 2015). It attends to the economic, cultural, social, and political contexts in which religious practitioners live and make meaning of their lived experience.

Robert Orsi has described two layers of intersubjectivity in the study of lived religion: the intersubjective nature of “individual, social, cultural, and religious identities, and indeed of reality itself” and the intersubjective nature of research on religion (2003, 173-174). He writes, “Our lives and stories are not simply implicated in our work; they are among the media through which we encounter and engage the religious worlds of others. Research is a relationship, to paraphrase Sartre.” (2003, 174). We are proposing a third layer of intersubjectivity—the

intersubjective nature of teaching—that acknowledges our students’ lives and stories as among the media through which we engage with religious worlds in our classroom.

Participating in a collectivity that may come to be the future of critique requires us to hone our students’ skills in perspective-taking. As Joshua Eyler observes in *How Humans Learn*, “In order to learn something, we must first wonder about it.” (2018, 18) In her courses on Asian religions, Beverley McGuire tries to stimulate her students’ curiosity about religious worldviews—especially those that differ from their own. She wants them to inhabit those worldviews as much as possible, so they can see how holding such worldviews impacts the way that religious practitioners view themselves, others, and the world around them. This skill of perspective-taking fosters attitudes of humility and open-mindedness to different viewpoints, which can be transferred to future contexts of problem-solving and civic engagement that require the ability to analyze issues from multiple perspectives.

However, to take different perspectives, one must be willing to reflect on one’s own biases and assumptions. Many of her students grew up in North Carolina, where Christianity is the norm. As a result, they tend to assume that religion involves belief in God (i.e., faith) and that religious affiliation is exclusive (i.e., one cannot be Christian and Buddhist). Some equate courses in religion with Sunday School, and they fear that a course in Asian religions will require (or lead) them to abandon their prior religious convictions. She surfaces such misconceptions from the outset, so they do not hinder her students’ learning (Ambrose et al. 2010), and she tells them that as scholars of religion they will use a variety of methods (anthropology, history, literature, sociology, etc.) to understand Asian religious worldviews.

Lived religion invites students to draw from different methods and entertain multiple viewpoints—their own perspective being among many that enter into our dialogical exchange. As they engage with people from different social locations, confront new perspectives, and try to make sense of contrasting or conflicting views, students are challenged to integrate insights from divergent perspectives (Newell 2010). Integrative theories of student development, especially the model of multiple dimensions of identity, propose that students dynamically construct their identity and that different dimensions of their identity—including race, sexual orientation, culture, and social class—become salient relative to changing contexts (Abes, Jones & McEwen 2007). An important premise of the model is that no dimension can be understood singularly, only in relation to other dimensions. Similarly, lived religion encourages students to synthesize and integrate learning across different methodologies. The model of multiple dimensions of personalities conceives of a core sense of self that contains “valued personal attributes and characteristics” (Abes, Jones & McEwen 2007, 3) surrounded by various contexts in which students experience their lives. Their attention to context and the way that it shapes identity resonates with the contextual thinking characteristic of lived religion.

Integrative theories of student development focus on the value of crossing boundaries and borders, and how students gain new understanding through such crossings. Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa has proposed a new *mestiza* consciousness, “a consciousness of the Borderlands,” produced when one is “torn between ways” and transfers cultural and spiritual values from one group to another (Anzaldúa 2009, 303). She emphasizes how “the ambivalence from the clash of

voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity.” (Anzaldúa 2009, 303) Anzaldúa writes:

La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes (Anzaldúa 304).

This new consciousness accommodates the ambiguity of contradicting ideas, promoting a more inclusive perspective. In Beverley McGuire’s courses in Asian Religions, she sequences learning so that students encounter a series of interpretive frameworks, beginning with an insider’s perspective (often through documentaries), then a scholarly perspective (typically, a chapter from a textbook), then their own perspective (through experiential activities), and finally a multi-interpretive approach. This hones her students’ perspective-taking skills.

She teaches Buddhism as a lived religion, expressed and experienced in people’s lives and embedded in cultural and social contexts. Pedagogically, this means drawing attention to the practices and everyday experiences of Buddhists, especially lay practitioners for whom ritual activity is their primary way of being Buddhist, rather than focusing on elite monastic texts and traditions. This challenges standard approaches to introductory surveys, which tend to begin with the life of the Buddha, rapidly proceed through 2,500 years of history, and end with a cursory glance at contemporary Buddhist traditions around the world. Critiquing this approach, Frank Reynolds has recommended that introductory courses in Buddhism focus on “a broadly representative variety of the real worlds, of real Buddhists, who are involved in real Buddhist practices that both generate and express real Buddhist experiences.” (2001, 11)

Experiential learning activities, site visits, and study abroad also provide opportunities for students to appreciate Buddhism as a lived religion; for example, some have students try to live according to the five precepts for several days (Fort 2011; Tsai 2008; Wotypka 2002). Many instructors identify sympathetic understanding as one of their learning goals (Garrett 2018; Tsai 2008; Williams 2008; Reynolds 2001; Sarbacker 2005); for instance, Frances Garrett has had her students imagine themselves as various characters (scholars, ritualists, doctors, farmers, traders, or craftspeople) living together in a Buddhist village somewhere in the Himalayas (2018). Designed in response to Todd Lewis’ call for students to connect to lives of real Buddhists, especially their stories and rituals (2002), Garrett employs sensory and embodied forms of learning to enable her students to see the interconnection of ritual, education, medicine, art, politics, the environment, and contemplation in Buddhist communities.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed the embodied, dynamic, and social dimensions of the practice of critical religious studies in the classroom. By incorporating multiple modalities, sense faculties, spatial locations, perspectives, and methodologies, we make our teaching and learning inclusive, equitable, and accessible. Our case studies demonstrate how a dialogical approach brings into view all of the participants in the critical study of religion: not only scholars, but also students and religious practitioners. We create an undercommons – “the nonplace that must be thought outside to be sensed inside” (Harney & Moten 2013, 39) – where we “think outside” to our

students' lived realities as well as practitioners' lived religions, so that those realities might be "sensed inside" ourselves, our students, and our institutions.

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