



## *Teaching the Moral Traditions of Others*

### *Spotlight on Teaching*

Frederick Glennon, Editor

*The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Lerone Martin, Chair) 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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*Image: Guanyin, pictured in this statue in Dali, China, is a key heavenly bodhisattva who embodies the virtues of compassion and mercy important in Mahayana Buddhism. Picture by Fred Glennon.*

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Alex Snow** is teaching assistant professor in the religious studies program at West Virginia University. For the past two decades he has been avidly studying, writing, and teaching mostly on Asian conceptions of "self," "sound," and "place." His research and teaching embeds these ideas within the comparative context of Japanese Zen, Islamic Sufism, and the theoretical/cosmological sciences. His current courses at WVU include: Introduction to World Religions, Religions of India, Religions of China and Japan, Studies in Asian Scriptures, Religion and Science, Comparative World Theologies, Religion and Mysticism, Religion and Music, and Zen Buddhism. As a coincidental and professional extension of his own continued globe-trekking, he led study abroad programs to Japan during the summers of 2013 and 2014 and will be leading two more this upcoming summer of 2015: one to Vietnam and Cambodia, and the other to southern Spain.

## Teaching the Moral Traditions of Others

Fred Glennon, Le Moyne College

Most Americans accept the notion that we should learn more about religious traditions other than our own (Wuthnow 2007). In our post-9/11 world, we recognize how difficult it is to comprehend fully the actions of religious people without understanding the impact their religious traditions have had on their motivations and behavior. One result of this new interest is that the comparative study of religion and religious ethics has become a critical part of today's liberal arts education. A quick review of the [Syllabus Project](#), a joint effort between the AAR and the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning, reveals a plethora of courses dedicated to this task.

Of course, those in the field of religious studies in general, and in religious ethics in particular, have been making this claim for some time. The modern field of comparative religious ethics dates back to the founding of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* in 1973, whose purpose is to publish the very best work in religious ethics with an emphasis on comparative religious ethics. At the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, a group of ethicists, many of whom are associated with the *JRE* in the past and present, believed that the field of comparative religious ethics was too important to be left to the periodic panels and presentations of the AAR's Ethics Section. [They claim](#): "Indeed, comparative ethics may be desperately needed in our contemporary context of global interdependence, misunderstanding, and mutual mistrust. There are thus ample grounds, both social and purely intellectual, to suggest that this ethical variety needs to be engaged directly via rigorous comparison. Comparative ethics makes such diversity central to its analysis." The AAR's Program Committee agreed with their assessment, and thus a Comparative Religious Ethics Group has been part of the annual meeting since 2006.

While scholarship in comparative religious ethics is an important area of research, presentation, and publication for scholars of religion, an equally important task is the *teaching* of comparative religious ethics for many of the same reasons. The global citizens who will engage with one another economically, politically, and socially are our current and future students. To break down the walls of misunderstanding and to foster mutual trust among people of diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, it is imperative that scholars of religious ethics find ways to translate their research and scholarship into successful pedagogical strategies for our students. To its credit, the Comparative Religious Ethics Group is aware of the importance of this task and at the annual meeting in Baltimore in 2013 dedicated one of their sessions to the following theme: "Pedagogy and Comparative Religious Ethics: Teaching the Moral Traditions of Others." This theme is the focus of this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching*; most of the contributors were participants in that session.

One challenge for those who want to teach the moral traditions of others is deciding on the content for comparison. Do we teach the religious traditions and highlight and compare the moral frameworks embedded within? Or do we adopt an issues-based approach and illustrate how those are addressed within different religious traditions? The challenge for the latter approach is that students do not have the depth of insight into the traditions to achieve a full grasp on either the reasons for a tradition's particular stance on a social issue or the diversity of perspectives within those traditions. Moreover, it is difficult to address the many ethical issues that confront us with much depth or substance. The challenge for the former approach is to attract the interest of students who want to see how religion is "relatable" to the ethical issues they deem important, especially in liberal arts contexts where courses in religious ethics are only one possibility for meeting a general education distribution requirement.

The authors in this edition of *Spotlight* understand these concerns regarding content and approach in various ways. Rosemary Kellison, who writes about her efforts in a course on Islam, has chosen the traditions-based approach. She focuses on the broad theme of sexual ethics and explores with her students not only the multiple ways Islamic communities have addressed that theme but also puts it into the historical, political, and social contexts out of which the concerns associated with sexual ethics emerge. In this way, they have the tools to examine critically ethical arguments. Irene Oh agrees that to bring students to a point where they can understand and engage the religious traditions' perspectives on ethical issues she must bring their knowledge of those traditions up to a satisfactory level. Only then can they meaningfully compare the traditions on important issues. In a similar vein, Nahed Artoul Zehr contends that understanding the evolution and practice of Islamic law can only occur by sustained focus on its nuances and complexity.

Steven Benko suggests that one way to enable students to become critical thinkers is by focusing upon a fundamental and powerful concept and using that concept for the basis of comparison. The term he chooses to use in his class is the term comparison itself. He asks students not only to define the term but to engage the religious traditions around that concept, noting similarities and differences. The result, he contends, is that students not only have a clearer sense of the comparisons but end up with a clearer sense of the study of religion, which is comparative by its very nature. As it relates to teaching the moral traditions of others, one could use a variety of ethical concepts, such as fairness, to enable students to get a better sense of the comparisons of different traditions.

This notion of using a single concept or issue as a basis of comparison is present in many of the essays in this edition of *Spotlight*. Oh's focus on interfaith marriage is a way to engage students meaningfully in in-depth comparisons, especially since sexuality and marriage are of special interest to many of the traditional-age students we teach. The same could be said of Kellison's focus on the theme of sexual ethics. Mark Larrimore uses *kuyo* rituals of Japanese Buddhism to draw students' attention to the "wider moral communities" in which they are enmeshed, communities which include more than the living human. In this way, he engages them in discussions about their own moral agency in relationship to a variety of ethical issues in comparison to the approaches taken by Buddhist and Christian traditions.

Of course, the content of teaching other peoples' moral traditions is not the only challenge. The challenge is also *how*. Elizabeth (Betsy) Barre signals a note of caution about the common pedagogical strategy of "bracketing" our own perspective when encountering a religious tradition different than our own. When it comes to the moral traditions, she rightly notes that these are "making claims upon us," and that bracketing may be unsuccessful when confronting ethical issues about which our students, many of whom are moral dualists, may have strong feelings. A better approach in her view, and which has strong support in the scholarship of teaching and learning, is to encourage students to get in touch more consciously than they are with their own moral frameworks and to bring these into dialogue with

the religious traditions of others. There will be lively debate, but if we construct a respectful and safe classroom space, the debate will be both critical and civil.

With this caution in mind, what are the most effective strategies? All the contributors affirm that, while lectures have their place, active learning strategies provide the basis for deeper understanding and engagement with the content and comparisons. Zehr combines the strategies of small groups, case studies, simulations, and role playing to enable her students to understand more fully the varieties of legal reasoning used by Islamic scholars. Similarly, Barre contends that the performative aspect of role playing and taking on the perspective and position of those who hold a view different from your own is a crucial way for students to gain some level of empathetic appreciation for the view of the other without feeling that they violate their own moral frameworks. Benko employs the semester-long strategy of online journaling where students have the freedom to choose the terms for comparison which gives them the confidence to refine their understandings and to make stronger arguments in support of them. Larrimore makes use of the seminar format, where students take an active role in discussion and where they are able to generate “a shared language of inquiry” evidenced in the class wiki discussion. The key to determining which strategies to use, as the contributors note, is to have a good understanding of the students in the classroom and the institutional context in which we teach.

The world into which our students will graduate is a place where “intercultural knowledge and competence” and “ethical reasoning and action” are extremely important (AAC&U 2007). Not only do they need the opportunity to think more fully and more critically about their own moral frameworks, they also need to understand the perspectives of the others they will inevitably encounter, many of whom are motivated by religious traditions. By teaching the moral traditions of others in relationship to the significant ethical issues we face, teachers and scholars of religion can contribute meaningfully not only to global emphasis of the academy and to the goals of a liberal education, but also to development of responsible citizenship.

## Resources

Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2007. *College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Wuthnow, Robert. 2007. “Religious Diversity in a ‘Christian Nation’: American Identity and American Democracy,” in Thomas Banchoff, ed., *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

## Educating Students as Immanent Critics of Religious-Moral Traditions

Rosemary B. Kellison, University of West Georgia

### Introduction

As a teacher of religious ethics, I am regularly asked by students to explain such things as “what Muslims believe about abortion” or “what Islam teaches about torture.” I used to answer this sort of question with a disclaimer about the range of opinions on any given moral problem within any particular religious community, but I found to my dismay that such a response tended only to elicit a further question: “Okay, but which of those different opinions is the *right* one—in other words, what does the Qur’an say?” There are a lot of assumptions built into that question: that the Qur’an gives one simple answer to any of these questions, that the Qur’an dictates the positions and actions of contemporary Muslims, that there is a consensus among Muslims on how to interpret the Qur’anic text. As Talal Asad (2003) has pointed out, these assumptions are shared by many Westerners. In my interactions with students, I have found that these same assumptions are often made of any religious community. It therefore became important to me to adapt my pedagogy to give students the tools necessary to shed these assumptions and ask more critical questions about religious ethics.

I am very pleased that the title of this edition of *Spotlight on Teaching* refers to teaching the moral *traditions* of others, because this emphasis on traditions reflects the direction I have taken in my teaching. In earlier attempts at teaching religious ethics, I took an issue-based approach; for instance, I might assign students two articles by Muslim thinkers, one defending capital punishment and one against it. However, this approach fit too well into the paradigm expressed by the sorts of questions recounted in the previous paragraph, leaving students with the impression that one or two individuals could adequately represent the entire community.

### Traditions-Based Approach

In an attempt to do a better job of challenging my students’ assumptions, I took a new tradition-based approach in a semester-length upper-division philosophy course on Islam. I devoted a full unit of the course to ethics, but rather than treating several different issues, I instead chose one broad theme—sexual ethics. In order to encourage contextualization of these issues within a tradition, before beginning this unit we worked through units on the interpretation of the Qur’an as well as on the historical development of the sharia tradition, including both the ways in which decisions are made and how these methods have been developed and debated over time. We also read a sampling of translated primary sources and secondary analysis of the colonial period and the related Islamic reform movements. Once we turned our attention to sexual ethics in particular, this background empowered students to capably make use of sources from a variety of genres and historical periods. What they now saw was not one or two dehistoricized opinions on polygamy or adultery, but instead several contributions to a centuries-long conversation—each of which claims, implicitly or explicitly, to be offering the best interpretation of that tradition.



In the context of Islam, one of the valuable lessons students learn through exposure to the history of colonialism and Muslim responses to it is that the aforementioned assumptions of what might be called Qur'anic literalism and determinism are in fact made not only by Westerners, but also by many contemporary Muslims themselves who deploy particular interpretations of scripture to defend certain constructions of orthodox, legitimate "Islam" (see Kecia Ali's [2014] comments on the "Protestantization" of Islam). Thus, when students seek to identify one moral position as the authentically "Islamic" one, they are themselves making a political move. Teaching traditions as traditions thus supports the achievement of several different learning objectives. At the most basic level, students learn (a small percentage of) the range of answers Muslims have given to some ethical question. At a more critical level, they learn about the different strategies Muslims use and the traditional and other sources on which Muslims draw to craft and justify their answers. Finally, students learn something about the ways traditions are constructed and reconstructed by interested individuals and communities. One thing that quickly becomes clear to students when learning according to this model is that it is very rare for any Muslim—whether clergy, jurist, scholar, or layperson—to justify one's moral position, no matter how radical or innovative it might seem, as a rejection of or as independent of Islamic tradition. Instead, some attempt is almost always made to legitimate one's argument as a faithful reading of that tradition.

The move toward tradition-based ethics in my teaching reflects a similar development in my scholarship (Kellison 2014), reflecting the influence of a particular strand of pragmatist philosophy. This body of work builds on Hegel's insight that the content of concepts is not fixed, but rather is constantly changing over time as individuals and communities use and apply concepts in new ways. Over time, the history of applications of a given concept within some community forms a tradition that is taken as authoritative for community members. Contrary to my students' initial expectations, this does not mean that there is some single "right" way to use a concept, as dictated by a tradition. Rather, traditions are long and diverse, offering many different precedents to which one may appeal in support of one's own interpretation. There will be, within the long and varied history of Islamic writing and practice, precedents for almost every method of Qur'anic interpretation, almost every position on some moral problem, almost every way of understanding central concepts and terms, and almost every perspective on how one should go about attempting to understand such concepts or formulate such positions. Therefore, at any moment there are likely to exist several different applications of any given concept, each of which is presented as if it is alone the legitimate and proper use. Of course, the tradition is still relevant; there is good reason to devote significant time to teaching its resources to students. Not only is the tradition the wellspring of precedents from which one will choose in crafting one's own contributions, but the success of those contributions depends in part on how well one is judged to have interpreted the tradition. Hegel interpreters Robert Brandom (2002) and Jeffrey Stout (2004) argue that other members of the community grant authority to some use of a concept when they treat it as a legitimate interpretation of traditional precedents. I would add that other factors, including the social status of the speaker, the relationship between the speaker and listener, and the political and cultural debates into which a given argument is intervening also have a strong effect on which arguments are taken as authoritative.

My hope is that by equipping students with an understanding of both traditional sources and traditional strategies of argumentation, along with basic knowledge of some of the most significant historical and political context, I have given them the tools to begin to work as immanent critics of the tradition under study. That is, students now can act as others in the community would when confronted with some argument claiming authority based on tradition, as most religious arguments do. They can more critically examine religious ethical arguments, looking not just at the bare logic of an isolated argument but

instead at the wider context in which that argument was made. They are able to identify patterns of reasoning typical to a given community, to assess arguments as more or less likely to succeed within that community, and to begin to reflect on why particular arguments might be made by particular persons at particular times. For their final research papers, students engaged in the immanent critique of Muslim arguments, producing some of the most critical scholarly work I've received from undergraduates.

### Conclusions and Extensions

The strategy of teaching tradition-based ethics was made much easier in the case described above by the fact that the course was focused only on Islam; given limitations of time, instructors of comparative courses might find it harder to achieve such a holistic approach. In my own world religions course, for example, while I still emphasize the structure and form of traditions and the ways in which they are constructed and reconstructed by various parties, I am unable to provide nearly the amount of content that would enable students to perform sophisticated immanent critiques of their own; I instead attempt to provide scholarly examples of such critiques. Additionally, the focus on argumentation and justification characteristic of this course was shaped in part by the fact that I teach in a philosophy program; instructors in other departmental settings might choose to focus on traditions of practice rather than of thought. One potential downside of this approach is the loss of the breadth of topics I used to be able to cover in a single course. My choice to focus on the specific area of sexual ethics came at the expense of analyzing other equally interesting conversations going on among Muslims about such issues as the morality of war, political ethics, and biomedical ethics, for instance. However, it is my hope that receiving preliminary training in just one of these areas develops in students some of the capacities needed to become skilled immanent critics of arguments made in any tradition.

### Resources

Ali, Kecia. 2014. *The Lives of Muhammad*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

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## Marriage and Moral Traditions of Others: Teaching Religious Ethics and World Religions

Irene Oh, The George Washington University

### Introduction

On a Tuesday morning, about two-thirds of the way into the semester of our Ethics and World Religions undergraduate course, I begin our class discussion on the topic of marriage by asking, “Does your family have certain expectations about whom you may marry?” Students laugh. They often share their parents and grandparents’ desires for them to marry a person who meets very stringent, seemingly impossible criteria.

One woman states: “My grandmother wants me to marry not just someone Jewish, but a Russian Ashkenazi Jew who speaks Russian fluently and belongs to a Conservative congregation. And, of course, English, because my parents don’t speak Russian. My parents want me to marry someone with a graduate degree. And, oh yeah, it should be a guy.”

I inquire further: “What would happen if you brought home someone who was not of your religious background?”

One student responds: “My parents told me that it was fine for me to *date* someone who was different, but that I had to *marry* someone who was also Catholic, preferably Italian Catholic. I did date a Hindu girl in high school, and my parents were OK with that since it was just dating, but I have to actually marry someone Catholic.”

In this particular segment on marriage, we look at interfaith marriage as a means of literally bringing together multiple religious traditions and examining traditions as ethical practices. We begin to approach the topic by reading a variety of materials, many of which are found online. I ask my students to find policies from different religious institutions about the performance of interfaith marriage, read newspaper op-eds and blogs about the interfaith marriages, analyze passages from scriptures about endogamy and exogamy, and review statistical surveys about interfaith marriages in the United States. The students then come to class, write a five-minute, ungraded reflection piece about the readings, and watch short video clips of interfaith marriage ceremonies. Through these materials, they tend to examine self-reflexively their own religious traditions, but also begin see how these traditions affect others and how the religious traditions of others may affect them. While a number of topics that we cover in the course do not apply directly to most students’ lives (e.g., stem cell research), the topic of marriage feels personally relevant for many. At a time in their lives when they are becoming independent adults and forging powerful emotional connections with others, students often find the topics of dating and marriage inherently fascinating and topical.

Upon encountering the texts and films and then discussing interfaith marriages in a culturally diverse classroom, students begin to realize both the complexity and the nearness of religious ethics. They sense religious traditions as text, experience, and community. They also note how so-called religious values are often closely intertwined with the expectations of ethnic groups and linguistic communities, and how the social and economic expectations of their families may both reinforce and conflict with religious values. Students observe how people interpret, follow, or ignore religious teachings about marriage. They ask—and are sometimes afraid to answer—difficult questions about personal limits of religious and racial tolerance. Most significantly, they see first-hand through the institution of marriage how they themselves, as individuals and members of communities, interpret and construct religious practices.

One goal of teaching religious ethics in an academic setting is for students to analyze religions as human institutions—changing through time and space, socially dynamic, and ethically relevant. The topic of marriage brings to the fore all of these aspects of religious traditions. The complexity of interfaith marriages adds to the mix the reality of diversity. All too often, religious traditions are discussed in silos—we'll spend a few weeks on Judaism, then move onto Christianity for a few weeks, then move onto Islam. But throwing a discussion of interfaith marriages into the mix pushes students to think seriously not only about each others' religious beliefs, but also about how people with differing religious beliefs in the same communities value each other. There are other topics that will accomplish this, as well—in particular, comparisons of just war theory, which we also cover in *Ethics and the World Religions*—but the discussions of marriage are, simply put, more fun.

### **Structuring the Syllabus: Practical Considerations**

*Ethics and the World Religions* is a discussion-based undergraduate class offered through the religion department at The George Washington University. The twenty-five or so undergraduate students range from first years to seniors and major in a number of different fields. They take the class sometimes out of interest, often to fulfill a curricular requirement, and always because it fits into already packed schedules. There are no prerequisites.

In *Ethics and the World Religions*, I assign students a combination of texts, online sources, and film clips to teach undergraduate students about ethical aspects within communities that practice Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and (briefly) Sikhism. Following the assignments, we meet twice a week and begin each session with a short, nongraded writing exercise. I will sometimes provide a prompt, but often allow the students to write about any aspect of the assigned topic. I occasionally ask students to share what they have written as a springboard to the day's discussion. Having taught some variation of this course for over a decade, I have found that class discussion benefits greatly from a few minutes (no more than five) of written reflection. Students recall what they have already read more easily, and substantive discussion begins more quickly.

Although I try to limit lectures, I have found that because the large majority of my students come to this class not having taken any courses in religious studies, lectures help to assure that students have some baseline knowledge of the religious traditions covered in the course. In fact, after several years of teaching the course by topic, I rearranged the course syllabus by religion. Approximately ten of fifteen weeks are arranged by religion, beginning with Hinduism and ending with Sikhism. The last third of the course is spent examining religious traditions in relationship to each other. During this portion of the semester, we delve into the topics of marriage, just war, and economics. Although I was initially hesitant to teach an ethics course by "silos" of religious traditions, I found that by dividing my syllabus in this way

I was able to bring my students' knowledge of religions up to a satisfactory level for engaged classroom discussions. One unexpected benefit of arranging the syllabus this way is that students are able to see diversity of views within each religious tradition. Even within relatively small religious communities, like Sikhism, we are able to discuss through a case study on the wearing of kirpans (ceremonial daggers) in public schools that Sikhs are not homogenous in their views of the topic.

### **Institutional Context: Who is the Other?**

Teaching about religious and moral diversity at an institution like The George Washington University has inherent advantages. The student body is remarkably diverse in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and nationality. Also, students often come to study in Washington, DC, because they are interested in politics and are engaged with many of the ethical issues covered in the course syllabus. I try to use this diversity and passion for politics during class discussions and encourage—if students are comfortable—reflecting upon and sharing observations about religious practices in their home communities.

Adapting the class to other institutional settings would require taking note of who constitutes the student body. While a more religiously homogenous institution would seem initially a disadvantage, such a setting presents opportunities for reflecting upon religious diversity within traditions. Indeed, one concern about the diverse classroom is the danger of tokenism—that the lone Hindu or Pentecostal or Baha'i student becomes the voice for all belonging to that respective tradition. As noted above, one difficulty of teaching a world religions course is emphasizing the diversity within a religion, but with a large number of students belonging to a particular tradition, intrareligious diversity is almost guaranteed.

Many students report that the conversations that they have with other students constitute the most memorable aspect of "Ethics and the World Religions." In other words, although the assigned work and lectures may lay the foundation for learning about the moral traditions of others, the face-to-face encounters with others in a structured classroom setting is intellectually, and perhaps even morally, transformative.

### **Resources**

Pew Research Center. May 12, 2015. "America's Changing Religious Landscape." Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

## **Using Group Work and Case Study to Teach about Islamic Law**

Nahed Artoul Zehr, Western Kentucky University

### **Introduction**

Though I have only been teaching college students for a few years, there are a number of lessons that I learned within the first few days of being in the classroom. The first was that students are more likely to be attentive and active learners when they feel connected to the material or when they can understand the relevance of the material being presented. In particular, students are keen to understand how it relates to their own lives, to their understanding of their neighbors and communities, and to their understanding of current events that peak their interest. The second is that students are more likely to be attentive and active learners when the course culture and atmosphere encourages them to connect to their colleagues in the classroom. These two points were reified when I spent a semester reading and discussing pedagogy with my graduate students (the books we read are listed below), and they have led me to incorporate small group activities and large and small group discussions into as many of the course meetings that I can.

While I still devote a significant amount of time to lecture, my students spend at least part of one class session per week, and sometimes part of every class session per week, in small group activities and discussions. Providing these types of facilitated activities has significantly increased student interest, enthusiasm, and engagement with the material. Moreover, my students have consistently expressed that these types of classroom activities have led them to deeper and richer understandings of the issues at hand. In fact, it has been student enthusiasm about group work and facilitated activities that has kept me motivated to continue to design and construct these types of assignments even though it often requires significantly more prep time on my part.

### **Teaching Strategy**

In my three years of teaching at Western Kentucky University, I have taught an Introduction to Islam course four times. Each iteration of this course has included a section on the development of Islamic law and its relevance to contemporary Muslim life. The details of this history are nuanced and complex, as the development of Islamic law was a grassroots and community-led process in its early stages, eventually culminating into a more formal system with specific methods and schools of law. Most of my students were unfamiliar with the various types of legal reasoning employed by Islamic jurists, and I was having trouble explaining the abstract concepts in concrete terms. For this reason, I developed an Islamic law simulation for my students. In this assignment, students worked in their usual groups. (I assign students to groups at the beginning of every semester, and the groups do not change. That way students develop working and sometimes social relationships with their group members, helping to create an atmosphere in which they become increasingly more willing to share and test out their ideas,

as well as contest the ideas of others.) Within their groups, the students divided themselves into jurists (judge), defendants, and claimants. I hand out a “case” which describes the positions of both the defendant and the claimant, as well as a series of Islamic texts that are relevant to the ruling. The point is to simulate a theoretical case that could be brought up before an Islamic judge and to have students attempt to deliberate through the evidence with judge, claimant, and defendant each presenting the facts of the case and adding details as they see fit.

The specific case that I gave to students involved a married couple that had come before the court. The wife was asking for a divorce, stating that her husband was neglecting his duties towards her: of love, affection, and providing material comforts as agreed upon in the original marriage contract. The husband, disputing the wife’s position, did not want a divorce. The facts were simple because I wanted students to be able to fill in the details so that the circumstances of each “couple” were different. I gave the groups a series of Qur’anic verses and *hadith* (narrations about the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community that have become authoritative sources for piety, morality, ethics, and law within the Islamic tradition) related to marriage, and I asked the groups to both make their cases (defendants and claimants) and to adjudicate (judges) based on these texts and their relevance to the details provided by the “husband” and “wife.”

I used this assignment in two Islam courses: a regular section of Islam (forty students) and an honors section (twenty-two students), and it was exceptionally well received by both classes. The students had so much fun! They deliberated, conversed, and elaborated on the facts in order to influence the judge’s ruling in light of the texts provided. They came up with all kinds of scenarios—some realistic and some far-fetched—regarding why the husband and wife might want or not want a divorce. They enjoyed the role-playing aspect and commented on how it helped them better understand the points we had been discussing in lecture.

More specifically, they learned a set of foundational ideas regarding the execution of Islamic law. In particular, they learned that the judges interpreted the details of the case and the relevant textual sources on marriage in very different ways even though they were all using the same material. This is a key point in understanding the way that Islamic law works, as the judge’s discretion and opinion are a significant part of the equation. If they elaborated on certain facts and did so differently than another group, the judge’s ruling changed significantly. They noted the bottom up approach of Islamic law, with judges often taking the immediate circumstances of the people in front of them into consideration when attempting to make a ruling. They were able to see first-hand the critical role that human reason plays in the interpretation of religious texts. And they were able to better understand the idea that Islamic law often tries to provide justice to both parties—a concept that is somewhat foreign to those who are accustomed to the American or European systems of law. Lastly, it helped them to better understand the way that someone from a religious tradition, in this case Islam, might think through moral, ethical, and legal questions in light of their religious commitments. In short, it was a hands-on activity that gave them a much better feel for the various ways that Islamic jurisprudence works and Islamic law is produced.

This assignment, by chance, was buttressed by a real-life example in my honors Islam course. My students, as a part of their presentations, wanted to interview an Egyptian Muslim who worked at the university in order to ask him questions regarding Egyptian culture and its influence on Islam in Egypt. I asked students to prepare and turn questions in ahead of time, to make sure that the presenter’s time was used effectively. One of the questions was, “Have you ever posed a question regarding Islamic life or piety to a *mufti* (a legal specialist who is tasked with providing legal opinions on a variety of questions

related to Islamic life, ritual, piety, etc.)?” Our speaker then launched into a story regarding a friend of his who had married a woman who, he argued, had misrepresented herself at the beginning of their relationship. Due to this misrepresentation, his friend was seeking a divorce. The speaker described the conversations with the mufti, whose advice advocated for prudence, discernment, and warned against a quick or hasty judgment in light of the gravity (but permissibility) of divorce. Most importantly, his advice was based off the same textual sources that my students had used. It was a terrific, and fortunate, teaching moment that helped students see the real-life relevance of what they had been learning in the classroom. Of course, not all assignments turn out this way, but it’s certainly great when they do!

### **Conclusion**

Pedagogical research is consistently demonstrating the point that professors ought to facilitate ideas in the classroom. Learning, according to this ground-breaking research, happens best when students not only listen to lectures and take notes (a skill that I strongly maintain is important to develop), but also when they are allowed to talk, discuss, deliberate, and generate ideas. My pedagogical methods and techniques are based on this idea. My goal is to help students learn course material, but more importantly, my goal is to help them to learn how to think critically and in multifaceted ways. Group work and class discussion are key elements in this task.

### **Resources**

Bain, Ken. 2004. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Fink, L. Dee. 2013. *Creating Significant Learning Experiences: An Integrated Approach to Designing College Courses*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



## Critical Thinking and Teaching the Religious Traditions of Others

Steven Benko, Meredith College

### Introduction

Has an instructor ever said that they were *not* teaching critical thinking? What is an alternative, but still acceptable, answer to the question, “Are you teaching your students to be critical thinkers?” It would not be acceptable to say that we want nothing more from our students than to be passive receptacles of information that they will then repeat on a test. It would not be acceptable to kick the critical-thinking can down the road and say that the responsibility of teaching critical thinking is spread out among multiple classes and faculty and that students graduate from our programs and colleges as critical thinkers. The only acceptable answer to the question of whether instructors are teaching their students to be critical thinkers is “yes, of course we are.”

Learning about the religious traditions of others seems to invite critical thinking. Students are learning new things! Students are getting more accurate and relevant information about religious beliefs and traditions! Misinformation is being corrected, and biases and prejudices are being left behind for tolerance and acceptance! Students are learning more about their own beliefs and values by comparing them to others! A critical thinker is someone who evaluates the soundness of their thinking by considering how evidence, point of view, built-in biases and assumptions, and outcomes inform thinking. In order to assist our students in becoming better critical thinkers, it is necessary to craft assignments that practice critical-thinking skills.

“Are we teaching our students to be critical thinkers?” is the wrong question because it is a conversation stopper. A better question is “How do we know that we are teaching our students to be critical thinkers?” Do students leave the class with an understanding of the principles and concepts that shape religious studies? Can students make connections between the concepts used in one class with material in another class? These questions invite reflection and get instructors to think about their assumptions, to consider evidence, and to articulate meaningful outcomes that would support an affirmative answer to the question “Are our students critical thinkers?” To put it another way, in order to determine whether our students are critical thinkers, we need to think critically about critical thinking: asking what critical thinking is and what counts as evidence of critical thinking are two good ways to begin a conversation about development of student critical thinking skills.

### Fundamental and Powerful Concepts

One challenge to the development of students’ critical-thinking skills is confusion between learning and thinking. This distinction is made clear in how students approach terms and concepts used in the classroom and in textbooks. There are too many terms for a student to master in one semester. Think

back to the first world religions class you took as an undergraduate. Which terms stand out? Our students are faced with textbooks that list, for example, thirty-five terms that are “key” or “essential” or “useful.” If there are thirteen chapters in the textbook, that is approximately 450 terms. How are students to know which terms are more important than others? If they memorize as many as possible, how many do they truly understand? The volume of terms and concepts that a student must learn over the course of a semester prevents them from connecting and comparing subsequent ideas.

Overwhelming students with vocabulary prevents them from getting a sense of what the academic study of religion prioritizes and what defines it as a distinct discipline. This is not to say that students are unable to extend their vocabulary or that they cannot use terms in a sophisticated and nuanced way. It means that courses and assignments must be organized to encourage the kind of reflective reading and writing that develops student critical thinking skills. One way to foster development of student critical thinking skills is to organize the class around the fundamental and powerful concepts and the essential questions of the discipline.

I have started organizing several of my classes around the idea of a “fundamental and powerful concept.” Nosich (2005) defines a fundamental concept as one that grounds other concepts. Other concepts in the course can be understood through the fundamental concept, and for that reason Nosich describes fundamental and powerful concepts as ones that can be used to think about and reason through a large number of questions, problems, and information. Class lecture, impromptu writing assignments, semester-long writing assignments, and questions on the final exam evoke a concept or an idea that students invoke in order to understand another term or idea we are discussing. What I have found is that students retain more information, gain confidence, and make more meaningful comparisons between ideas, concepts, practices, and traditions if they have a common term that they approach the topic through.

How does this aid in teaching the religious traditions of others? In a way, we are always teaching the religious traditions of others. Unless instructors share a religious tradition with their students, then they are teaching the traditions of others. That makes the teaching of religion an inherently comparative enterprise. But what is comparison? What is a meaningful comparison? As Decosimo (2010) points out, all things can be compared but not all comparisons are interesting or meaningful. In my class, I used the Blackboard journal tool to ask students to spend the semester writing about comparison. The journal tool was useful because it collected all of their submissions in one place and allowed them to see their past submissions. I asked students to define comparison and to explain what makes a good and meaningful comparison. For every subsequent unit, I asked students to compare at least two things. Students had to explain similarities and differences, and explain why the comparison they had made was meaningful. At the end of the journal entry they had to redefine comparison and explain how and why their definition changed or remained the same.

### **Increased Understanding, Increased Confidence**

I have been using this assignment for several semesters, tweaking it around the edges, but the general format has remained the same. The results are encouraging: students left the class with a much more developed understanding of comparison and what comparison entailed, and they gained a deeper sense of one aspect of the academic study of religion. Nosich says that one benefit of the fundamental and powerful concept is that because the concept is fundamental to a discipline, students get a chance to do the kind of thinking that defines the discipline. This is particularly valuable for students who are not majors and who may otherwise be practicing thinking like an accountant, chemist, or interior designer.

For a semester, though, they are thinking like a religionist and leave the class with a better understanding of the practices, issues, and concerns that shape the discipline.

Another positive result is that students used a wider variety of terms and concepts, and at the end of the semester they were still referencing readings, lectures, and ideas from the beginning of the class. This project allowed them to make connections to the various learning units and to assume more control over their learning as they were the ones picking the terms to compare. Because the students were choosing the terms of comparison and evaluating them, their voices became more confident: they were constantly refining their assertions and making better arguments. As a result, their voices became more credible and articulate.

One concern with this assignment is that students will not have had sufficient practice reflecting on their own thoughts to express why it is significant that their definition of the fundamental concept remained the same or changed. My experience has been that students can identify similarities and differences, but that it takes several attempts before they can explain them. Presenting examples of student work and working on this activity in class helped students to understand the difference between identification and explanation, and by the end of the semester more students than not were successful at this part of the assignment.

There is no one correct fundamental and powerful concept. Different courses could use different concepts. In an ethics course I teach, I use fairness as a fundamental and powerful concept. In a similarly structured assignment, students are asked to define fairness and then explain how different approaches to moral and ethical decision making are fair and unfair. At the end of each entry, students explain how and why their definition of fairness changed or remained the same. Another concept that would work just as well in this class is empathy: students could write about how each approach to moral and ethical decision making encourages and discourages empathy, and then define and explain their definition of empathy. Keeping fundamental and powerful concepts central to instruction helps students see the big picture.

## Resources

Nosich, Gerald. 2011. *Learning to Think Things Through: A Guide to Critical Thinking Across the Curriculum, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Decosimo, David. 2010. "Comparison and the Ubiquity of Resemblance." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.1: 226–258.

## Wider Moral Communities: A Framework for Teaching Comparative Religious Ethics

Mark Larrimore, Eugene Lang College

### Introduction

I was once part of a discussion of the applicability of the category of “religion” in Japan. After a while, my host, a Tendai priest, said that nothing we’d been discussing fit the largely funerary ritual of the temple he inherited from his father. Rather than “religion” (*shukyo*), it might be better described as “ethics for the dead” (*shisha ni tai suru rinri*). This observation hit me like a thunderbolt. What he proposed as a way of interpreting a particular practice, for me raised general questions. “Ethics for the dead” has shaped my understanding of religion ever since. And also of “ethics,” whose default secularity it threw into dramatic question.

I recount this experience in my course Exploring Religious Ethics, a comparative course which brings materials from Buddhist and Christian traditions into conversation, with some “secular” moral philosophy along the way. I tell the story to help the class briefly understand the widespread Japanese practice of *mizuko kuyo*. But it also marks the appearance of what has become one of the course’s foundational questions: what are the limits of the moral community?

### The Limits of Moral Community

*Mizuko kuyo* is a ritual memorialization for those who (to borrow a phrase from a temple in Kamakura) are not able to be born—primarily but not exclusively aborted fetuses. Our discussion begins with William LaFleur’s (1994) influential and somewhat romanticized account of the practice in *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*, before exploring other accounts of the practice in Japan and beyond. It winds up in our first major comparative confrontation, with the expansive “culture of life” outlined in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*.

LaFleur’s account of a “Buddhist” awareness of the inescapability of sorrow on the frontiers of human life—frontiers which are never clear despite the efforts of what he calls western “definitionism” to evade them—has inspired more Americans than Japanese. Arguably it’s in America that “water baby” (*mizuko*) ceremonies may have become a “Buddhist” practice. Learning to see the western desire and projection in LaFleur’s account and its reception is a useful warning of too easy comparativism as well as an intriguing example of religious ethical change.

In fact *Mizuko kuyo* raises two sets of questions which are important to initiating students in the enterprise of comparative religious ethics. The first concerns the limits of the moral community: Who belongs to the sphere of our concern and responsibility? Where are the boundaries? And who decides?

The second relates to the varieties of agency involved as people play their part in communities understood to extend beyond the currently living human: Can ritual be a form of ethical agency? Are there different ethical roles in human communities? Is human agency the only kind at play in the wider moral community?

The larger category of *kuyo* rituals of which *mizuko kuyo* is part force these questions. *Kuyo* ceremonies, which define a terrain of affect extending from gratitude to apology, are performed for tools like needles and eyeglasses, for dolls, for laboratory animals, and for animals for eating, too. These ceremonies signal intimate relationships beyond the human as constitutive of human life, and appropriately mark them as constitutive of our humanity.

LaFleur's account of fluid boundaries at the beginning (and ending) of human life and the capacity of ritual to acknowledge them animates vigorous discussion, but my classes are flummoxed by the variety of other *kuyo* rituals. This produces just the right mix of excitement and discomfort for a productive engagement with the moral tradition of others. Perhaps more keenly than earlier generations, today's students feel that all life lives at the expense of other life (and nonlife), and the discussion gave us terms to talk about this. The moral maximalism of *Evangelium Vitae* took on a new charge in this setting, too. Students appreciated it not just as dogmatic legislation of human life but also as a serious religious response to realities of human existence papered over by definitionism.

### **Wider Moral Communities**

Exploring Religious Ethics is taught at a progressive liberal arts college with an open curriculum. We have no distribution requirements, no general education program. All of our courses are seminars. Every student has a personal reason to be in each class, but most students also arrive without having encountered any formal education about religion. For many students, Exploring Religious Ethics is their first exposure to religious studies, and maybe their last. It is often their only academic exposure to ethics as well. The course must not only introduce the traditions we are comparing, Christianity and Buddhism, but teach what religion, ethics, and comparison are—and aren't. I suspect many courses in religious ethics bear a similar burden.

It surprises me sometimes that we aren't as suspicious of the claimed autonomy of "ethics" as we are of the putatively secular state, the nation, the gendered body, race, art. In my theory of religion courses I remind students that the modern category of religion is a member of the same litter as these others. An ethics which privileges (when not confining itself completely to) the relationships and responsibilities of adult humans to each other occupies pretty much exactly the same space as the liberal state with its domesticated faiths. It's no wonder religion can seem no more than "morality touched with feeling"—a fifth wheel to an ethics itself effectively depoliticized.

The larger communities to which different traditions pay witness, extending beyond the (currently living) human in many and distinct directions, raise questions that are at once "religious," "ethical" and "political." Comparative study can deepen awareness of the questions while suggesting new answers. The traditions we study and compare have long suspected that the question "How shall I live?" cannot be answered without reference to wider communities.

Exploring Religious Ethics looks not only at precepts and virtues, but at monastic codes and lay/monastic symbioses, animals, economics and war; even a little interreligious dialogue. We also consider the

agency of saints and bodhisattvas, and of bodhisattva vows and relics. (A course engaging different traditions would doubtless have different examples and emphases.) Ethics language emerges as a way of articulating the particular responsibilities and capacities of human beings within wider communities of interaction and care—especially as these interact in environments of pluralism.

For many of my students, coming (as the majority of young people now do) from religiously plural backgrounds, establishing an identity includes understanding how to position oneself within, among, or outside various “religious” traditions. But, aware of the Anthropocene, they also wonder how to develop decent and sustainable relationships with the nonhuman. I’m a little suspicious of those who claim to find ready-made ecological consciousness within the “world religions,” but there’s no question that the resources of the traditions we explore can help us here, and possibly better than the default humanism of “ethics.”

### The Language of Morals

The framework of “wider moral communities” emerged out of the particular teaching context of Exploring Religious Ethics and Eugene Lang College’s student body. I have not had opportunity to take it beyond the Buddhist-Christian context of my class or a student body romantically tempted by the former and politically suspicious of the latter. I don’t know how it would fly with students with different proclivities. I imagine it would have taken different form had my course focused on, say, Judaism and Confucianism. I don’t know how it would work outside a seminar setting, where students can feel the emergence of a shared language of inquiry.

However, my experience suggests that it can take us beyond the limits of unexamined secular categories such as “religion” and “ethics,” as well as the impasse of calling all categories in question at once. Approaching specific traditions as ways of articulating and participating in communities beyond the (currently living) human brings the ethos of the study of religion to students in a way that speaks to their emerging sense as agents in a complicated and changing cosmos in which the human is not alone.

At the end of the most recent iteration of Exploring Religious Ethics, students were invited to contribute to a freewheeling wiki discussion of the broad questions of the syllabus, including the question about wider moral communities. (I used the wiki Piratepad, which initially distinguishes but later anonymizes voices.) Here are some excerpts:

*... I don't think that the dead and the unborn can participate in the moral community; however they definitely influence our moral codes. They're definitely members because they are things we come into contact with throughout all of our lives, but these things cannot socialize with us. Religious influence and cultural values change how we regulate and react to things like abortion, death and wildlife which makes them a part of our moral communities. They don't, however, contribute actively to the morals of the communities because they don't talk. Someone help me.*

*... The way we react to animals and things show how one's moral character is like. In the moral agent's placing of value and subsequent reaction to them, we can make sense of them participating actively in the moral community, and so it would seem that they are members of the moral community.*

... I think there is a cross cultural understanding that you have to be good to the dead and the unborn, they're on the other sides of where we are, and maybe we're just doing it to keep our minds at ease, but it's very much a part of our system. And I don't think they need to talk, just like Gods don't talk to us directly but they influence us none the less.

References to Christian and Buddhist traditions appear elsewhere in the wiki (*mizuko kuyo* in a question about ritual). Much of the discussion is, like the excerpts above, at a more general level. This is the shared space in which “ethics” and “religion” language live, one that is opened up by (and to) questions of membership in wider moral communities. It’s also the space of liberal arts students who have chosen to take a class in comparative religious ethics.

### Resources

LaFleur, William H. 1994. *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hardacre, Helen. 1999. *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Wilson, Jeff. 2009. *Mourning the Unborn Dead: A Buddhist Ritual Comes to America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Noddings, Nel. 1993. *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Shulman, Lee S. 2004. *Teaching as Community Property: Essays on Higher Education* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

## The Personal is Pedagogical: Embracing Moral Debate in the Religious Studies Classroom

Elizabeth Barre, Rice University

### Classic Challenges

In some ways, the questions we are asking in this issue of *Spotlight on Teaching* are not new. Anyone who has taught an introductory course in religion, or even read about the teaching of such courses, is already well aware that the task of teaching a “tradition” is fraught with difficulties. It’s never quite clear *what* we’re supposed to be teaching when we’re assigned this task, and if we do manage to settle on a responsible answer to that question, it’s not long before the time constraints of a semester-long course make us wonder whether responsibility is simply a luxury we can’t afford.

Further challenges arise when we discover that our students come into these courses with their own goals, and that these goals often have little to do with what we hope to achieve. In Barbara Walvoord’s classic study, we learn that more than 66% of students take our introductory courses to help develop their own beliefs. But less than 33% of faculty thinks fostering this development is a primary, or even important, goal of their teaching. Not surprisingly, most (86%) prefer to focus on “critical analysis.” But many wonder whether it is possible to foster an appropriately critical stance among students who enter their classrooms expecting spiritual growth.

And perhaps no pedagogical issue has captured the attention of our discipline more than the question of whether it is possible to teach the traditions of “others.” Can an instructor who does not herself identify with a tradition teach that tradition as well as those who do? And what about the students? How do we ensure that students are not exoticizing, romanticizing, and/or demonizing traditions with which they are unfamiliar?

These pedagogical challenges have been with us for decades, and the discipline has reached no consensus on how to manage them. Nevertheless, in my experience, the most popular approach appears to be some combination of the following pedagogical strategies:

1. Help students resist the impulse to essentialize by reading critical theoretical texts or introducing them to significant degrees of pluralism within each of the traditions studied.
2. Encourage a critical distance in students by presenting a picture of the religious studies classroom as a space where everyone (instructor and students alike) “brackets” their personal experience, commitments, and questions so that they can come to understand that which is



being studied “on its own terms.”

3. Ensure that the emphasis on critical distance doesn't overshoot its goal (which is usually something like “critical understanding”) by urging students to “empathize” with, or perhaps even “respect,” traditions that are not their own.

When implemented with care, these strategies can do a great deal of good work for our students. But they are not without danger. If we overemphasize the porous and amorphous nature of traditions, students can lose site of the threads that tie beliefs and practices together. Too much bracketing can lead students to see other traditions as historical or sociological artifacts better suited for the shelves of a dusty museum than for organizing a modern life. And if we aren't careful, asking students to respect or empathize with all the traditions they study can turn our courses into platforms for promoting a naïve and uncritical understanding of religious pluralism.

As I noted at the start, none of these debates are new. Yet they are worth recounting here to help us understand the extent to which these issues become amplified or entirely transformed when the unfamiliar traditions we teach are not simply religious, but *moral*.

### **Morality as Amplifier**

The impulse to essentialize, personalize, and exoticize difference seems to be built into the DNA of our students. But my experience suggests that this impulse is most intense when the difference they encounter is a moral world that pushes up against their own. And if we think William Perry's stages of moral development are more or less accurate, the unique intensity of these encounters makes sense. According to Perry, most of the students in our introductory courses will be operating with a singular conception of moral truth, having never considered the possibility that the moral authorities in their lives could be wrong. As such, encountering moral views that challenge their own is an experience that is equal parts personal, unsettling, and alienating. It is perfectly natural (if not ideal) that they try to make sense of these views with oversimplified mental models, that they frame the alternatives as entirely alien, and that they have a hard time resisting the urge to fixate on their own views (and their possible justification).

This also helps explain why students have so much trouble bracketing their personal views when they encounter moral diversity. In most cases, bracketing in the religious studies classroom is challenging but not threatening. It may be hard to think about the practices of Muslims in a mosque without referencing one's own experience as a Christian in a church, but because the former can exist alongside the latter, one's experiences as a Christian are not challenged by the Muslim experience (at least not in any straightforward and immediate sense). But if students come into our classroom as moral dualists, any and all moral difference will be encountered as a form of conflict, making the task of bracketing especially threatening.

And even if a student is not a moral dualist, she may still find it difficult to bracket her personal judgments in the face of moral practices and beliefs she considers deeply unjust. It is one thing to refrain from making judgments about the possibility of miracles or the plausibility of inerrant scripture; it is quite another to remain a neutral observer when reading arguments that sanction gender inequality or condone the use of indiscriminate violence. Unlike other truth claims, moral claims reach out to us for a response. When we learn that someone believes “men who lie with men should be put to death” or that

“women should be free to hold leadership positions in the church,” we are encountering claims that are also *claims upon us*. And to ask our students to encounter these beliefs in any other way is to strip the claims of that which makes them moral.

Finally, it is hard to imagine a pedagogical context in which the dangers of encouraging “empathy” and “respect” are more pronounced. We might want our students to understand Thomistic arguments “on their own terms,” but asking them to respect or empathize with his position about the proper punishment for heretics (i.e., death) is a recipe for swift and severe student pushback. We can and should make the case for certain narrow forms of empathetic understanding and respect (more on this later), but we must also recognize that our students have a history with these words and that they are likely to interpret them as synonyms for “endorsement” in the context of moral disagreement. In fact, if the moral distance between the students and the source is great enough, they are likely to push back against almost *any* form of engagement (empathetic or otherwise).

I first learned of this dynamic when I asked students to read Osama bin Laden’s *Letter to America* in an introductory religious ethics course in 2006. Well aware of the controversial nature of the text, I made a point to emphasize that we were simply working to understand his arguments, rather than endorse them. But much to my surprise, students could not wrap their heads around this distinction. For these students, even the seemingly benign work of “understanding” offered Bin Laden more validation they were ready to give. Likewise, a colleague who studies the Ku Klux Klan has shared stories of numerous academics responding to her work in similar ways. She’s been asked pointed questions about whether the Klan “deserves” to be studied, and many more have worried that her work might work to “legitimate” that which should never be legitimated.

None of this bodes well for those who hope to teach the *moral* traditions of others using the pedagogical strategies employed in the traditional religious studies classroom. The moral dimension of the course will make it more difficult for students to avoid essentializing, personalizing, and exoticizing, but it will also make the traditional antidotes to these problems (“bracketing” and “empathy”) almost entirely ineffective.

In what follows, I outline two alternative strategies, drawn largely from the pedagogical toolbox of our colleagues in philosophy, which have proven most useful for teaching the moral traditions of others. The core insight of both strategies is that deeply personal disagreement and debate can, and indeed *must*, be a central component of our classrooms when teaching the moral traditions of others.

### **Leave the Brackets at the Door**

When we ask our students to leave their personal judgments and commitments at the door of our classrooms, we often have good intentions. And I admit that, for some purposes, this bracketing can be pedagogically useful. But if we want our students to understand the moral traditions of others, it is ultimately this practice that should be left at the door.

The primary reason we should welcome personal engagement has already been noted: when introducing moral issues, we’d be fighting an uphill battle if we expected students to keep their judgments at home. But there are other reasons this move makes good, pedagogical sense.

In the first place, the scholarship on teaching and learning has long made clear that students will only learn material in a lasting way if they are able to make sense of that material *in terms of what they already know*. In the must read *How Learning Works*, Susan Ambrose and her coauthors remind us that deep, transformational learning is only possible when we engage students' prior knowledge and work to shape their already existing mental models. If we ask our students to leave their current beliefs at the door, they might be able to memorize and recall what we've taught them about various moral traditions, but that "learning" will vanish within a few months. But if they come to understand those moral traditions in terms of their own (via similarities *or* differences), they will be building new mental models that remain with them for a long time to come.

Another (rather obvious) insight from the scholarship on teaching and learning is that lack of motivation is a primary determinant of student learning, and that students are most motivated when *something personal is at stake*. There will always be students who are motivated to learn in the "neutral" space of the traditional religious studies classroom. But those students are not the norm, and if you scratch the surface of their motivation, you often discover other—equally personal—motivations for their effort (grades, the validation of professors or parents, etc.). By inviting students to relate their own moral frameworks to the traditions we are studying, we help them to see the material as something other than a mass of information to be memorized for a test. And as a bonus, it allows them to understand the moral traditions of others *as actual moral traditions* (i.e., traditions that make claims about how everyone—our students included—should live), rather than curious artifacts of a distant time or place.

Lest anyone fear this move is a recipe for uncritical discourse in our classroom, it should be noted that our colleagues in philosophy have been teaching ethics in this way for quite some time. And, at least in my experience, there are few places more hostile to uncritical discourse than the philosophy classroom! As is often the case with the pedagogical decisions we make, how we implement the practice is just as important as the practice itself. And in this case, to avoid classroom discourse that is a cross between group therapy and cable news shouting matches, we must help students to see there is a clear and important difference between the *justification* of their beliefs and their mere *expression*.

But before we can get to that place, or really any place that requires students to activate their own prior beliefs, we have to make sure they are actually aware of those beliefs. This may seem rather strange, as we would like to think that one of the primary features of beliefs is that those who hold them actually know that they do. Yet, at least with respect to morality, implicitly held beliefs are the rule, rather than the exception. So in every ethics course I teach, I make it a point to begin each semester by asking students to fill out Lawrence Hinman's "ethical inventory." With questions like "No one has the right to intervene when he or she thinks someone else has done something morally wrong" and "The right thing to do is whatever is best for everyone," it covers standard terrain of an introductory ethics course. But you could certainly create your own questions, tailored to the specific ethical issues you will teach in your course. In each case, the goal of this activity is the same: to help the students prepare for activities later in the semester, when they will be asked to express and justify their personal reactions to the moral arguments of those with whom they disagree.

In the past, I've had students fill out the inventory for homework after the first day of class, leading to a lively discussion on the second day. I now put the questions into an audience response system (I've used Poll Everywhere, Socrative, and TopHat) and ask the students to respond to the questions via their phones on the very first day. By using this technology, I'm able to show the responses of the entire class in real time, and guide a lively conversation on the very first day of class.

One danger of the ethical inventory activity is that discussions about the results can easily devolve into the uncritical expression of dueling intuitions. As this is always a danger in classes where students are invited to express their personal judgments, it is important to figure out how you will guide your students in another direction. If you want to help students understand that their personal judgments are welcome, but that they will always be required to justify those judgments, you must continually solicit both judgments and justifications for those judgments in class. And, in my experience, there is no better pedagogical tool for this task than the Socratic Method.

To help set expectations for the rest of the semester, I employ this method—in somewhat artificial and amplified form—during our discussion of the ethical inventory on the very first day of the semester. More specifically, I invite students to share their personal intuitions, but then immediately follow up on their response (and all future responses) with a variant of the question “why?” To ensure that students get the message about what I’m doing without feeling threatened on the first day, I keep things light-hearted by overdramatizing the questioning (e.g., saying literally nothing but “why” over and over again) and laugh along with students as they slowly catch on to what is happening.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I work hard to create writing assignments that invite personal engagement with the texts we’re reading, while also making specific justificatory demands on my students. And after a semester of having to justify their claims in class via the Socratic Method, students are generally (though not always!) aware of the difference between assertion and argument. So while they are free to disagree with what they’ve read in the moral traditions of others, they learn to justify their critiques with reasons and evidence that reflect a serious and fair engagement with that tradition.

### **The Performance of Perspectives and Civil Disagreement**

But as I noted earlier, one of the biggest worries about inviting personal judgments into the comparative ethics classroom is that these judgments will make it difficult (if not impossible) for students to engage with other traditions in serious and fair-minded ways. One way to mitigate this is to work with students to develop their “empathetic imagination.” Yet, as I also noted above, this practice (at least as students interpret it) is a recipe for disaster when you’re asking students to work with moral arguments they find objectionable. So what can we do to ensure that personal engagement with these texts doesn’t get in the way of authentic understanding?

The first step is to push back against the oversimplified assumption lurking beneath the surface of these concerns. It is important for you, and your students, to recognize that active, public, and personal disagreement is not *necessarily* incompatible with genuine understanding. While it may be true that the former makes the latter more difficult, these conversations too often assume that it is impossible to take another seriously while simultaneously disagreeing with them—that we can’t “think with” if we are “thinking against.” But if this were true, we’d have to give up any and all of hope of getting students to understand moral arguments they (or we!) are unwilling to accept. Moreover, I think there are a number of pedagogical moves we can make to ensure that students can see the Other through their deep disagreement. And none of these call on our students to “empathize” in any traditional sense of that term.

The first strategy is to require that students “perform” the perspective of the Other throughout the semester. So, for example, while employing the Socratic Method, I often ask my students to take on the role of others, presenting and defending those views (instead of their own) in response to the questions

I typically ask. I also assign writing prompts that ask students to make the best possible argument for a given claim from within one of the traditions we are studying. And in assignments where they are asked to present and defend their own critiques, I still require them to include a section where they anticipate, present, and respond to the counterarguments most likely to be offered by those they are critiquing. Finally, recent research on the role-playing pedagogy of [Reacting to the Past](#) suggests that it could be used profitably for this purpose. In this case, students would be assigned to different traditions or thinkers at the beginning of the term and then asked to act out those roles in dramatic performances throughout the semester. In each of these assignments and activities, students are invited to engage in the “perspective taking” that is often associated with the “empathetic imagination.” But because it is always framed as a performance, students can work to understand the view without feeling they are being subtly coerced to endorse or support that view themselves.

The second strategy I employ is arguably the most important pedagogical move anyone can make in a classroom that welcomes and encourages debate. And that is to make clear to students that the purposes of the classroom are such that certain limits must be placed on the form of their discourse, if not its content. These limits are not always needed (and sometimes morally suspect) outside the classroom, but in a context where discovery and transformation are the primary goals, civility protects the conditions for their possibility. For in an environment of incivility, students will adopt a defensive posture, close themselves off to the other, and lose sight of any goal beyond securing points against their opponents. If we want to encourage students to understand the Other, we must help protect the space that makes that possible.

But it is important to emphasize that civility in my classroom does not preclude vigorous and spirited debate. I do not, like many others, believe that “civil disagreement” is an oxymoron. And I work hard to model this mode of discourse for my students in my own behavior in front of the classroom. If they can see that it is possible to work at understanding a position without giving up the right to oppose what one learns, they are more likely to appreciate the value of studying the moral traditions of others.

## Conclusion

Although I hope my students will learn a great deal in my courses, as a comparative ethicist, there is no learning outcome more important to me than helping my students get to a place where they are comfortable with moral disagreement. Like most fundamental learning goals, this aspiration is inescapably political. Others may have different, equally reasonable, goals. But insofar as we think higher education is in the business of preparing students for civic life, it seems to me there is no better preparation than extended practice expressing civil disagreement with moral traditions that are not their own. Yet this is only possible if we stop asking students to “bracket” their own views and “empathize” with others. To prepare them for the *worlds they will actually live*, we must teach them to understand in the midst of personal conflict, and this is only possible if we embrace and encourage moral debate in the religious studies classroom.

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