Faith formation in my world religions classroom

Each year a Hindu priest asks my students to “worship our own, but respect all.” They find the second part easier.

by Jason A. Mahn in the February 12, 2020 issue

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It’s the first day of the Encountering Religion course that I regularly teach at Augustana College. Many of the students are here because the course fulfills the college’s diversity requirement. The course will map some of the religious diversity in the United States and in the Quad Cities, which span the Iowa and Illinois sides the Mississippi. It will also give students some modest tools for dealing with religious conflict and bigotry. A handful of students are flirting with majoring in religion, although they have yet to break the news to their parents. A few more will sign up for the college’s new program in interreligious leadership before the course concludes.

While some students assume that being tolerant and appreciative of all religions is the primary goal of the course, the syllabus puts it differently. The first goal is to know something about the beliefs and practices of a handful of different religious traditions, especially as they are lived out in the local community. The second objective is more reflective and personal, or even existential: “to work through the problems and promises that religious diversity poses for people of particular faith traditions.”

I’ve taught the course a dozen times and so know just how easy it is for the majority of my hypertolerant, softly relativistic, Gen Z students to move quickly past the real challenges of religious diversity in order to cordially applaud all diversity with something like a golf-gallery clap. And so I try on this first day to name and model the real questions that religious difference introduces in the lives of people of faith.

I show a photo of the 1988 version of me pictured with my girlfriend at the high school winter dance. “Forget the mullet, if you can,” I say. “What you need to know is that I was baptized and confirmed in the Missouri Synod Lutheran church and that she was one of the few Jewish students at our suburban public high school.” I tell them that there were two things that I deeply felt at the time: first, that my girlfriend was an awfully good kisser and that I really liked her for that and other good reasons; second, that I thought she was eternally barred from heaven because she did not believe that Jesus died for her sins. I note that those two feelings didn’t seem to cancel one another out.

The story gets some laughs and breaks the ice, if nothing else. We conclude the first session with students sharing stories about their own encounters with people who “orient around religion differently,” as the going terminology has it. They speak (and later write) of having a Buddhist student or a “really hardcore Christian” as a roommate; of Islamophobia in popular culture; or of being raised in a blended Jewish-Protestant home. One student who grew up in northern India tells of bringing a Muslim friend home after school only to have her Hindu grandmother berate the friend with racial and religious slurs. Some weeks later, a student will tearfully confide in me that throughout the course tensions have been mounting. New thinking about religions and empathic connections to religious “others” has led to a painful disconnect with the student’s family and the family’s faith.

I ask students to examine the terms by which religious differences are negotiated.

Most courses on world religions include the first goal of fostering religious literacy but not necessarily the second goal of helping people reflect on their own religiousness (or lack thereof) in light of religious difference. Indeed, some of my colleagues teach Encountering Religion with far less emphasis on the students' own identities. They rightfully worry whether personal negotiations with identity and diversity won't get in the way of understanding any religion on its own terms. They wonder, too, whether comparing religions, with all the necessary translations and correlations that entails, doesn't finally reduce different religions to variations of one's own.

Yet I am convinced that students inevitably and constantly relate their learning about different religions to their own shifting sense of themselves—often with fear and trembling—whether I name and sustain that work or not. While professors need to remind some students of the difference between the academic study of religion and the faith formation that they experienced in church (or temple, or *masjid*), they can also help students name their burning questions and sometimes walk them across the hot coals.

One smoldering question is this: How can I know and worship God in *this* way while also studying, respecting, and even admiring those who know God really differently? How and why can I stand *here*, while learning about, respecting, and appreciating those who stand *there*?

Many students desperately want a clear resolution to these sometimes quite painful identity questions that arise when encountering people of other faiths. I have come to see part of my job as trying to get them to name and endure these tensions and live these questions rather than to solve and answer them straightaway.

What is more, this fraught living with interfaith questions constitutes faith formation for many college students, given that fewer and fewer of them come to college with anything like a mature and reflective sense of their own faith. At my college, which is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, more students identify as nones than identify as Lutheran. What does faith formation look like for students who are passionate about social justice and interfaith understanding but often reticent in naming, owning, and reflecting on their own inchoate identities?

In my own effort to keep faith formation and interfaith understanding from pulling in different directions, I ask students to examine the terms by which religious diversity

is typically negotiated. The well-worn categories—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—suggest that we have the ability to measure commitment and openness according to a single scale. Exclusivist are committed to their religion but not open to others, whereas pluralists, at least in popular opinion, are open to everything but committed to nothing in particular. Somewhere in between, inclusivists see truth in other traditions but still favor their own as having the final or clearest revelation.

I teach these categories to my students but also encourage them to deconstruct them, especially when taken as firm places to stand. I put students into small groups and ask each to draw a picture on the whiteboard that represents one of the three religious responses to religious diversity. The group depicting exclusivism has an easy time of it: they might draw a thick line or row of flames to distinguish one's own religion from the host of heretical others. The inclusivism group, too, typically finds visual ways to depict respect for other traditions while still favoring one's own as the final and full truth.

Pluralism, however, proves very difficult to picture. Students often draw different religious symbols in a circle, reminiscent of "coexist" signage. But what, I ask, is at the center around which all the traditions turn? God? Not for most Buddhists. Some abstract metaphysical category like "the Ultimate" or "the Real"? Wouldn't that define another transcendent perspective from which all other perspectives can be seen and ranked—even if they tie for second place?

Some student groups draw different paths leading up the same mountain or multiple rivers flowing toward the same sea. But does that not make the diverse religions functionally equivalent—different versions of the same kind of thing? The triune God, dharma, the Dao, and Allah all become different expressions of the ground of being. Salvation, enlightenment, and moksha become specific versions of a more abstract final end. Pluralism, at least when depicted as a clear answer, often undercuts itself, diminishing the qualitative difference it means to affirm.

I hope that students come to understand that categories like exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are simply markers between which more personal negotiations are carried out. Diana Eck, Harvard professor and founding director of the Pluralism Project, is quite clear about this in her book *Encountering God*:

> Let us remember that these ways of thinking about diversity may well be part of the ongoing dialogue within ourselves. Since they represent

> attitudes, ways of thinking, the move from one position to another is often more of a sliding step than a giant leap. One of the continual challenges and dilemmas in my own writing and thinking is recognizing the ways in which I move back and forth along this attitudinal continuum.

Eck says she moves between pluralism and inclusivism. She even suggests that she has relied more on the terminology and frameworks of her own Methodist upbringing the more that that worldview is widened and stretched by encountering God in other traditions.

Barbara Brown Taylor shares this experience of deepening personal commitment alongside the cultivation of openness to religious others. She takes the title of her recent book, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others*, from Krister Stendahl, whose final rule for interfaith understanding was to "leave room for holy envy." Taylor writes of the real attraction that she feels to the practices and beliefs and welcoming postures of others—so much so that she admits to having been tempted toward "spiritual shoplifting" when she started teaching Religion 101 at Piedmont College in the north Georgia mountains 20 years ago. The book's subtitle suggests a movement from exclusive Christian claims to the pluralist posture of embrace, a trajectory that roughly parallels her own journey from Episcopal priest to spiritual writer and guru. Throughout the book, she reflects on her work in helping mostly conservative Christian students move primarily from a place of fear and exclusion to that of appreciation, empathy, and friendship.

Self-assured "pluralists" can be quick to exclude the "exclusivists."

What makes the book so rich, however, is the way that this otherwise linear journey toward openness doubles back toward recommitment, at least in her own spiritual journey. She ends *Holy Envy* writing of how and why she decided to "make peace with [her] own religious language." After early temptations to spiritually shoplift and the understandable desire to rise above Christian confines in order to embrace all religions, she comes to realize that even the most liberal, enlightened openness can remain closed off to beliefs and practices that many don't find enviable.

Ironic but true: the worldview of the self-assured pluralist is sometimes shored up by stereotyping and excluding the exclusivist. For this person, no less than a fire-and-brimstone preacher, the task is to get one's self-projecting ego out of the way long enough to encounter a God who is qualitatively Other. Meeting faithful persons of

other religions helps Taylor to renew her relationship with an Other God, the God of the other. In the end, she finds that her own Christian faith remains “quite excellent” at naming what it means to be in faithful relationship with this Other and with other others.

But it is one thing for a teacher to rediscover a more capacious and compassionate Christianity by meditating on the traditions of others. It is another to help students develop their own commitments in a course on religious diversity. This is especially difficult when the students are so much inclined to forgo formation in their quest to embrace tolerance.

Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core, can help. When he visited my college several years ago for an ELCA interfaith understanding conference, Patel gave a speech titled “What It Means to Build the Bridge” in which he offered his own typology of religious response to diversity. He said that one’s faith in the face of other faiths can be “a bubble of isolation, a barrier of division, a bomb of destruction, or a bridge of cooperation.” He then added a fifth alliterated option: blasé. The threat of religious fundamentalism—the threat of barriers and bombs—is all too clear. But the order of the day seems now to be blasé, perhaps especially on college campuses.

How does one build bridges between religious people when at least one side is passably accepting of every religion but knowledgeable about very few and grounded in none? In Patel’s words, “without a strong anchor ‘here,’ you can’t bridge to ‘there.’” This is hard news for those of my students eager to become polite pluralists.

America’s political landscape further complicates the situation, as Patel’s latest book, *Out of Many Faiths*, shows. In a chapter excerpted in the *Christian Century* (Sept. 12, 2018), Patel traces the rise of what he calls “social Muslims”—prominent public figures who break stereotypes of Muslim piousness and chiefly symbolize anti-Trump progressive multiculturalism. The postures and politics of these social Muslims differ significantly from “traditional Muslims,” who often see their tradition as a cultural alternative to America’s permissiveness. Social Muslims, by contrast, earn social capital by creating positive impressions about Islam among cultural progressives, largely by showcasing iconoclastic Muslim identities that reflect and entertain the American mainstream.

For all the empathy generated across religious lines, these Muslims have also become “a totem in the current chapter of the American culture wars, a symbol that signals, above all, a tribal belonging.” They are invented characters representing the left’s “heroic multicultural fantasies.” In other words, under the guise of appreciating religious difference, progressive Christians like me as well as secular humanists often lift up select Muslims as symbols of our own most cherished ideals.

Interreligious understandings remain too easy and too thin when they do not address religious differences that are harder for self-proclaimed pluralists to celebrate. For example, some politically progressive interfaith allies must work to empathize with positions—like the pro-life stance of many traditional Muslims—that they’d otherwise be inclined to overlook or outright exclude. That’s no easy task, especially at colleges quick to celebrate diversity.

What’s one to do when, say, the top candidate for a faculty position teaching Islam is a practicing Muslim of Iranian descent who can detect and dismantle Islamophobia with laser-like exactitude but declines to shake the hand of a female member of the search committee? Or when the most convicted and vocal students proclaiming that Jesus alone saves come not from white, wealthy suburbs of Chicago but from Ghana and South Korea and rural Illinois, and who bravely confess their truth with aching awareness that it hurts their chances of assimilating into the relativistic ethos of their new college?

I make a hundred choices each term with tensions like these in mind. Do I choose to take students to visit the mosque across the river populated primarily by business professionals who speak so eloquently about progressive Muslim identity, including feminism in Islam, and so inevitably connect with my students? Or do we head to the mosque in Illinois, which houses a worldwide rainbow of recent immigrants, many quite traditional in their values? The advantage of the latter is that students meet Muslims who look and act differently than what can look like Islam’s version of mainline Protestants. But when we observe prayer there, students also quickly note that the women are relegated to a cramped adjacent prayer room and follow the men through live video feed on a small TV. And they certainly notice when a Muslim man in traditional Indonesian dress and head covering takes a plastic bag and, without comment, puts it over what he obviously deems the too-short skirt of one of my female students. (We had to process that event for most of our next class period.) While recognizing the distinctiveness of Islam is invaluable, it can also make it easier to dismiss the tradition as less enlightened than the students’ own faith or

enlightened nonfaith.

One of the most difficult decisions I had to make in recent years was how to respond after students were proselytized at a local Pentecostal church. In our unit on different Christianities, students venture off in small groups to observe a Christian worship service that promises to make an all-too-familiar tradition strange again. Options included a Greek Orthodox church, a big box–sized nondenominational church, an African American Church of God, the local Benedictine monastery, or a Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church. Halfway through the marathon Pentecostal service, the minister and his spouse asked the students to accompany them to a small adjoining room, where they were invited to hold hands, to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and to commit to a life of holiness. When the students matter-of-factly described this episode alongside their other observations, I quickly and emphatically apologized for putting them in the situation. Obviously, I had not made the students' outsider, enthnographic, observation-only status fully clear when setting up the site visit. I removed the church from the list of options the following semester.

But now I'm not sure that was right. How authentically can you study an evangelizing tradition without encountering actual evangelists and coming to terms with oneself as a possible convert?

Engaging religions in all their particularity makes all of us uncomfortable.

As I've taught Encountering Religion throughout the years, I've given more time and space for the formation of my students' faiths alongside their knowledge and appreciation for other religions. Our first outing is always to meet with the priest at the Quad City Hindu Temple, who typically ends the tour in front of an image (*mutri*) of the deity Balaji (a form of Vishnu), pleading with us to "worship our own, but respect all." Students find the experience powerful. Most of them quote the priest in their papers. Yet they almost always leave unanalyzed and unappreciated the first part of the priest's closing advice—to worship one's own—which is no less powerful or difficult than respect for all. I now ask students to grapple with Hinduism from their own religious or ethical perspectives. I ask Christian students, What does it mean to take communion now that you know Hindus who take *prasada*, food offered to a deity and then returned to the worshipers as divine power and grace? I ask secular nones, How might you follow the priest's advice to worship your own, but respect all, when the second part seems so much easier on its own?

After a unit on Buddhism, we turn to the monotheistic “religions of the book.” It is here that it is increasingly difficult to pull apart the two objectives of the course—learning about other religions and grappling with one’s own. It’s difficult because of the looming issue of supersessionism, the widespread idea that Jews have the accusatory law of the *old* (superseded) testament but not the forgiving grace of the New Testament or the tolerance of enlightened humanism. Convinced that the marginalization of Jews is often central to Christian self-understandings, I don’t think students can learn about contemporary Judaism without simultaneously unlearning supersessionism, just as they cannot learn about Islam without unlearning contemporary Islamophobia. The upshot is that such unlearning also helps students reclaim a humanism that is less disparaging of traditional religions, as well as a Christianity whose faith is in the God of Israel instead of in its own supremacy.

Studying religions in all their messy particularity will include particularities that leave us uncomfortable: unapologetic segregation by gender in Islam, all the mantras and mandalas and mudras of Buddhism that go far beyond centering prayer, Christians who faithfully, prayerfully believe that Jesus really is the only way to heaven and feel called to witness to that fact. If students are to reflect on their own religious identities in light of different ones, would I be helping or hurting were I to carefully protect the line between outside academic observer and inside faithful believer? How deeply can and should I lead my students into existentially charged, anxiety-producing self-reflection?

Interfaith questions such as these structure my reflections as I teach this class. I live the questions each semester as I invite a new classroom of students to live their own.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Taking religion to heart.”