



Religious Studies after the 2016 Election

Spotlight on Teaching

Sarah Jacoby, Editor

The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning sponsors *Spotlight on Teaching*. It appears twice each year in *Religious Studies News* and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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The 2016 Election and its Aftermath in the Religious Studies Classroom

Sarah Jacoby, Northwestern University

The impact of the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump as 45th President of the United States reverberated across campuses all over the country, affecting students and their professors in religious studies classrooms in myriad ways. In the immediate aftermath of the election, teachers faced emotionally charged classrooms, replete with students who were weeping and despondent, terrified and stunned, elated and vindicated, and the full-range between. Walking into the classroom bleary-eyed the morning after the election raised immediate pedagogical questions for those of us standing in front of students in the throes of processing the results. Should we initiate a discussion about students' reactions or avoid addressing it head-on given the emotional intensity of the moment? Should we stick tightly to the scheduled topic of the day, or veer off the syllabus to consider what was, to many, a shocking election outcome? Should we maintain a neutral stance in the classroom, giving all students' voices a chance to be heard while maintaining our own objectivity? Or was that even possible, let alone morally conscionable, in the face of rhetoric (not to mention the specter of impending legislation) that left some students and their families endangered?

As the weeks and months since the election have passed, questions persist about the best strategies for teaching students to critically appraise not only the election itself, but also the hate speech, Islamophobia, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and more that has accompanied it. The authors of the essays collected here share their experiences and methods contending with these topics in religious studies classrooms located all over the country—in blue states (Bazzano and Glennon in New York; Trelstad in Washington), red states (Shearer in Montana; Martin in Missouri; Glass-Coffin in Utah), and one swing state (Gleig in Florida)—each specialized in different religious studies subfields. They hail from large state universities (Gleig; Shearer; Glass-Coffin); large private universities (Martin); and religiously affiliated colleges (Bazzano; Glennon) and universities (Trelstad).

The editors posed the following questions as guideposts for authors' contributions:

- How have you addressed the US presidential election and its aftermath in the religious studies classroom?
- How can religious studies scholars best teach and mentor students experiencing terror, grief, and uncertainty in the face of the rise of the alt-right/white nationalism and the prospect of a Muslim registry and mass deportation of undocumented immigrants?
- Is it possible or even admissible to maintain a stance of neutrality in the classroom when moderating discussions about politics and the election, allowing all students to voice their viewpoints, including those that may be hurtful or threatening to others?

- If the result of the election is an indictment of the academy, as Cornel West proclaimed at the November 2016 American Academy of Religion meeting in San Antonio, how can our work in the classroom help to redress this?
- What specific teaching methods, classroom discussion formats, readings, and student assignments have you found to be effective tools to enhance student learning about issues related to the causes and consequences of the election of Donald Trump as president?

Tobin Miller Shearer brings his expertise in the history of race and religion in the United States to bear on the problem of how to discuss controversial topics in the classroom. He explains his decision, amid the raw emotion his students expressed on the morning after the election, to forego his typical classroom discussions based on the values of mutual respect, avoiding stereotypes, and grounding comments in evidence and first-hand experience in favor of storytelling. Beyond storytelling, Shearer describes his classroom techniques for dealing with conflict as ones in which he models a “nonanxious presence” as a means to de-escalate conflict. Drawing on the disciplines of mediation and conflict resolution, he engages students with diverse political leanings in discussions that “counter rhetorical bullying” and “invite respectful disagreement,” thus furthering what he argues is a unique role that religious studies scholars can play in “nurturing democracy at a point when it was most threatened.”

Elliott Bazzano considers ways that Islamic studies professors can react to the Trump administration, “with special attention to building positive narratives in addition to challenging existing ones.” He urges that educating college students on what Islam is, and isn’t, is especially crucial now given the rampant Islamophobia that characterizes the Trump White House, for in Trump’s own words, “Islam hates us.” At the same time, Bazzano reflects on a conundrum: even as important as Islam-focused courses are to understanding international politics, following every relevant headline in class quickly dominates course content, leaving little room for anything else. He suggests that equipping students to understand the roots of Islamophobia requires attention to the roots of Islamic traditions, including their aesthetic and intellectual dimensions, not only attention to the latest news cycle’s anti-Muslim vitriol. Bazzano perceives his pedagogical task to be teaching students to think deeply and *build* narratives, not only critique existing ones, as well as “teaching students skills for understanding the spectrum of the beautiful and grotesque, as this spectrum relates to religion and beyond.”

A specialist in religion and politics in the United States, Lerone Martin describes his approach in a class on religion in the modern civil rights movement to examining the racial scripts that contribute to an assumption that “America is largely a ‘color-blind’ society.” After structuring his classes on this challenging topic by pairing students together to discuss specific aspects of the readings, Martin finds that these discussions help foster authentic dialogues about racism in contemporary America between white students and students of color. In his course about the history of 20th century American religious experience, he inspires students to reconsider “the inevitability of American racial progress,” a narrative especially in need of rethinking in light of the recent election. Martin calls our attention to the importance of pedagogy that focuses on racial narratives as a means to examine constructions of whiteness in religious studies, as well as to examine the racial inequalities that lie beneath the illusion of America as a “post-racial” society.

Ann Gleig teaches the history of Asian religions in America, and she finds much within this history to contextualize “the present Islamophobic and anti-immigrant climate.” She describes her approach to teaching Hinduism in America as one in which she juxtaposes divergent materials, such as American Hindu responses to Trump with scholarship critiquing the presentation of South Asians as model minorities. In her “Buddhism in America” course, she examines American Buddhist convert responses to

the election and problematizes these by reading critiques that the convert-Buddhist emphasis on “sitting with what is” in meditation is not sufficient in the face of threats to Americans’ civil liberties. Gleig draws on Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to explain her teaching methods in these courses as “critical pedagogy,” which she defines as “an approach that aims to translate the insights of critical theory into social justice oriented teaching practices.” She advocates “shifting the focus from questions of truth to questions of power” and working toward “promoting solidarity between marginalized groups.” Gleig invokes feminist pedagogies such as that of Alison Jaggar to conclude that the goal of being a neutral discussion facilitator “simply confirms the authority of the current dominant regime.” She advocates, instead, building “genuine affective relationships with and between students.”

A Lutheran theologian, Marit Trelstad recounts how the 2016 election changed her teaching of Luther. She recounts how she brought Luther’s 1543 writing titled “On the Jews and Their Lies” into a classroom discussion on hate speech by pairing it with contemporary writings on genocide and asking students to list words, policies, and patterns from these disparate sources. In doing this, her pedagogical goal is to move students from passively observing Luther’s historical anti-Semitism to considering the ways in which Nazi Germany actualized aspects of Luther’s rhetoric. She then asks them to apply their critical attention to contemporary hate speech and its effects. She calls students to examine the psychology and rhetoric of genocide and dehumanization that hate speech can invoke, aiming “to offer students tools or signs that may indicate dangerous rhetoric and policy directions such that we do not recommit the errors of Luther that we so openly despise.”

Bonnie Glass-Coffin approaches the topic of teaching about the election and its aftermath from a different perspective, as a professor of anthropology who is an affiliate professor of religious studies and the founder and director of the Interfaith Initiative at Utah State University. She shares a pedagogical approach she has found useful in facilitating interfaith dialogues among students called “speed-faithing.” This is an ice-breaker activity in which pairs of students have two minutes each to respond to a facilitator’s questions about their name’s origins, religious traditions, and values, before switching conversation partners and repeating the process. Inspired by Eboo Patel’s Interfaith Youth Core, which seeks to “make interfaith cooperation a social norm,” part of Glass-Coffin’s mission is to cultivate “authentic sharing, appreciative listening, and meaningful dialogue” as pillars of empathy and connection. She notes that the rationale behind constructing an interfaith dialogue around students sharing their personal religious commitments and values is anathema to the “decades-old wisdom” that students should check their religious commitments at the door when entering the religious studies classroom. Glass-Coffin resists this, suggesting instead that in the postelection campus climate in which hate speech is on the rise, we need “to provide our students with the skills that will bridge difference and cultivate positive relationships across religious divides.”

Fred Glennon is a specialist in religion, social ethics, and society. He shares his experiences teaching about religious, social, political, and economic issues raised by the Trump election in two courses he taught this year: “Church and State” and “Ethics from the Perspective of the Oppressed.” He describes three classroom strategies that have helped him guide discussions in these classes on the aftermath of the Trump election. The first is prompting his students to create what he terms a “class covenant” at the beginning of his courses by posing questions to them about how they feel they should treat one another, respect each other’s opinions, and handle disagreements. Once students have devised their own covenant, he “ritualizes” it by having students pledge the covenant to each other, and he makes it their responsibility, not his, to hold each other accountable to it. The second pedagogical strategy Glennon proposes is teaching with “case studies” in his courses, thereby providing specific examples of real-world tests of issues such as the boundary between religion and government in the United States. Glennon terms his third pedagogical strategy “experiential learning,” which includes exercises such as

the “eviction notice” in which Glennon surprises his students by arranging a situation in which they are kicked out of their learning spaces repeatedly by school administrators and must try to continue their classroom activities in public. Glennon finds these techniques useful both for students for and against the Trump Administration and its policies.

The essays collected in this *Spotlight* issue demonstrate some of the many different approaches religious studies instructors are finding effective in the classroom to teach topics related to the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath. I hope that these insightful essays will further inspire us all to find meaningful ways to foster religious understanding at this time when religious difference is too often demonized in American public discourse.

Managing Crisis and Conflict in the Religious Studies Classroom

Tobin Miller Shearer, University of Montana

A Story Chosen

Religious studies scholars are uniquely positioned to discuss the election of Donald Trump and its aftermath. The nature of our topic matter requires that we know how to discuss controversial topics in the classroom. People care as passionately about their religious identities as they do about their political affiliations. Techniques and approaches that invite exchange among Roman Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, Baptist, and Wiccan students most often work to do the same when supporters of Bernie, Donald, and Hillary are in the room. The most difficult point of discernment, however, is to figure out when those techniques are likely to fail and to know what to do instead.

I faced this very question on the first day that students in my course, “Black: From Africa to Hip-Hop,” met after Donald Trump’s election. In this introductory course, we had just finished a week on Islam in North America and were preparing to turn our attention to an examination of religious themes in contemporary hip-hop. Up to this point, classroom discussions had been robust, animated, and energetic—but never really polarized. Of course, the breadth of opinions in the classroom reflected Montana’s electorate in tenor and tone. In comparison to many East Coast universities, for example, students expressed politically conservative views more often, libertarian perspectives popped up more frequently, and those on either end of the spectrum sounded generally less strident.

So, when I walked into the classroom on the Thursday after the election, I planned to remind students of the values they had agreed to uphold on the very first day that we met. Values like mutual respect, avoiding stereotypes, and grounding comments in evidence and first-hand experience have created productive spaces in my religious studies classes. I thought that those values would transfer over to a discussion about what the Trump election would mean for the Islamic community, the hip-hop world, and African American religious practitioners—the topics we had and would soon address.

I knew immediately, however, that this time those values would not suffice.

At least one student was quietly weeping. Another radiated righteous ire. One cluster of students was uncharacteristically quiet but also clearly elated. Some of my most stalwart and dependable students hadn’t even shown up. Others looked frightened, confused, smug, or defeated. I cannot remember a time when I encountered such an array of emotions so visibly displayed.

So I changed my plan. Rather than invite discussion amid such raw emotion, I decided to tell a story. I described another time when the country was intensely divided, when the lives of women and people of color were being publicly threatened, and when hate groups were on the rise. I described the murder of the young white seminary student and activist Jonathan Daniels in 1965, his heroic sacrifice to save the

life of the then seventeen-year-old voter registration activist and black Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) member Ruby Sales, and the subsequent decision by SNCC activists to continue uncowed, forthright, and direct in their political efforts.

I told the story and turned to the work of the day.

Upon hearing me describe my choice to tell this story rather than encourage discussion, a colleague asked me, “But weren’t you really only speaking to a certain set of your students? What about those who were happy about the election’s outcome? How did your story support them?”

She had a point.

My story about Jonathan Daniels and Ruby Sales did speak most powerfully to the students who were feeling devastated, angry, or afraid at that moment. I made a pedagogical decision to offer them solace. They were, after all, the ones who were most at risk. Within forty-eight hours of the election, instances of racial harassment, bullying, and hate crimes had spiked. One of my students, an African American bisexual woman, would go on to post a deeply troubling account of an instance of racial harassment that required her to relocate for her safety.

At the same time, the story I told did no harm to the students excited about the Trump election. I made no direct connections, offered no commentary, placed no blame on any student in the room. As in the case of all good storytelling, it is the story itself that carries the weight, that allows those who hear it to interpret it for themselves. It is why a story seemed the best possible choice in a moment fraught with such intense emotion.

Dealing with Crisis

Storytelling is not the only option for dealing constructively with teaching religion in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s election. Many principles honed through the study and teaching of religion do transfer and prove effective.

Central to my overall pedagogical approach is a commitment to embracing crisis and using it to further students’ intellectual growth. For example, on the first day of “Voodoo, Muslim, Church: Black Religion,” I carry a large stone above my head, thump it down in the center of the room, and declare, “This is a religious object. Respond.” I allow the crisis of uncertainty, confusion, and frustration to build without giving any additional direction until—inevitably—someone breaks this silence and explains why they do—or do not—think the stone is a religious object. It is often the best, most rigorous and lively discussion of the semester.

In this instance I create crisis through my refusal to expound on my initial declaration. An essential part of the exercise is that I then remain quiet but fully attentive, centered, and relaxed as the students struggle to figure out what they should do.

In essence, I aim to model a “nonanxious presence” in the midst of conflict and disagreement. Mediators have long observed that one of the best ways to de-escalate conflict is simply to remain calm when it erupts. Having learned that conflict is natural, normal, and neutral, I am better able to de-personalize the crisis, remain focused, and look for ways to invite students into deeper learning through conflict rather than in spite of it.

Learning to use conflict rather than avoid it is the most essential skill instructors can acquire to deepen student engagement. Instructors who can remain relaxed, focused, and comfortable when crisis

erupts—whether from planned or spontaneous classroom dynamics—have the best chance of ushering students to a new, if unfamiliar, learning space. It is never my job to make the discomfort or crisis dissipate. In the midst of such uncertainty some of the best learning takes place.

At the same time, within the bounds of my physical and intellectual ability, it is my job to ensure the safety of my students. As such, I will intervene if anyone engages in verbal attacks. I will remind students of the values of mutual respect that we establish at the beginning of class. I will model an equitable means of response to and engagement with one's opponents.

I also bring into the classroom techniques and methods that have emerged from the disciplines of mediation, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation. In my class, "Prayer and Civil Rights," I regularly set up a debate early on in the course about the efficacy of violence and nonviolence during the civil rights movement. Several weeks later, I then use a fishbowl exercise on the same topic in which participants have to listen to an opposing viewpoint, restate that person's view to their satisfaction, and only then explain their view. The rest of the class sits in a circle around the interlocutors and may join the conversation by listening, restating, and voicing their perspectives. Students invariably express amazement at how much more productive the conversation is when they are required to focus on listening rather than on preparing a rejoinder.

But I have also learned that crisis requires clear-eyed judgment about when to cut off, limit, or redirect heated conversation. In one of my introductory courses, I had given extra credit for students to attend a talk by Patrice Cullors, one of the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement. The morning after her talk, I wanted to give students the opportunity to discuss their reaction to her lecture, but I knew from mid-course evaluations that some students felt I did not allow "the other side" of the African American religious experience into my classes. In short, they felt that I censored the views of those white supremacist groups who have coalesced under the "alt-right" label.

Given that I am as committed to encouraging debate as I am to ensuring that racist stereotypes are not legitimized, I chose to narrowly frame our discussion of the Cullors talk. Rather than debate the specific content of Cullors's speech, I simply asked students to comment on what they had learned by listening to her. This prompt invited multiple perspectives but focused the conversation on sharing personal experiences rather than debating truth claims. While debates are essential in an era when many disregard factual data, historical proofs, and rational argument, great care, attention, and forethought are needed to make debates productive. Debate for debate's sake alone seldom enhances student learning.

A Changing Context

We teach in the midst of a number of contexts. First, each group of students brings its own personality, level of engagement, and preparation to the classroom. Likewise, any given institution cycles through financial, cultural, and structural challenges that influence the tenor and complexion of the learning environment. Larger national and statewide trends likewise shape professor-student interactions.

The question that I have been mulling over for the past number of months is, "What specifically has changed with the election of Donald Trump?" We already have credible evidence that overt acts of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism have proliferated. Issues of cabinet appointments, policy pronouncements, and budget appropriations aside, we have also seen an administration committed to undercutting public education at all levels. The political divides in our nation have hardened and grown wider in the aftermath of this election as well.

But more importantly, faculty's ability to pursue academic inquiry without political interference has come under attack. Whether or not, as Cornel West contends, the outcome of the election was an indictment of the academy, at least three state legislatures have struck out against tenure policies at public institutions of higher learning. Those who initiated Professor Watchlist to target over a hundred professors—myself included—for our “radical” teaching agenda have met with the Trump transition team. The idea of thinking deeply, carefully, and thoughtfully about controversial issues such as religious identity appears to have fallen out of favor among the general public. In an age of listicles, research-based writing—whether in popular or scholarly form—reaches the smallest of audiences.

That larger political context has begun to shape classroom instruction. But, I would contend, we who teach in higher education have a responsibility to respond intelligently, deliberately, and directly to those who would curtail rational argument in favor of bombast and prolixity. Our classes on religion can be spaces where we not only model rationale discourse, but where we require students to practice the same. We can foster spaces that counter rhetorical bullying, invite respectful disagreement, and value research, scholarship, and study.

Religious studies scholars have a unique role to play in the shaping of our national future. Although it may be a small role and one not always recognized, it is no less essential. By making thoughtful decisions, becoming comfortable with crisis and conflict, employing proven techniques to foster conversation between adversaries, and grounding all we do in the knowledge we help create, we can be part of creating a future in which we in the academy—and especially those of us who study and teach about religion—will be celebrated for the role we played in nurturing democracy at a point when it was most threatened.

Resources

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A Post-Trump Islamic Studies Pedagogy?*

Elliott Bazzano, LeMoyne College

The Campus Mood on US Colleges and Universities the Day After

What happened to your college campus on November 9, 2016? Was it just another day or was the air thick with spoken and unspoken disruption? When I walked into my intro to Islam class, which had numerous people of color and students from diverse backgrounds—but still majority white—the faces of my students expressed a combination of fright, disappointment, and uncertainty. (As I've [written about elsewhere](#), comedy can be one the most effective means for teaching difficult subjects, and [this SNL skit](#) illustrates a provocative sentiment about reactions to the election with attention to race relations in the United States.)

On the same day in my first-year seminar, a Syrian student, who had said close to nothing all semester, shared his thoughts: “Are we supposed to respect Donald Trump now? After he spent months and months disrespecting people like me? Why are we supposed to show him good manners when he’s unable to do the same for us?” The other students in the class were as taken aback as I was that this very reserved student had broken his silence with such a forceful articulation of his thoughts. What happened that edged a student from intense reservation into an active participant in class discussion? While Fox News and other outlets unabashedly [ridiculed students like this](#), referring to them as crybabies and snowflakes, college professors throughout the country sought to rise to the occasion in support of their young learners as the complex and sensitive people they are.

As for my intro to Islam course on the day after the election, we were in our unit on mysticism, poised to turn our attention to the famous female saint, Rabi’a of Basra (d. 801). Knowing that students likely faced any number of preoccupations, I began class by playing some Sufi music and inviting them to journal for five minutes. I then invited students to spend another ten to fifteen minutes sharing their reflections. (We had given attention to current events throughout the semester already, and I had given students extra credit for watching the presidential debates and identifying themes related to Islam and Muslims, so the course had already prepared them to offer informed perspectives on how the election weighed on our course topic.) We then spent the rest of the class reading Rumi poetry and trying to decode the sometimes obscure aphorisms of an Iraqi Muslim woman. In many ways, this day reflected what has become a foundation of my teaching philosophy: always maintain flexibility for unplanned dynamics but also continue the slow and steady approach that we began on day one of the semester.

The Challenge of Teaching Islam in 2017

Since Trump became a candidate in the 2016 US presidential race, [educators have continued to reflect](#) on how his political presence might influence pedagogy. Personally, I find myself in a familiar quagmire:

to what extent do I focus on current events in my Islamic studies courses? If I wanted to, each class session could devote itself exclusively to political developments, domestic and international; this has been the case for years.

Trump's incendiary comments, policy moves, and cabinet picks who malign Muslims, exacerbate this quagmire. [Trump, for example, said that "Islam hates us"](#) in a March 2016 interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper. His cabinet picks and advisors have endorsed similarly disturbing, perhaps willfully ignorant, positions and rhetoric. In this essay, I will discuss some strategies, as well as challenges, for how Islamic studies teachers might react to a Trump administration in a classroom context, with special attention to building positive narratives in addition to challenging existing ones. [Most Americans have never knowingly met a Muslim](#), and so beyond cheap headlines, college courses on Islam could be the first occasion for many students to have a more than superficial engagement with Islam and Muslims—which remains important for many reasons, including how to make sense of why the president would claim that the religion of 1.5 billion people "hate us."

Recent legislation has included travel bans to the United States from nationals of Muslim-majority countries. In the language of *The Intercept's* Zaid Jilani, "[If we bombed you, we ban you.](#)" Laptops that are too Muslim-y have also been banned from certain flights headed to the United States, and the idea has spread as the United Kingdom adopted a similar policy. (Incidentally, Royal Jordanian Air—one of the airlines affected by the Muslim-majority country laptop ban—immediately [trolled the policy in a Tweet.](#)) The latest US military attack on Syria could give even more occasion to use Islam-focused courses as lenses to understand international politics.

People who study religion quickly learn that any investigation into the human condition reveals both the beautiful and grotesque. As someone who teaches all of his classes in the core curriculum at a liberal arts institution, I increasingly see my pedagogical task as teaching skills for understanding the spectrum of the beautiful and grotesque, as this spectrum relates to religion and beyond. How can my teaching, I often ask myself, positively contribute to the lives of my students in a way that empowers them more than it overwhelms them, in a world where there is so much hurt and confusion?

Fortunately, many scholars of Islam remain positively engaged in public discourse and efforts toward bridge-building and political problem-solving on an ongoing basis. Ilyse Morgenstein-Fuerst wrote a blog post for the University of Vermont, "[Trump 2016: The View from Islamic Studies,](#)" in which she details the connections between Trump's rhetoric, cabinet choices, and their consequences. Caleb Elfenbein, an author for the Wabash Center's "Teaching Islam" blog, has contributed to an important [project that maps anti-Muslim crimes in the United States](#). Also chilling is [Mohammad Fadel's article for The Islamic Monthly](#) that details worst-case scenarios for Muslims under a Trump administration, including comparisons with Japanese internment camps. And most recently, professors from across institutions have [compiled a timely syllabus on the intersections of Islamophobia and racism](#). This is all to say that there are simply too many, individual as well as cumulative, momentous and worrisome news headlines to introduce to an undergraduate Islamic studies course while still covering other material in the course.

Are the Challenges (that) Different than Before?

Effective pedagogy includes understanding one's context, including institutional goals, student demographics, and the current political landscape. An effective way, I find, to invite students to draw personally meaningful connections to course material is to always keep in mind popular symbols and ideas that bear, even indirectly, on what we study. The absurdity of mainstream media coverage of

Islam can also offer [some cathartic moments of laughter](#), which helps ease students into challenging discourses.

In terms of noteworthy contributions that Muslims make to American public life, we saw Linda Sarsour—a Palestinian American activist—lead organizing efforts for the Women’s March on Washington. Keith Ellison, the first Muslim member of Congress (now in his sixth term), received the endorsement of Bernie Sanders for chair of the Democratic National Committee, and [the funeral of Muhammad Ali](#) in June 2016 attracted international media attention, including its full broadcast on Fox News. In [a beautifully narrated but also depressing account](#), National Public Radio’s Asma Khaled details what it was like, as a Muslim woman, to cover Trump’s campaign during the election.

As Amir Hussain (2016) adroitly argues in his recent book, *Muslims and the Making of America*, we have much to learn about American cultural fabric by studying the role of Islam and Muslims in our history, even as it continues to unfold. In my capacity as host for [New Books in Islamic Studies](#) podcasts, I have interviewed a number of scholars—including Amir Hussain, Sophia Arjana, and Todd Green—about how current political affairs impact the lives of Muslims in the United States. I keep my students in mind as one audience for these interviews, and I have repeatedly assigned my students [the interview I conducted with Todd Green](#) on Islamophobia (which prospered in the American mainstream long before Trump reached the national spotlight).

The Good, the Bad, and the Mystical

Despite the many humanizing accounts about Muslims that my students study, these same students also tell me that they aren’t surprised to learn about the pervasive Islamophobia in the news cycle. But don’t some details shock them, even a little bit? In a 2015 Public Policy Poll, for example, about [30% of Republicans and 19% of Democrats supported bombing Agrabah](#)—the fictional city from Disney’s *Aladdin*. Among Trump supporters: 41%. As I wrote in [a previous blog post](#), students can use current political tensions, and how they respond to them, as a way to make sense of Sufi conceptions of spiritual growth. “Do I,” students might ask themselves, “harbor anything related to these views that I find so toxic and ignorant?”

I’m currently teaching “Islamic Mysticism” for the third time, and I’ve implicitly chosen in past iterations to focus less on current events than I do in my intro to Islam courses, or even in my courses on the Qur’an in which we explicitly explore contentious political topics. This time, however, I find myself taking closer stock during class time of political context, and not only because of the most recent presidential election. I think students likewise crave a balance between attention to (depressing) current events and engaging with aesthetics and intellectual discourse that don’t immediately relate to the latest fake news (or “alternative facts”?) on their social media feeds. In many ways, I don’t think students are equipped to understand the roots of Islamophobia without understanding the roots of Islamic traditions. I am learning that watching feature films, reading medieval allegories, requiring trips to mosques and Muslim student group meetings on campus, and hosting Muslim speakers to speak about their oftentimes mundane lives can indeed be more effective, and manageable, means of combatting Islamophobia than direct analysis of the latest anti-Muslim vitriol from a high political office.

How Do Students Understand Intersections between Religion and Politics, Anyway?

When I was an undergraduate during the first years of the twenty-first century, e-mail was still relatively new to my life and social media was not yet a word. The verb “google” was not part of my active vocabulary. Most people I knew didn’t own cell phones, and pocket-sized super computers called smartphones would have sounded supercool had I read about them in a science fiction narrative. I

would not leave the United States for the first time until I finished my first year of graduate school in 2006—traveling to Morocco and Spain—and it was not until then that I began to appreciate global politics. (Crossing international borders with an American passport allowed me to reflect on nation-states and my own American identity from a new paradigm.)

I share all this to emphasize how ill-equipped I was to understand in depth the kinds of contexts my students encounter in my courses on Islam in 2017. I think that students are hungry to understand the complex social and political nature of the world, but I also think that part of what makes a liberal arts college experience effective is the opportunity to think about stuff without *always* finding an explicit real-world, capitalistic application. (Sometimes ideas need to percolate, in any case, before they even make sense for real-world application.) I return, then, to the slow and steady approach I mentioned toward the beginning of this essay. We have a chance in the college classroom to complicate the simple narratives students can find with a quick Google search on super computers in their pockets. And complex narratives take time to construct. Dedicating class time to Trump's latest Tweet can indeed help contribute to building these complex narratives, but I would argue that too much focus on critiquing simplistic narratives could get in the way. Indeed the tortoise comes out on top precisely because the hare buries himself in a series of distractions.

On Building Narratives

In conclusion, I would like to include a brief reflection on student activism and its connection to teaching. As a graduate student at UC Santa Barbara, I witnessed some student groups host anti-Muslim ideologues including Dennis Praeger, David Horowitz, and Daniel Pipes. Frequently, I would watch many other student groups respond with formal protests, which I found both heartening and problematic. Indeed, protest is perhaps part of the human spirit; it encapsulates much of what it means to thrive in a democratic society. It's also an effective catalyst for change as numerous examples from history attest. At the same time, however, I regularly remind myself that part of the difficult intellectual work of teaching and learning involves *building* narratives, not only challenging visible narratives. Both are necessary, and my course on Sufism helps me, and I hope my students as well, appreciate the significance of this balance, the complementarity between *jamal* (beauty) and *jadal* (majesty)—two sides of the same human condition.

**Portions of this essay have previously appeared in the Wabash Center's blog series "[Teaching Islam](#)."*

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White Supremacy in the Classroom

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Teaching Strategy

One way to facilitate honest conversations about contemporary white supremacy and privilege in the religious studies classroom is to examine and challenge the racial scripts of color-blind racism. To this end, I use Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2013) *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* at the conclusion of my course on religion in the modern civil rights movement. It has proven to be an excellent text to illuminate the shifting and persistent nature of white supremacy in post-civil rights America. This color-blind racism is characterized in part by its seemingly non-racial and non-historical approaches, subtle and covert nature, and avoidance of traditional racist discourse; all of which serve to render the enduring mechanisms of racial inequality invisible (26).

Chapter five, "I Didn't Get that Job Because of a Black Man: Color Blind Racism's Racial Stories," is particularly useful in the religious studies classroom. The chapter offers a qualitative examination of a national study concerning how white college students often employ similar racial story lines when confronted with discussions about race. These racial scripts enable white students to make sense in their own mind of race in contemporary America. However, they also function to justify and defend white supremacy. In addition to the use of similar phrases (e.g., "the past is the past," or "I didn't own any slaves," and "I don't see color," etc.), these narratives of "defensive belief" also tend to have a religious motif. These racial "testimonies," as the author calls them, usually take the form of "confession, example, and self-absolution." The study presents several examples of white students quickly lapsing into first-hand accounts of a racist incident perpetuated by a white person that concludes with the storyteller or perhaps another white person emerging as the redemptive figure or as the real victim of racism. Bonilla-Silva then shows how these patterned testimonies, while often well meaning, actual reify racial subordination. Indeed, this "rhetorical arsenal" of racial testimony renders racism as primarily a problem of personal interactions or a burden that primarily harms white Americans. In the end, these racial scripts all serve to buttress the fable that America is largely a "color-blind" society. If racial inequalities exist, white Americans suffer the most, not people of color. Bonilla-Silva confronts this narrative head-on.

In preparation for this reading, the class reads George Lipsitz's (2006) "Law and Order: Civil Rights Laws and White Privilege," in his *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*. The brief chapter examines how massive white opposition to major civil rights legislation has enabled the persistence of structural and institutional white supremacy. Armed with this perspective, students read chapter five of the Bonilla-Silva text and gain a better understanding of how racial storylines hinder us from seeing the mechanisms and structures responsible for the perpetuation of white supremacy and racial inequality in contemporary society.

I have my students sit in a circle and discuss the Bonilla-Silva chapter near the conclusion of the course. The exercise has yielded fruitful and honest discussion on the topic at hand. The students are paired with the person seated next to them. They are then assigned to discuss one college student from the text with their partner and share why they chose the particular student. Following this discussion, we reconvene as a whole class. Students then share their discussions to the entire circle. In my experience, white students have been quick to speak about their identification with the college students in the text. They have continually attested to the realization that their own well-intentioned racial scripts do indeed perform sociological work in daily life. Several have acknowledged how their daily testimonies have blinded them to their privilege, even as it has dismissed the subjugation of people of color.

To this end, several students of color have engaged the conversation. They have touched upon which racial testimonies they have encountered the most, both in life and on campus. Moreover, they have continually divulged how these testimonies have discounted their experiences of white supremacy. Usually without my aid, the discussion has often then turned to how the white students and students of color might have more fruitful and honest discussions about racism in contemporary America, authentic dialogues that move beyond racial storylines and help white students discuss race without falling prey to the testimonial formula of “confession, example, and self-absolution.”

The text works well even in the case of students feeling reticent about sharing their own feelings. The chapter’s focus on real college students allows for students to engage actors their own age. Therefore, even if students do not share, reflecting on the text still allows for a substantive discussion. Regardless, this class session has continually yielded very honest and helpful class discussions. Indeed, at the conclusion of one semester, I was informed that several students formed a reading group to read Bonilla-Silva book in its entirety.

Background and Theory

I decided to use Bonilla-Silva text on account of experiencing difficulty in structuring truthful and honest classroom conversations about white supremacy in contemporary America. I teach undergraduate courses on the history of the 20th century American religious experience. I often examine race and religion in the past. This certainly allows for both scholarly and critical distance, which often yields productive insights into the nature of white supremacy in the nation’s history. However, narratives of religion and Jim Crow can also easily morph into stories of the inevitability of American racial progress. Such historical events can condition students to misunderstand change over time and its relationship to the persistence of white supremacy. Indeed, the power, courage, and mythology of the religious crusades of the civil rights movement leads some of my students specifically, and Americans more broadly, to believe that white supremacy was completely exorcised from the soul of the nation. Racial inequalities in contemporary America then are viewed as the result of personal failure, not enduring systemic racial inequality.

This triumphant narrative—not to mention the fact that the first black President was the first president of college students’ teenage and adult years—can actually prevent honest and productive dialogue about the contemporary nature of racial inequalities in America. Indeed, despite the profound changes to America’s racial customs following the civil rights movement, a new racial structure has emerged, enabling the continuance of certain forms of white supremacy and racialized inequality. This “color-blind racism” has no regard for the strong and persistent white opposition and weakening of civil rights legislation. Racism is deemed dead. There is, therefore, no need to remain vigilant against racist practices and institutions, despite blatant racial inequality. As Chief Justice Roberts announced from the highest court in the land during a 2007 school desegregation case, “The way to stop discrimination on

the basis of race, is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” This is, in part, the challenge of talking about white supremacy and racial inequality in contemporary America: we are constantly told that we live in a “post-racial” society even as racial inequalities persist.

Derald Wing Sue’s (2015) book *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* is very helpful in thinking about how to approach discussions about race in a post-racial society. Sue encourages a pedagogy that aims, in part, to identify and examine racial biases and racial narratives that render white supremacy invisible. Once these scripts are named and their veneer of neutrality is removed, frank and fruitful discussion can occur. Moreover, we can then remain vigilant against such racial narratives. My search for texts that would facilitate such frank research-based dialogue among college students led me to Bonilla-Silva work.

Conclusions and Extensions

Pedagogy that focuses on racial narratives has important implications for teaching and learning in religious studies in the age of color-blind racism. First, it allows us to see the importance of examining past and present constructions of whiteness in religious studies. Narratives of whiteness are more than just stories. Rather, they are rituals. These rituals shape and affirm worldviews. They uphold that which is considered sacred, valuable, and good: whiteness. Naming and studying the ritualization of whiteness can help discussions about race and religion be more honest and fruitful.

Second, interrogating these narratives in religious studies classrooms can de-center whiteness in the study and teaching of religion. As Marla Frederick has written, in the study of American religion, whiteness has operated as a normative category, while the study of people of color is subsumed under various categories (e.g., African American religion, etc.) Naming and examining whiteness as a socially constructed ritual can not only aid discussions about race, it can also help us rethink the kinds of texts and assignments we give our students when we teach courses on the “American” religious experience.

Finally, examining the racial narratives of college students can aid white students in doing their own racial work. Too often the burden of classroom discussions on race are laid on the shoulders of students of color. Focusing on color-blind racial scripts can encourage white teachers and leaders to engage in self-examination. Indeed, for it is the practice of self-reflection that is a key component to the teaching and learning experience.

In light of the recent election, such honest and informed conversations and reflections on racism and white supremacy are a must. Our classrooms must better equip our students, of all races, to engage in pressing public conversations that epitomize color-blind racism. White supremacist groups and think tanks continue to align themselves with and champion “mainstream” politicians, respectable publications, and causes. However, they are increasingly eschewing the label “white supremacist” or “white nationalists.” Instead, they are associating under the banner of “populists,” “identitarians,” and/or “alternative/alt-right.” Their aim, they argue, is not racist. Rather they simply want to maintain and buttress white identity. As such inflicted rhetoric is increasingly heard from the Supreme Court, White House, and Congress, our classrooms must help our students understand how such racial narratives are not harmless, irrelevant, or aberrations in the American experience. They are the foundation of America’s new racial structure: color-blind racism.

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“Even Trump has Buddha-Nature” and “Trump as Lord Vishnu”: Teaching Buddhism and Hinduism in America as Critical Pedagogy

Ann Gleig, University of Central Florida

I was in Indonesia, attending the fourth annual conference of the International Association of Theravada Buddhist Universities when the election results came in. Being so far away in an unfamiliar place, made me feel all the more forlorn, and I was desperate to share my grief. So when I met an American at the conference, the first thing I blurted out was “Oh my gosh, are you devastated?”

The question was rhetorical so I was shocked when she replied, with very little affect, “Not at all.” In response, perhaps, to my look of bewilderment, she continued, “It’s just another impermanent arising in the wheel of *samsara*, isn’t it?”

My surprise turned to suspicion, however, when I discovered she was part of a Burmese contingent of monks, some of whom, the evening before, had dismissed my questions about Buddhist violence towards the minority Rohingya Muslims with the claim that it was “just the media” making something out of nothing. Was her lack of concern primarily a sign of Buddhist piety, I wondered, or a reflection of anti-Muslim Buddhist nationalism in Burma?

Later at a panel on the social relevance of Buddhism, another incident on a similar note jarred me. A junior female scholar delivered a thoughtful paper on interreligious dialogue in Indonesia, interweaving reflections of her own struggles to integrate her growing interest in Buddhism with her Muslim upbringing. The patronizing response of the senior monastic present not only managed to reduce a sophisticated autoethnographic paper to a narrative of self-discovery but also included a dig at attempts to reestablish the Theravada female bhikkuni lineage by claiming it was in tension with the teachings of *anatta* or no-self. I was livid! Would this monk be as quick to employ metaphysical doctrine to dismiss identity if his own agency and authority were in question? After all, on meeting me earlier, he had given me a biographical pamphlet, which detailed his numerous prestigious achievements from his early schooling to present monastic life. Where was his concern with *no-self*, then?

I returned to Florida with a heart weighed down by the global rise of religious nationalism, Islamophobia, and the employment of religious doctrines to erase the concerns of vulnerable populations and reinforce dominant, oppressive structures of power and privilege. All of these have been prominent features of the pre- and post-election North American landscape. As well reported, 81% of white evangelicals voted for a candidate who based his campaign largely on white ethno-nationalist populism, Islamophobia, racism, and misogyny. While some evangelical women denounced Trump’s bragging about sexual abuse, male evangelical leaders rushed to deliver theological apologetic defenses. David Brody, correspondent for the Christian Broadcasting Network, for example, tweeted “This just in:

Donald Trump is a flawed man! We ALL sin every single day. What if we had a ‘hot mic’ around each one of us all the time?” Scholars of American Christianity have produced potent critical analyses of this religious-nationalist landscape as well as useful pedagogical reflections on how to approach these topics in the religious studies classroom. Inspired by critical and feminist pedagogies, I will suggest ways by which scholars of Asian religions in America might promote critical thinking around these issues in their syllabi.

Trump as Lord Vishnu? Hinduism in America as Critical Pedagogy

The history of Asian religions in America provides no shortage of material to situate the present Islamophobic and anti-immigrant climate. The discrimination and violence faced in the late 19th and mid-20th century by Chinese and Japanese immigrants shows that American Muslims are the latest victims of a long history of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. After being invited to come and work in the California Gold Rush, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian immigrants successively found themselves the target of rhetorical and physical violence from white nationalist organizations such as the Asiatic Exclusion League as well as subject to a series of legal discriminations that culminated in the 1924 Asian Exclusion Act. The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II stands as a shameful reminder of how whole groups of Americans were stigmatized and incarcerated under a national climate of xenophobia. I explore this history through discussion-based lectures with close analyses of primary documents, images, and documentary clips.

Many prominent Japanese American Buddhists such as George Takei have spoken out against the proposed Muslim registry. To show how this issue cuts across religious traditions, I have incorporated material produced by the Blaine Memorial United Methodist Church in Seattle to mark the 75th Anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066 of 1942. Reverend Derek Nakano, the pastor of the church, asked his parishioners to share their own internment stories in support of immigrants and refugees. I have also included the Japanese-Muslim solidarity campaign #VigilantLove and images such as the tweeted photograph of a young boy holding a sign declaring, “Japanese Americans Against Muslim registry,” that went viral during the Women’s March on Washington.

These solidarity images and narratives function as nice segue to the South-Asian American immigrant experience. Over two classes structured around short lectures, class discussion, and analysis of Internet and multimedia clips, we unpack the analytical components of Vijay’s Prashad’s (2001) *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Building on W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 classic sociological text *The Soul of Black Folk*, Prashad argues that whereas African Americans have been constituted as “the problem” minority, Asian Americans have been constituted as “the solution” minority and used “as a weapon in the war against black America.” He explores the multiple ways in which American Hindus have internalized the “model minority” myth and perpetuated racism through their identification with whiteness as well as being subject themselves to violence and discrimination. One chapter, for example, focuses on “Yankee Hindutva,” and the devastating consequences of the construction of an essentialist and ahistoric Hindu identity for women and American Muslim and African American minorities.

This semester I use American Hindu responses to Trump as the primary material to read alongside the *Karma of Brown Folk*. The Republican Hindu Coalition (RHC) support for Trump shows parallels between Hindu and Christian religious ethno-nationalism and the internalization of the model minority framework. Take, for example, “The Hindus for Trump” Facebook page description: “American Hindus are model citizens, educated and industrious...” with its accompanying image of Trump meditating in a red, white, and blue lotus. Not all American Hindus have been thrilled by Trump replacing Lord Vishnu, however. The Alliance for Justice and Accountability (AJA), a coalition of progressive South Asian groups,

launched a counter campaign, #SouthAsiansDumpTrump, to denounce the anti-Muslim sentiments of the RHC.

We consider how American Hindu responses to the racist murder of Srinivas Kuchibhotla in Kansas illustrate Prashad's analysis. For example, the Telagnana American Telugu Association's (TATA) suggestion to American Hindus to only speak English in public places demonstrates the public/private split in which South Asian immigrants assimilate in the public sphere and confine their cultural and religious identity in the home. We look at the irony of Hindu Samhati president Tapan Gosh response for Hindus to wear the tilak and bindi for safety; in light of the Dotbusters hate group that was active in New Jersey in the 1980s and responsible for multiple acts of brutal violence against American Hindus; and we consider alternative responses of solidarity such as the #ModelMinorityMutiny and #AsiansforBlackLives, which illustrate Prashad's call for South Asians to join in solidarity with other minorities as an aspiration and promise, "crafted on the basis of commonalities and differences."

Even Trump has Buddha-Nature? Buddhism in America as Critical Pedagogy

I find much of the work involved in teaching Buddhism to my undergraduate students in Florida to revolve around the dismantling of their romantic and idealized notions of Buddhism as a transcendent philosophy focused on meditation and world peace. I begin with Donald S. Lopez's and Robert E. Bushwell's (2014) short but potent "10 Misperceptions of Buddhism," and have students identify the two that most surprised them. Unfailingly, they identify "All Buddhists Meditate" as the most shocking with "All Buddhists are Pacifists" and "All Buddhist are Vegetarians" as close competitors for second place. Current events provide Buddhist scholars with ample opportunity then, not only to raise critical awareness, but also to tackle some of the biggest misperceptions hindering our object of study. As a scholar of American Buddhism, I leave Burmese Buddhist nationalist violence aside and focus on how American Buddhist convert responses to the election put pressure on the privileging of meditation in the Western imaginary.

The class is structured around a threefold sequence of examining normative Buddhist perspectives, socio-political Buddhist critiques, and constructivist engaged Buddhist responses. First, students read the *Lion's Roar* e-publication "[After the Election: Buddhist Wisdom for Hope and Healing](#)," which features post-election reflections from popular Buddhist teachers in the United States. I put them into pairs and ask them to identify the main Buddhist doctrines drawn upon and how such reflections might translate on a social level. Next, we discuss Pablo Das's "[Why this gay Buddhist teacher is dubious about Buddhist refuge in the Trump Era](#)," in which he problematizes these responses as reflective of a privileged social location that negates the traumatic reality of marginalized communities. Das suggests that meditation practice and calls to "sit with what is" are not sufficient to create safety for vulnerable populations. He warns against using Buddhist teachings on impermanence, equanimity, and anger to dismiss the realities of such groups and calls instead for the creation of safe spaces inside Buddhist communities and support of social justice organizations as part of Buddhist practices of generosity. Finally, we look at Against the Stream's (ATS) "[Statement of Commitment](#)" as a constructivist American Buddhist response to Das's call. This statement declares that ATS is not "content to sit quietly" while the civil liberties of fellow Americans are under threat and advocates for specific rights of vulnerable populations framed as expressions of Buddhist teachings on wisdom and compassion.

This sequence aims to show that while there might be universal religious doctrines, there are no universal religious subjects: everyone is situated in a particular socio-cultural location marked by various degrees of privilege and this location mediates and shapes religious discourse. Hence, seemingly "universal" or politically neutral Buddhist teachings such as right speech, equanimity, and meditation

can function in reactionary ways to mask and reproduce dominant structures of power. Taken together, these apply pressure to students' naïve misperceptions of Buddhism as a transcendent, meditative "philosophy" and recover it as a religious tradition fully embedded in and enacted through specific sociocultural and political contexts.

Critical Pedagogy for What to Teach

The above exercises are inspired by critical pedagogy, an approach that aims to translate the insights of critical theory into social justice-oriented teaching practices. Brazilian social theorist Paulo Freire's (1968) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the seminal text in this pedagogical lineage, describes it as a means to make visible and transform inequitable and oppressive forms of power. Its aim is to develop learners who are able to critically reflect on their own and others' particular social-cultural situatedness and participate in the creation of just and equitable societies. In examining certain systems of belief, therefore, critical pedagogy shifts the focus from questions of truth to questions of power, with inquires such as: what populations does this belief system benefit and serve most? Critical pedagogy also emphasizes the collective, structural experience of individuals and is concerned with promoting solidarity between marginalized groups. Nancy Ares (2006) highlights the empathetic dimensions of critical or "transformative" pedagogy, which involves helping students recognize and challenge oppressive conditions in society not only for themselves, but for other vulnerable populations.

Critical Pedagogy for How to Teach

As well as what to teach, another question weighing heavily on many of us now is *how* to teach? One of the prompts for this edition of *Spotlight* was whether it was possible or admissible to maintain a stance of neutrality and objectivity when moderating discussions around the post-election landscape. Here feminist pedagogies, close cousins to Fiera's critical pedagogy, can inform us. Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar (2013) argues that the goal of being a "dispassionate investigator" governed solely by reason and logic simply confirms the "epistemic authority of the currently dominant groups." Following Jaggar, I suggest that the goal of being a "dispassionate facilitator"—far from being neutral or objective—simply confirms the authority of the current dominant regime. As feminist pedagogy has shown, there is no "view from nowhere," and, quite frankly, as a queer, gender nonconforming professor, I feel that it would generate more suspicion and distrust from students if I pretended I did not have strong ethical commitments around these issues.

Moreover, a goal of dispassionate facilitation assumes there are no real power differentials between views, and it risks injury to our most vulnerable students. While maintaining the classroom as a space for a diversity of views, I suggest tackling head-on the hijacking of liberal diversity discourse and promotion of false equivalencies that has been employed to chilling effect in the so called "alt-right." Consider the language employed in the White Student Union Facebook groups that sprung up as a backlash to Black Lives Matter in November 2015—these groups claimed to be "providing safe spaces for white students" and to represent a "countervailing voice against intolerance." Comments on the White Student Union at UCF page showed that many participants could not differentiate between white supremacist groups and ethnic minority student groups. As educators, it is our responsibility to help our students think historically and critically about how social and cultural differences are constituted by various forms of power and privilege and are not equivalent and simply interchangeable.

To do this type of challenging intellectual and emotional work I have found it essential to develop relationships with students, particularly with those whose worldviews are under interrogation. I do this in a variety of ways through intentional interpersonal contact and presenting material in a decentered,

transparent personal style. I have found that strategically using personal disclosure is an effective way to build rapport with students and also to help them relate individual experience to structural realities, a move many students seem to struggle with. For instance, I share my own experience of being a working-class, first-generation undergraduate student in a prestigious or “posh” university in the United Kingdom and how much anxiety and shame I experienced about things I felt marked me as “less than” my predominantly upper-middle-class peers such as my strong regional accent. Because my accent is one of the things that American students tend to find very endearing about me, it works really well as a personalized “way in” to think about class, social mobility, and different types of access and belonging. I also share my own ethical failures such as an experience I had when I did not sufficiently challenge a racist, anti-immigrant comment made by another white female passenger on a flight to the United Kingdom from Morocco. Many students can be extremely defensive around issues of race, and I have found that a little humility and vulnerability (“I got that wrong too”) can go a long way in defusing that defensiveness so that attention and energy can be focused on the most effective ways to recognize and combat discrimination (“So how can we get that right?”).

In short, I have found that if students feel seen and have some sense of emotional rapport, or as one of my students put it, that we are talking *to* them and not *at* them, they can tolerate more discomfort and pressure on their worldviews. Rather than be preoccupied by objectivity, then, I suggest we focus on how to build genuine affective relationships with and between students, relationships marked by trust and resilience that can best support uncomfortable, challenging but absolutely necessary conversations about difference, racism, white privilege, and Islamophobia.

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Hate Speech Red Flags: Recognizing Rhetoric that Justifies Killing, Violence, and Demeaning Others

Marit Trelstad, Pacific Lutheran University

The 2016 election, the fear of my students, and the rash of hate speech and crimes that rapidly followed, changed my teaching of Luther. It exposed a way to make his abhorrent writing about the Jews useful in a time of demeaning rhetoric. The day after the election, my syllabus dictated that we were to discuss Martin Luther's 1543 hate speech writing "On the Jews and Their Lies." But how could we discuss an academic text when students were reporting being called "the 'n' word" on campus or being asked when they would be deported? Other students were unaware of the sudden swell of sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Muslim rhetoric because they were not the targets. But the surge of hate speech was real, fresh, and extreme.

For teaching Luther after the election, I developed a class session in which we examined Martin Luther's anti-Semitic rhetoric and recommendations in the assigned treatise. Next we examined Luther using tools provided in the books *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave and Exterminate Others* by David Livingstone Smith (2011) and George Tinker's (1993) *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Genocide*. Smith's book reveals rhetorical forms and philosophical assumptions in genocidal propaganda of the last century. Tinker's book on American religious history reveals patterns of cultural genocide toxically embedded within the work of missionaries. The real learning took place by putting the lists of rhetoric, patterns, and policies from all three sources on the board next to one another and then opening it up for discussion.

Throughout the class period, covering Luther, Smith and Tinker, I was struck by the students' wide eyes and affect of "high alert." They were engaged and actively evaluating what was happening around us in the news and on our campus. They were interested in tools that might help them analyze the degree to which their fears were justified. I had planned to stop and directly ask about the ways in which Luther, Livingstone Smith, and Tinker elucidated policies and hate speech today. I did not have to. Some students immediately saw connections and offered comments on similarities and differences we were witnessing. At my university, in the polarized red-blue zone of Washington State, the exercises below gave concrete, specific criteria to discuss what constitutes hate speech and how it functions.

Background and Pedagogical Challenges

For a little background, I am a lifelong Lutheran; the church was my second home and I attended a Lutheran college. I was soaked in the message of divine grace and acceptance despite faults. It was not until after college that I had an Aryan Nation pamphlet stuck to my car windshield in Boulder, Colorado, that led with an anti-Semitic quote from Martin Luther. I had never been taught this side of Luther. When I later started teaching Lutheran heritage, I was determined to present the full story of Luther

“warts and all.” Luther’s various writings on the Jews, and Lutheran collusion with Hitler in the Second World War, are regular parts of my syllabi. Luther did not believe that human nature got better over time, even with God’s grace. He believed that humans were depraved and sinful and his own theological mix of sunshine and acid evidences this.

Lutheran scholars employ various approaches to work with these awful texts of Luther’s: they acknowledge and denounce them; they distance themselves; they historically contextualize them; they examine Luther’s charismatic and caustic personality. In the classroom, students who had appreciated Luther often walk in disgusted. Frequently, they feel betrayed or duped. Here is a man who was fighting unjust, manipulative power with words of grace—they had just started to like him—and now he is using power and hate against the Jews. I understand their feelings. I reread the text with them each time and feel physically ill. I warn them that they may never read any worse example of hate speech than Luther’s 1543 treatise. Invariably, students struggle to understand the relation between Luther’s violent recommendations of actions to be taken against the Jews and the ones enacted in World War II Germany. They are undeniably similar.

But it has bothered me that reading Luther’s “On the Jews” elicits passive guilt, self-vindication, historical curiosity, or just voyeurism. The text sits inert. Students and others are left judging Luther (appropriately), but the critical lens remains focused there—it does not turn its eye on ourselves or our society. This is partly due to the extremity of his writing which shocked even some of his historical contemporaries.

Passive Guilt Mobilized: The Specifics of the Exercise

Martin Luther

Smith and Tinker’s books provided the tools to examine Luther and our contemporary situation simultaneously. We started with Luther. I had the students highlight and compose lists of the names Luther called the Jews as well as the characteristics and crimes he attributed to them. The students had a hard time saying them out loud, and I had a hard time writing them on the board due to their truly severe offensiveness. But that experience of discomfort was important to the exercise; the list on the board confronted us. Luther uses the following words to describe the Jews whom he is scapegoating: idle, proud, mad, foolish, lazy, usurious, blasphemous against God and country, murderous, raving, greedy, envious. He accuses the Jewish Germans of acting like masters, taking money from “true” or “real” or “rightful” members of the country, kidnapping or harming the well-being of children, poisoning water, and infiltrating society. He argues that Jewish people are acting against “our” religion, which falsely creates the notion of a homogeneous population under “attack” by those within his own country. Throughout the treatise, Luther engages in dramatic name-calling. His exact words are: devils/demons, pigs, whores/sluts, beasts, vipers, wolves, fools, stupid, dogs, evil, thieves, rogues, and adulterers.

To place this in the context of Luther’s work, he describes the leaders of the Church by many of these same names and characteristics—and I point out that we had overlooked it in previous texts when he was speaking to the powerful. No one in class objected then. In his critique of the Church, however, he does not advocate the same *actions* against the Church as those he offers for the Jewish people. As a class, we named and listed the recommendations he proposes for the Jewish German people: expelling them from the country, razing and burning homes and places of worship, taking over businesses, denying them safe travel, arresting and detaining people in camps and making them work, destroying their sacred books, and displacing and threatening the lives of the leaders and people. In his text, Luther also appeals to a forced and false sense of unified nationalism. Indeed, he helps create the very concept

of a unified Germany. We talked about ways this mirrored policies and rhetoric against the Jews in Nazi Germany.

When the students assembled lists of Luther's name-calling, recommendations, and caricatures on the board, a few audibly muttered, "this sounds familiar." I asked what they meant and they recounted many incidents of Trump calling specific people and groups names, assigning "dangerous" characteristics to them, during the election. They also recounted the explosion of hate speech since the election. The seemingly positive "Make America Great Again" motto appeared to be supported by ideas that harkened to Luther's: support for detaining and deportation, economic distress of "real" Americans caused by vulnerable minorities, fear built around infiltration by "outsiders," and a false homogeneity of race and religion built around scapegoating. It was unsettling to feel connections between Luther's disgusting tract, the genocide of Jews in the last century, and rhetoric emerging in our own time.

David Livingstone Smith and Dehumanization

David Livingstone Smith's book specifically examines the psychology and rhetoric of genocide and dehumanization. A particular mindset needs to be established to enable people to mistreat or kill their fellow human beings. When we dehumanize another, it decommissions our inhibitions that would normally prevent our enacting cruelty on others. Through examining propaganda in multiple countries, Smith pulls the common elements of rhetoric (language and imagery) that supported genocide in the past century. In line with Smith, a National Geographic article in 2006 named the last one hundred years as the "century of genocide" due to the unprecedented number of mass murders across the globe. His book reveals that dehumanizing rhetoric, conducive to genocide, equates people to insects, snakes, invasive vermin, and undesirable or predatory animals. It also capitalizes on the assumption that someone's essential nature is fixed and subhuman ("less than human," as in the book's title) despite appearance of humanity. Someone does not just lie. They *are* a liar. "Subhumanity," Livingstone Smith writes, "is typically thought to be a permanent condition. Subhumans can't become humans any more than frogs can become princes" (159).

George Tinker

George Tinker's book *Missionary Conquest*, provides another valuable tool as he explains the patterns of actions involved in cultural genocide. He repeatedly assures his reader that missionaries acted with good intentions and yet committed atrocities. He is exceedingly clear that feelings of guilt will not prevent future genocide and oppression. He writes:

The implicit agenda of this book . . . is to raise a critical question for us to consider in our own historical and theological context, namely, What is our blindness today? With the best of intentions and with the full support of our best theologies and intellectual capabilities, do we continue to fall into the same sort of traps and participate in unintended evils? My presupposition is that without confronting and owning our past, as white Americans, as Europeans, as American Indians, as African Americans, and so forth, we cannot hope to overcome that past and generate a constructive, healing process, leading to a world of genuine, mutual respect among peoples, communities, and nations. (viii-ix)

Beyond this, he also reveals patterns of cultural genocide that were repeated in different areas of the Americas. In my class, we focused on these "red flags" (my phrase, not Tinker's) or patterns of cultural genocide present in Luther's writing and also perhaps today. Tinker urges his readers to familiarize themselves with these signs so that we pay attention and scrutinize potential larger patterns at work in seemingly discrete actions or policies. He outlines the following four consistent patterns present in

physical and cultural genocide:

1. Political signs: Threats “to control and subdue a weaker culturally discrete entity” (6).
2. Economic signs: “Using and allowing the economic systems, always with political and even military support, to manipulate and exploit another culturally discrete entity that is both politically and economically weaker” (7).
3. Religious signs: “Overt attempt[s] to destroy the spiritual solidarity of a people” (7).
4. Social signs, including:
 - “Obvious attacks on the relationships that bind a community together” (8).
 - Breaking up families and communities
 - Denial of language or criminalizing religious rituals
 - Displacing people from their homes or forced relocation

Conclusions and Extensions

Over the course of the class, we examined Luther’s text and contemporary rhetoric and policy with the criteria of Smith and Tinker in mind: Do we witness incidents of pinning humans with nonhuman names or characteristics? Do we see an attempt to ascribe permanent, bad essences to particular people and groups? Undeniably, Luther’s writing carries these marks of the genocide-supporting propaganda Smith explores. He repeatedly assures his reader that missionaries acted with good intentions and yet committed atrocities.

In terms of today, I could tell they were busy assessing whether the current presidential administration’s rhetoric and policy advocacy met the criteria for genocidal propensities. In a politically and emotionally charged atmosphere, students turned naturally, but cautiously, to applying our learning to the election. They described the persistence of name-calling by both sides in the election but noted that, in the debates, Trump’s rhetoric had untiringly depicted particular groups of people as *being* threatening, opportunistic, nasty, bad, or dangerous. We discussed how and whether the new Trump administration’s proposed policies were designed in ways that met Tinker’s criteria. All in all, the focus on specific types of language and socio-political patterns gave us concrete things to analyze in a chaotic time; it was a type of evaluative space through which we could navigate discussions.

My goal for the class was to offer students tools or signs that may indicate dangerous rhetoric and policy directions such that we do not recommit the errors of Luther that we so openly despise. Red flags themselves cannot confirm that we are actually dealing with genocidal intentions. Awareness can, however, calls us to analyze the situation and patterns of policies more closely. The work of Livingstone Smith warns that demeaning others is a precondition to greater and more dangerous oppression and thus attention to language is valuable. Tinker identifies the patterns in cultural oppression so that we can recognize them and resist. As scholars, we are committed to representing the material of our field, the content and canons. But if we are seeking a more aware, humane and just world, we also need to glean tools from our course material in creative ways.

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“Speed-faithing” Engages “Big Questions” and Builds Bridges of Empathy and Connection

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“What is the origin and meaning of your name?” asks the facilitator to the students who stand facing one another in two large circles in the middle of the room. “You have two minutes,” reminds the facilitator. “Remember, this is more a serial monologue than a dialogue. Each conversation partner should take a one-minute turn speaking while the other partner listens and then you will switch.” She can barely get these words out before students begin speaking animatedly with their partners.

After two minutes, she shouts above the growing din, “now stop, thank your partner, and students in the outside circle, shift one person to the left.”

Over the course of the next twenty to thirty minutes, students continue to speak with multiple conversation partners, sharing their thoughts on questions like, “Where do you feel most at home and why?”; “Did you grow up with a particular religious or spiritual tradition or a particular world view...what was it?”; “Do you adhere to that or to another tradition or world view now?”; “What is one of the core values that you hold that you would attribute to that tradition or world view?”; “What is a stereotype or an assumption that others have about those who share your religious tradition or world view that you would like to dispel?”; “What else would you like me to know about you that you haven’t already mentioned?”

This ice-breaker activity is called “Speed-faithing,” (like speed-dating). Sometimes it is also called, “Talk-Better-Together.” It was, as far as I know, first used by Interfaith Youth Core’s student-trainers at their regional Interfaith Leadership Institutes held each year in Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles. This organization, founded and directed by Dr. Eboo Patel, seeks to make “interfaith cooperation a social norm within a generation,” by training student leaders to build positive relationships on their campuses among people who orient around religion differently.

Today, speed-faithing is an activity used on a growing number of campuses throughout the country to encourage students to engage in the kinds of conversations that can very quickly build bridges of connection and empathy where none have existed before. As an exercise in meaningful sharing, it provides students with opportunities to talk about the “Big Questions” in their lives.

Before beginning the activity, students commit to practice “safe-space-dialogue-guidelines.” They agree to use “I” statements when they speak. In other words, this is not a time for proselytizing or debating Truth claims—but to speak as experts and owners of their *own* life-histories and experiences. They agree to speak vulnerably and honestly, but only as vulnerably as they are comfortable. Recognizing that a deeply held personal belief might run exactly counter to what their conversation partner believes, they

agree to listen with a certain level of personal detachment, and to give one another the benefit of the doubt when truth claims clash. They agree to hold what is shared tenderly and to fiercely protect the trust that their conversation partner has placed in them—what is shared in speed-faithing events, stays in speed-faithing events.

Over the last two years, I have facilitated this activity more than twenty times. I have used it in the classroom, at student-centered gatherings, in “Better Together Interfaith Ally” training workshops, and even in community settings where people want to strengthen their connections with one another. Every time I have, the results have been transformative, powerful, and immediate.

Each time we debrief the activity, participants note with surprise how easily they were able to talk with their conversation partners about topics normally considered “taboo” or “off limits” (especially in public university settings like ours). They note how good it felt to share some of their personal story—even with strangers—in an environment where they knew they wouldn’t be judged or censored. They note, with surprise, how much diversity of thought and opinion they experienced when sharing and listening to their partners—even when they shared the same religious (or nonreligious) backgrounds. They always comment on how much similarity they found between their own core values and those of conversation partners whose worldviews or spiritual commitments are very different than their own. And, they always, *always*, wish that there was more time to share and to listen. They leave the experience hungry to know more.

Why Speed-faithing is Useful on *Public* University Campuses in the Intermountain West

The Intermountain West is a unique region in the United States because of its vast and open landscapes, its low population, and the relative lack of opportunity for university students to engage daily with those who are religiously “different” from themselves. We know that, in the wake of the recent presidential election, religious “others” are increasingly targeted on college campuses. Where religious diversity is lacking and where students are ignorant of their religious privilege, the climate is certainly ripe for the kind of hate speech that stems from lack of empathy and connection. Perhaps *because* of this lack of diversity, there is an especially urgent need to build student capacity for positive interactions among those who orient around religion differently in this part of the country.

We know from the literature that authentic sharing, appreciative listening, and meaningful dialogue are necessary pillars when constructing these bridges of empathy and connection. Students *want* to have these kinds of dialogue on campus—both in and out of the classroom. This is, at least in part, because college students are in the business of exploring the “big questions” and “worthy dreams” that give meaning to their lives. A big part of this exploration includes the religious and spiritual orientations that are foundational to their identities as “emerging adults.”

On my public university campus in Utah, for example, a recent survey of incoming freshmen revealed that almost 90% of our students have at least *some* interest in having these discussions. This is the case whether they are members of the “majority” religion (about 70% of our incoming freshmen self-identify as being members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or “Mormons”), members of “minority” religious groups, or spiritual but not religious. Similarly, whether students identify as “post” religious, as secular humanists or agnostics, or even claim a “faith commitment” to atheism, our students want to explore how their experiences and allegiance informs their identities—both in and out of the classroom.

But, on university campuses such as mine, it is also easy for students to presume that lack of visible diversity means lack of difference. On our campus, students frequently choose to add to an *illusion* of

homogeneity by *choosing* to keep their own religious and spiritual commitments “closeted.” When we asked why, during a recent campus-climate study that I directed, students told us that it’s because they don’t feel safe “outing” themselves to others.

Whether Mormon or Buddhist, atheist or spiritual, our study found that students prefer to keep their faith-commitments private because they feel vulnerable and afraid of judgment. Even though students say they *want* to build bridges across religious-divides in order to feel more connected to members of the campus community who don’t share their faith-commitments, they’re not quite sure *how* to break the ice or how to get these conversations started.

Speed-faithing has helped to fill this void on our campus. It is an icebreaker that has—on every occasion I have facilitated it—helped students to make new connections. It has helped them to move beyond their comfort zones while opening space for more meaningful interactions with religiously different others.

Speed-faithing as a First Step Towards More Meaningful Connection

There is a decades-old wisdom that has guided religious studies classroom management. This wisdom has suggested—or at least presumed—that students leave their religious commitments at the classroom door when entering into the nonsectarian *study about religion* that religious studies exemplifies. The kinds of topics that speed-faithing addresses have often been discouraged, especially on public university campuses like mine.

But authors like Jake and Rhonda Jacobsen have countered this narrative. They have affirmed the importance of supporting the kind of dialogue that encourages students to consider how their faith-commitments impact other aspects of their lives. Opening this space has always seemed important to me and it has guided my teaching since the beginning of my career. As an anthropologist, rather than a religious studies scholar, I have actually had less “push-back” in the classroom when engaging students in these kinds of conversations about how their personal values impact their abilities to perceive the world. Perhaps this is because, as Ruth Benedict once put it, “the purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences.” And, at least in my mind, *religious* difference has never been excluded from Benedict’s dictum.

But the need to foster these kinds of dialogue seems even more urgent now, since the election. Because we are experiencing a moment in history where religious identities are increasingly politicized and polarized, we must provide our students with the tools for countering poisonous and divisive rhetoric, now more than ever before. For as Eboo Patel has noted, “If we don’t cultivate and advance a positive public language of religion we simply forfeit the territory to people who have poisonous public language.”

A very poignant example of the ways that religion can polarize Western communities was illustrated in a *New York Times* article last year about the small town of Pocatello, Idaho, which is home to Idaho State University, just ninety miles north of my home institution. When that university began heavily recruiting international students from oil-rich Muslim majority countries in the Middle East a few years back, Pocatello residents and Idaho State University students reacted. As the title of that March 21, 2016, article reported, [“The Middle East Came to Idaho State: It Wasn’t the Best Fit.”](#)

As the *New York Times* reported, normally friendly Westerners reacted. While some residents lobbied the city to block the construction of a proposed mosque, others lashed out on campus, leafleting cars with Islamophobic messages. One woman who was interviewed for the article reported that she lived in

a state of fear “that a jihad was going to occur in Pocatello.”

Some of the affected Muslim students countered. They complained of discrimination on campus—including being accused as “terrorists.” Many decided to transfer to other universities or to leave the United States altogether. This caused a loss of significant revenue to the university.

When this pre-election example is coupled with the rise of hateful rhetoric and poisonous speech that campuses have experienced in the days and months since the election, it is clear that we need to prepare our students for more positive engagement with religious others. As the Pocatello story amply illustrates, increasing religious diversity alone doesn’t necessarily translate to respect or appreciation for difference: Instead, this is something that we must cultivate.

In recent weeks, “religious freedom” legislation and policies that mandate “free-speech” zones on campuses are popping up all over the country. While perhaps well intended, these certainly don’t guarantee that all religious (or nonreligious) points of view get equal voice. Instead, finger-pointing, self-righteous grandstanding, and downright meanness has increased both on campus and in the public square as these efforts escalate. Civil discourse and a willingness to *listen* when others speak continue to decline as these measures are implemented.

To build capacity for appreciation across faith-lines and to cultivate a vision that values diversity as an asset, we need, instead, to provide our students with the skills that will bridge differences and cultivate positive relationships across religious divides. Speed-faithing can help cultivate this climate of appreciation and empathy because it teaches students to share authentically, to listen appreciatively, and to identify common values across boundaries of religious difference. It can help because it cultivates the kind of dialogue necessary to transform stereotypes and misperceptions as it builds connections among real individuals with real life histories and real “worthy dreams.”

I have found speed-faithing to be a valuable tool—both within and beyond the classroom. It is a tool that I have used to encourage dialogue and to build bridges of empathy and connection among participants. It is only one tool, and it only serves to open dialogue that must be supported and nurtured with other pedagogies. But, it is a good beginning as we—collectively—work to construct the bridges of cooperation and common concern that may just inoculate our campuses against the rising waters of intolerance that threaten to drown and destroy civility on campus.

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Engaging Issues from a Trump Presidency in the Classroom: Three Pedagogical Strategies

Fred Glennon, Le Moyne College

Introduction

Two days after the election, students from my college decided to hold a march on campus to protest the election results and its implications for America's future. The students in the march were mixed: white and black, Christian and Muslim, straight and gay. As the march was about to begin, some pickup trucks raced in front of the group carrying large flags: an American flag, a Trump flag, and a Confederate flag. The students of color near me burst into tears, realizing that this show of defiance on the part of a couple of students didn't understand their concerns over Trump's racist and misogynist statements; even worse, they either had no clue as to what the Confederate flag symbolized or were advocating white supremacy. Given that we were in Central New York and not the south, it was hard to see how it meant "southern heritage."

When I arrived in class the next day, we discussed the election, the events on campus, and what students were thinking and feeling. Like students on many college campuses, most were devastated by the election and aghast that some of their classmates could be so insensitive. But there were several Trump supporters in the class who were willing to voice their reasons for voting for Trump. They were quick to distance themselves from the bigotry displayed by the drivers of the trucks and the racist and misogynistic rhetoric used by Trump; but they wanted their classmates to know that they came from working class families who were struggling to make ends meet let alone put them through college. They felt a Trump administration would better address their economic needs and the issues they faced.

The response on the part of the other students in the class was respectful, demonstrating interest in the perspectives of their peers even though they didn't agree. The conversation went back and forth for about thirty minutes until everyone felt they had been heard. Why didn't they attack each other as some have done in other college settings? I contend this was because the students had crafted their own class covenant, one of the pedagogical strategies I will describe in this essay. Their discussions operated in accordance with that covenant the entire semester and kept doing so when they considered the Trump election.

Since the election, I have had numerous conversations with students in my current classes to look at the religious, social, political, and economic challenges raised by the Trump election. It doesn't hurt that the two classes I am teaching are on Church and State (Religion and Politics), and Ethics from the Perspective of the Oppressed. The content of each class lends itself to discuss important elements of a Trump administration. In this paper, I want to talk about three classroom strategies that have enabled

me to engage students in meaningful and civil dialogue about the aftermath (in terms of cabinet appointees and policies) of the Trump election as President.

First Pedagogical Strategy: Class Covenant

As is the case for many who teach religious studies and/or religious ethics, most of my classes are discussion oriented, where we tackle difficult issues such as reproductive health, economic justice, and the environment. To ensure engaged but collegial dialogue, I encourage students to develop what I call a class covenant. While others may describe similar strategies as ground rules for discussion, I use the language of covenant because of its strong emphasis on mutual responsibility and accountability.

During the first week of all my classes, I divide students into small, heterogenous discussion groups (my class sizes range from twenty-five to thirty-five students). I do this in a variety of ways but the goal is the same: form groups of students who are not necessarily friends to get them talking to people they may not know or who may be different from them.

Second, we form a class covenant. In their groups students are given certain prompts to develop this covenant. Those prompts include such questions as: *How should we treat one another in our groups? In class as a whole? Should we respect each other's opinions? How should we handle disagreements? What ground rules for our discussions should we follow?*

After about fifteen minutes, I ask the groups to report out to the larger class what they believe those ground rules should be. As you might imagine, many of them revolve around the various ways we should demonstrate respect to others. I record the ideas every group offers and then we narrow them down to a list of rules with which everyone feels comfortable. Here is the class covenant agreed upon by one class this semester:

- We should treat one another fairly (Golden Rule), which means we should respect others and their right to have opinions and beliefs different from our own.
- We should keep an open mind and welcome disagreement, trying to come to agreement when possible.
- When conflict and disagreement do arise, they should be “argued out” respectfully, which means really listening to each other to understand fully what the other’s point of view is rather than talking over one another.
- If there is no resolution, then agree to disagree.
- We should handle conflict peacefully and not make it personal.
- What is said in class should stay in class (confidentiality).

Most classes tend to develop a similar list of rules or covenant. The challenge, of course, is to be sure that everyone agrees to and abides by these rules. I do this in a number of ways. First, I ritualize the rules; after all, I teach religion. Once the rules are agreed upon, I have students stand and make a pledge to one another to abide by the covenant they had made. Second, I publicize the rules. Each student gets a copy of the covenant. The covenant also goes on to the welcome page of the learning management system we use (Canvas). When I sense that a class discussion might be contentious given the

personalities in the room, I put the class covenant up on the overhead so that students are mindful of their responsibilities toward one another. Third, I emphasize accountability. I remind the students that the responsibility for enforcing the covenant rests with them, not me. If they see a classmate violate the covenant, it is their responsibility for drawing the student's attention to the violation. This is not easy for them at first, but with practice through the semester, they become more comfortable during those few times when it is necessary, which it was not the day after the election.

Second Pedagogical Strategy: Case Studies

In many of my Religious Ethics classes, I have found case studies to be a helpful pedagogical tool to involve students in meaningful dialogue about significant issues. In my class on the relationship between Church and State (Religion and Politics), we always explore some of the boundary and authority issues implicated in trying to keep religion and government separate. Some of the questions we discuss include: How extensive should the boundaries between religion and government be? Should there be a "wall of separation"? What does it mean to make sure that government does not establish a religion? Is this even possible (or desirable)? How do we protect the free exercise of religion for every citizen or non-citizen?

One locus of our exploration is the public funding of religion. This semester we have focused on the Supreme Court case, *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, where the Supreme Court in a 5-4 decision ruled that providing school tuition vouchers to be used at private, mostly religiously affiliated schools by individual families did not violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Considering the Betsy DeVos confirmation as Education Secretary, whose entire career has been to promote school vouchers to improve elementary and secondary education, this case was timely. Aside from excerpts from the case, students read the backdrop for the case, the results of the Cleveland school voucher program (where over 90% of the vouchers were used at church-related private schools), and some studies regarding the effectiveness of vouchers in improving educational outcomes.

Students then do a social goods exercise where they are asked to distribute the social good of a good education. They are asked the following questions: On what basis would you distribute this good (what criteria would you use and why)? How should it be distributed? Who should distribute it? What would you say to people who disagreed with your decision?

The discussion sparks a lively debate about this good, especially on the question of who should distribute it. They raised important questions about public education versus vouchers and can analyze the key questions related the Trump Administration's appointment of Betsy DeVos as the Education Secretary, who is on record as saying that her efforts on behalf of school choice is in part a desire "to confront the culture in which we all live today in ways that will continue to help advance God's Kingdom" (Wermund). While most students felt it was appropriate for religiously affiliated schools to offer education, they disagreed with the argument that taxpayer money should be used for this purpose (even though several of them had gone to Catholic high schools). Vouchers used at religiously affiliated schools, they argued, violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. I encouraged them to voice their concerns to their elected officials.

Of course, Betsy DeVos might see this as an example of indoctrination. In her speech at Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), she made this suggestion to the college students who were present: "The fight against the education establishment extends to you too. The faculty, from adjunct professors to deans, tell you what to do, what to say, and more ominously, what to think. They say that if you voted for Donald Trump, you're a threat to the university community. But the real threat is silencing the First

Amendment rights of people with whom you disagree." Contrary to her opinion, I do not tell my students what to think. I respect all the First Amendment rights of my students, including their right to exercise their religious freedom, something I doubt her dominion theology has in mind (Glennon).

Third Pedagogical Strategy: Experiential Learning

John Dewey contends, "An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance" (1966, 144). Over the years, I have found Dewey's contention especially true with helping students to understand the multi-faceted dynamics associated with social injustice and inadequate public policies which are central to my class on Ethics from the Perspective of the Oppressed. I teach in an institutional context where most students come from somewhat privileged, mostly suburban and rural backgrounds. They have internalized, often unconsciously, a variety of stereotypes about minorities, the poor and the homeless, such as lazy, irresponsible, and the like. Most of them lack any clear understanding of the institutional, policy, and structural injustices and barriers the poor and the homeless face (such as poor educational systems, low wages, and lack of affordable housing). Therefore, in this class, I use a variety of experiential learning strategies, from simulations to a social justice action project, to break down these stereotypes, some of which have been perpetuated by members of the Trump Administration. One such simulation I use is a strategy I call "Eviction Notice." The purpose of this teaching tactic is to lead students to understand through simulation at least one aspect of the obstacles the poor and homeless face: carrying on one's responsibilities without a place to call one's own.

In preparation for class, students are broken into groups to read different chapters of a book that highlights the behavioral and structural problems associated with poverty and homelessness. I have used such texts as Shipler's *The Working Poor* and Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*. When they arrive at their classroom, the door is locked and an eviction notice is posted advising them that until further notice they are unable to meet in any classroom (by order of the Registrar). At times, I will even use brightly colored tape barring access to the door. I feign ignorance regarding the problem and lead the students to a nearby hallway where I have them engage in a cooperative learning strategy called "jigsaw," in which different groups teach one another the material from their respective chapters. (Just because you can't meet in the classroom doesn't mean you don't fulfill your teaching-learning obligations). Meanwhile, I go in search of a resolution to the classroom problem. After working for 15 minutes in the hallway, an "angry" official from an office comes and asks us to vacate the premises because we are disruptive and do not belong here. We go to a different hallway and are again asked to leave by another official. Eventually, we make our way outside (which in February in Syracuse can be a chilling experience).

The combination of the reading, the cooperative learning, and the eviction notice has been an effective strategy in enabling students to become conscious of the many obstacles faced by the poor and the homeless and of their own stereotypes. In processing the experience with them, they note how uncomfortable they felt outside of their normal classroom surroundings and in the face of the glares and stares they received by passersby. They also comment on how difficult it was to stay focused on the task before them. In their reflection papers, they can connect the entire strategy with a new awareness that the problems associated with poverty and homelessness are not just behavioral but also structural. The difficulties the working poor face transcend racial and familial boundaries. Black, white, poor, two-parent, and single parent families are all struggling in relationship to the multiple impediments they face when trying to move out of poverty and into the mainstream middle-class. After engaging in this simulation, many students can understand the dynamics that have frustrated the working poor, many of whom are Trump supporters. At the same time, the strategy leads to discussion about how budget

proposals to cut back on key government programs, such as Medicaid and Food Stamps (SNAP), in favor of increased defense spending and tax cuts for the upper classes, perpetuate the problems that many working-class families, even those who supported Trump, experience.

Conclusion

These pedagogical strategies, a class covenant, case studies, and simulations, may not be applicable to all institutional settings, although I think there is room in all classrooms, large and small, for some modified use of them. Nor do I think these are the only effective tools to enhance student learning about issues related to the causes and consequences of the election of President Donald Trump, as the other essays in this edition of *Spotlight on Teaching* make clear. In my classes, however, these three pedagogical techniques have been helpful for me and my students both for and against the Trump Administration and its policies as we grapple with the implications of his presidency. The class covenant provides a safe space for students to participate in civil discourse in our common search for truth, respecting the differences that exist among us. The case study method provides a way for students to think through all the dynamics and implications of the Trump Administration's public policies, from immigration to school choice to climate change. Experiential learning techniques provide the opportunity for students to place themselves in the shoes of those most affected by these policies and to envision what the best arrangements would entail. This has been my experience thus far. I am sure that the next four years will provide ample opportunity to implement these and other teaching strategies to engage students in thoughtful reflection on what is best for the common good of all persons and to encourage them to use what they learn to advocate for the kinds of policies they think will bring it about.

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