



Teaching the Paranormal and the Occult

Spotlight on Teaching

Frederick Glennon, Editor

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Teaching the Paranormal and the Occult: Editor's Introduction

Fred Glennon, Le Moyne College

Walk into a classroom early and you might overhear students talking about such television shows as *The Walking Dead*, *Ghosthunters*, or *Haunted Case Files*; or the latest horror film like *Ouija: Origin of Evil*. Such paranormal pop culture is so prevalent these days that there is a [website](#) whose mission is “dedicated to covering all of paranormal culture in mass media.” While the website does not endorse claims about the paranormal, it does reflect the widespread interest in the paranormal among the population. Personally, I love the films that deal with ghosts and demons, as do many of my students. They are intrigued, if not a little bit spooked, by the genre. They want to believe that there are mystical experiences and forces that transcend the routine in everyday life. I share their interest.

The appeal of these media to our students should not be surprising given that several polls over the years have shown that quite a few Americans, especially college-aged students, have some belief in or even experience of the paranormal. A [Gallup poll \(2005\)](#) indicated that three in four Americans profess at least one belief in the paranormal, such as extrasensory perception (ESP), the existence of haunted houses, or the presence of ghosts. A [Pew Research Survey \(2009\)](#) found that 49% of Americans said they had a religious or mystical experience, defined as a “moment of sudden religious insight or awakening.” These types of experiences are common among the “religious unaffiliated” (i.e., those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” and say that religion is at least somewhat important in their lives), among whom 51% have had a religious or mystical experience. Moreover, 29% of all respondents said they had felt in touch with someone who had died. A [2013 Harris Poll](#), found that 42% of adults say they believe in ghosts, 36% say they believe in UFOs, and 29% say they believe in astrology.

Student interest in various forms of spiritual experience, whether traditional or paranormal, is consistent with the findings of the UCLA study among college students, “Spirituality in Higher Education.” The study found that although religious engagement declines somewhat during college, students’ spiritual interests and qualities, such as actively seeking answers to life’s big questions and the development of a global worldview that transcends ethnocentrism and egocentrism, grow substantially—especially in classrooms that expose students to diverse cultures and worldviews and encourage self-reflection and meditation. The authors of the essays in this edition of *Spotlight on Teaching* contend that these spiritual qualities can be and have been developed through engaging students in the study of the paranormal and the occult.

Most of the authors emphasize beginning with the lived realities of students both in terms of popular culture and also in relationship to the social locations in which they are enmeshed. Jack Hunter suggests that the strong connections between the paranormal and popular culture, evident in films, books, etc., are present in many of our students own lived experiences. They can relate to them in significant ways and may be an avenue for a stronger connection to the study of religion generally. Richard Callahan

agrees: “all around us there is widespread belief and practice and representation of the supernatural and strong student interest in this material.” In his “Haunting and Healing” class, he begins with what is familiar to students and then draws their attention to local ghost stories to engage them in dialogue and to get them comfortable with the ambiguity and ambivalence inherent those stories; characteristics which Darryl Catherine argues are also endemic to the term and study of “religion.”

The challenge posed by beginning with students’ interest in the paranormal is to get them to think more critically and more deeply about the subject matter. The authors herein engage in a variety of pedagogical practices. Madeleine Castro uses reflective exercises and moments to get students to the point of “critical being,” a state that involves their whole selves, not just their minds, and promotes “the cultivation of a sensitive and respectful approach to different perspectives.” Such fairmindedness is also the aim of Joseph Laycock, who uses some traditional pedagogical methods, such as the semester-long research paper, to help his students find the “balance between the hermeneutics of respect and the hermeneutics of suspicion,” which he notes is a problem for all who engage in the study of religion. When looking at spirit possession and demons in his course, he can move his students beyond religious literacy to engage the questions of meaning that religious and paranormal phenomena raise.

Charles Emmons gets his students to understand the interconnections between scientific and “intuitive” ways of knowing (broadly defined) by incorporating some of the practices associated with the paranormal: ESP games, healing practices, and visits by spiritual mediums or psychic readings. In their journaling, he invites students to recognize the social construction of all knowledge. “Doing experiential, intuitive exercises in the classroom acknowledges that there are other ways of knowing besides mainstream science.” Catherine uses a medium and the séance as an experiential way to get students to think through their own understandings of these realities. The experience engages them intellectually and emotionally as they explore what happened.

Of course, such investigations of paranormal beliefs and practices carry some risk, especially for those students whose religious traditions view such beliefs negatively. Whether in a classroom with evangelical students in West Texas (Laycock) or in a class with predominantly Catholic students in Central New York (Catherine), faculty should be sensitive to the religious frameworks students bring with them as part of their lived reality. However, in their experience the exploration of the paranormal not only broadens students’ understandings of the complexities of religious and spiritual reality, it also provides opportunity for them to discover more deeply their own religious commitments. Hunter contends that by bringing their own experiences with the paranormal into the religious studies classroom, the teacher can create a safe environment for a fuller conceptual exploration of these phenomena and experiences, and may contribute to their own spiritual development. The example he provides is the way in which students’ explorations of questions related to UFOs enabled them to explore their understandings of the nature of God, thus improving their critical thinking capabilities. Likewise, Catherine remarks that one of the results of teaching about the occult is that it opens students to a renewed interest in their own traditions, hence creating an opening to a growth in their own spirituality.

One final theme in these essays is the sense that the study of the paranormal and the occult may be the future of the study of religion. For Laycock, the study of spirit possession and demons enables students to get in touch with the theory and method of religious studies. It gets them to wrestle with the ambiguity of the questions these phenomena raise. Callahan argues that the study of paranormal is underrepresented in his field of American religions: “I see it as a possible method of religious studies for a post-secular age, intent not on debunking but on reflexively exploring ‘reparative’ or creatively constructive readings of cultural phenomena.” Catherine contends that the paranormal and the occult

border between traditional study of religion and new scientific ways of looking at the world. It provides an avenue for students and professors alike to “pioneer new intellectual ground in the interstices of institutionalized religion and science,” like what occurred with early occultists. All the authors agree that there are no answers to the questions raised by these phenomena, but that is the allure: wrestling with questions that perhaps have no answers but lead all to grapple intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. It is, they claim, the next step in the evolution in the field. Given the widespread interest in the paranormal and the occult, they may be right.

Resources

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Religious Education and the Paranormal: Reflections of Discussing Anomalous Experiences in the Classrooms

Jack Hunter, University of Bristol

Introduction

For a while now I have been thinking of different ways to use the paranormal as a catalyst for deeper understanding in my teaching of religious education and religious studies in secondary and further education institutions respectively. I have found that my students, regardless of age, are often fascinated by the paranormal, influenced in part, no doubt, by the prevalence of occult themes in contemporary popular culture (superheroes being a particularly vivid expression of this), and the kinds of urban legends and folktales that spread amongst students in schools and colleges. It is also likely that individual personal experiences of the paranormal play a role in fostering this fascination—strange dreams, sleep paralysis experiences, ouija board escapades, and Charlie-Charlie experiments. This article will argue that taking the paranormal seriously in the context of religious education (RE) lessons can have benefits not just for religious literacy, but also for student well-being.

Why the Paranormal?

In recent years, the attention of certain scholars in academic religious studies has shifted towards a focus on paranormal topics as an avenue for deepening our understanding of religion more generally. Jeffrey J. Kripal (2010), for instance, has argued in his book *Authors of the Impossible* that the paranormal is “our secret in plain sight,” and that it is deeply entwined in the histories of many of the world’s religions. Historian of religion Darryl Catherine (2011) has similarly recently referred to the paranormal as a modern analogue of religion, and, slightly earlier, sociologists Emmons and Sobal (1981) suggested that paranormal beliefs serve as functional alternatives to traditional religious beliefs, which have been fundamentally challenged through processes of modernisation and secularisation. There is ample reason, therefore, to take the paranormal seriously in the context of the study of religion (Laycock 2015), as well as in the context of teaching *about* religion. In paraphrase Jeff Kripal, the paranormal is the sacred in transition from a religious register to a scientific register. The paranormal may even be the *future* of religion.

For many, however, paranormal and religious beliefs are viewed as something that ought to be eradicated, as a form of “pseudoscientific” or even “prescientific” thought. Popular sceptical atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and James “The Amazing” Randi, are particularly vocal in this regard. In a 1998 article on the paranormal, for instance, Dawkins concludes quite certainly that “[t]he paranormal is bunk,” and Randi is famous for denouncing all paranormal claims as “Woo-Woo” (whatever that might actually mean). And yet, despite such denunciations, claims and accounts of paranormal experiences

and phenomena are still extraordinarily common: no amount of labelling of such claims as “bunk” and “woo” rids us of the fact that people do indeed seem to have genuine anomalous experiences (Castro, Burrows, and Wooffitt 2014), and that these experiences often play an important and transformative role in peoples’ lives, regardless of their ultimate ontological reality. The paranormal is also deeply enmeshed within our popular culture; it is everywhere.

In addition to the links between the paranormal and the origins of the world’s religious systems, there is yet another reason that secondary RE teachers might consider taking an interest in the paranormal. It is probable that many young people will encounter a wide range of paranormal themes over the course of their social and personal development, whether through ghost stories and popular movies, or accounts of paranormal experiences and beliefs related to them by friends, family members and parents (Braswell, Rosengren, and Berenbaum 2012).

Research has also found that children are particularly prone to anomalous, transpersonal, and religious experiences (Armstrong 1984; Tamminen 1994). Indeed, my own exploratory classroom based research with Year 7 pupils at a large secondary school in Shropshire found that, in a sample of three RE classes (75 pupils), 48% claimed to have had an experience that they thought was paranormal, and 62% claimed to believe in the paranormal. These are particularly high percentages, especially when compared to the number of pupils who claimed to be religious: 28% (Hunter, 2016). This data, although relying on a relatively small sample size, suggests that paranormal beliefs and experiences are more prevalent than traditional religious beliefs.

It is the author’s contention that it might be useful for RE classrooms to provide a safe and supportive environment within which young people can make sense of such experiences and ground them within a wider conceptual framework. An exploration of such experiences in the classroom could be understood as an important aspect of the development of children’s spirituality, which is a fundamental requirement of RE teaching in schools (see OFSTED 2015 and Hay 1998 for a discussion of the importance of spirituality in education, for example). Any account of religion, including the teaching of RE in schools (Holt 2014), therefore, ought to be able to deal with such apparent supernatural manifestations in a critical but open-minded manner. Once we have recognised the connection between religion and the paranormal, the question becomes “how should we face up to, and then teach about, the extraordinary nature of the foundations of the world’s religions, as well as the paranormal experiences of modern day pupils in school?”

The Paranormal in Practice: UFOs and the Nature of God

The following is a brief reflection on an instance in which, as part of my own experience as a trainee RE teacher, I used the paranormal (UFOs specifically) as a springboard for philosophical discussions about “who or what is God?” The lessons took place with two Year 7 (11–12 years old) RE classes at a large secondary school in Shropshire, United Kingdom.

In keeping with a constructivist awareness of the need to understand the extent of each pupil’s prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences (upon which any learning in the lesson must necessarily be built), before presenting new information, I started the lesson with an activity about UFOs. I put up a PowerPoint slide featuring several images of UFOs and asked pupils to work together in pairs to discuss their own ideas about what UFOs are, whether they believe in them, and why. I asked each pupil to write out three questions that they would ask about UFOs on sticky post-it notes. The following questions are examples of what the class came up with:

“Do you even exist?”

“Why are UFOs usually thought of as a round shape?”
“Are they secret military testings?”
“Has anyone ever made any contact with a UFO?”
“If they aren’t real what are they?”
“How long have UFOs been around?”
“How many times has a UFO been sighted?”
“Are UFOs real? Or something in disguise?”

Once pupils had done this, I asked for feedback from each group to tell me one of the questions they would ask. I then asked the pupils why they thought we were talking about UFOs in an RE lesson, so that it was the pupils making the connection themselves. Responses included that both religion and the question of UFOs revolve around belief, and we explored these issues a little further through deepening of questioning. I then explained how it is possible to ask many of the same questions about God as we can about UFOs, such as “Is God real?”; “Is God imaginary?”; “Why do people believe in God?”; “Have you ever had an experience of God?”; and so on.

I then introduced the class to the main theme of the lesson, which was to think about who or what God might be. We then moved on, again as part of the general constructivist progression of the lesson, to think about pupils’ own ideas about God (building up from their own prior knowledge), including thoughts about what God might be like, whether God exists, and whether and why or why not they believe in God. This was done collaboratively in table groups, with pupils collaborating to put together a mind-map of their ideas large sheets of paper. Pupils were given fifteen minutes to complete this exercise. Once they had finished, each group fed-back some of the ideas they had come up with, and other groups were encouraged to add in extra ideas and detail to their own diagrams, thus incorporating alternative perspectives and showing clear progress. This activity worked particularly well, and the pupils were well engaged. Some of their responses to the question “Who or What is God?” are included below:

“I don’t believe in God because I can’t think there is someone ‘watching over us,’ I don’t think like that.”
“I am not entirely sure about God because I have my doubts from scientific theories.”
“I think people have made God up.”
“I think God is a spirit.”
“Because so many people believe in God so maybe he is real.”
“How can there be a big person in the sky?”
“Character from story.”
“He could be imaginary.”
“If God was real there would be peace in the world and not war.”
“God is not real because nobody has seen him.”

These responses to the question “Who or what is God?” are particularly insightful. The pupils were evidently thinking deeply about the question, their responses show a degree of creativity and critical thinking that is very impressive, and there is a range of perspectives from those who believe in God, to those who are agnostic, and those who are atheistic. It is this author’s opinion that beginning the lesson with a discussion of UFOs, and encouraging pupils to formulate their own questions about the UFO phenomenon, enabled them to make progress and think more critically and creatively about the nature of God. Pupils were encouraged to make connections between their own beliefs and ideas about UFOs and wider issues about the possible nature of God (a subject that they may previously have had little interest in exploring at school).

Conclusion

Martin (1994, 357) has highlighted the benefits of incorporating pseudoscience and the paranormal into science education programs, but which also apply to RE programs. He writes:

The goal should not be to instil such beliefs in students but to get them to think critically about such beliefs. Science education...should not be narrowly conceived. The goal of science education should not just be to get students to understand science but to be scientific...Learning to think critically about pseudoscientific and paranormal beliefs is part of being scientific.

The development of critical thinking skills is reason enough to include explorations of the paranormal in the RE classroom. This, coupled with [OFSTED](#)'s requirement to provide an opportunity for young people to develop their *spirituality* in school-based education, presents ample reasons to take the paranormal seriously in RE. I suggest that this open-minded and open-ended approach to religious education could be achieved through engaging with pupils' own experiences and beliefs about the paranormal in a manner like that outlined above. Through explorations of paranormal topics, pupils can be encouraged to develop their own *informed opinions* on a range of religious phenomena and experiences, as well as to develop a more nuanced understanding of their own anomalous experiences (should they have one).

Furthermore, through making use of an emphasis on the experiential dimension of religion, it should be possible to foster a more *tacit* and empathetic understanding of differing religious perspectives, including a wide range of anomalous experiences, and so move away from purely *explicit*, fact-based, learning—we can approach a dimension of knowledge and understanding that cannot be expressed in any other way. Perhaps through this kind of approach it might be possible to foster an attitude of deep respect and understanding relating to anomalous experiences (as well as towards religion, and different modes of conceiving of the world), which can often play an important role in the lives of many people.

Resources

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Haunting the Religious Studies Classroom

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From Ghosts to Haunting

At the outset of my “Haunting and Healing” course we begin with familiar experiences, finding ways to approach them anew. An early assignment is to collect local stories of ghosts and haunted places. Not only to record them; but also to talk with people about where they heard the stories, what they think of them, if they’ve told them to anybody else, and if so, then in what settings. I have multiple pedagogical goals wrapped up in this assignment. First, it encourages students to think locally and concretely, and to see the supernatural as a part of the living culture around them and not only in literature or the movies. Second, it provides a rich collection of material, in which the students have a stake, for class discussion—including, in addition to the subject matter of the stories, the experiences of collecting them. Students often find that people they talked with questioned why a college class, especially a class in religious studies, would be interested in ghost stories. This leads to conversation in class about what is considered “appropriate” material for the academic study of religion and higher education more generally. Students also find that many people claim that they do not “believe” the stories they share, but they share them anyway in particular settings. Moreover, students learn that people’s ideas about the supernatural derive from a variety of sources, usually not connected with religious institutions. Third, as students compare and discuss the stories that they’ve collected, they come to the realization that many of the hauntings have something to do with the Civil War. This makes sense, given the mid-Missouri setting, and the pattern compels students to recognize the ways that a particular past haunts the present in this place. Haunting, they learn, is not just individualistic; it is social and historical, related to shared—and contested—memory and identity.

With that collecting project under their belts, and with the focus still on “lived religion” and “real people,” the class then turns to several folkloristic approaches to supernatural material. The purpose here is to introduce them both to a variety of supernatural traditions that are found in the United States and to a variety of ways of exploring this material academically. They read about the history and morphology of Phantom Hitchhiker legends. They explore storytelling events and supernatural narratives as performances that engross participants and audiences, suspend disbelief, allow people to “try out” their understanding of the limits of reality and what they can know. They learn about ostension (i.e., the practice of enacting the legends they hear) usually by visiting purported sites of haunting or supernatural activity. By this point, they have developed a vocabulary and a bank of comparative material through which to further analyze and interpret the stories they collected at the outset of the course.

The class follows up on this material with three books that also model very different methodological and theoretical approaches to issues of haunting while slowly stretching the valence of “haunting” into different, and more abstract, realms. Reading Darryl Caterine’s (2011) *Haunted Ground: Journeys Through a Paranormal America*, they learn about different communities formed around paranormal phenomena (spiritualists, UFOlogists, and dowzers) while also grappling with the author’s reflexive ethnographic approach and his interpretation of America’s haunted present as the result of an unsettled relationship to the American land and its indigenous peoples. Sean McCloud’s (2015) *American Possessions: Fighting Demons in the Contemporary United States* presents students with a decidedly non-ethnographic critical method, analyzing texts by influential leaders of the contemporary evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal deliverance ministry movement. McCloud interprets the recent growth of demonology and exorcism among Protestants in the context of the porous borders of global capitalism, neoliberalism, and cultural diversity. Jeffrey Sconce’s (2000) *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* takes up the central role of developments in media technology in his book. To this I add material about spirit photography and social media. Sconce pushes the notion of haunting the furthest, entering through the relationship of the development of the telegraph to the practice of Spiritualism, by taking students on a journey through increasingly abstracted conceptions of the self, society, and presence that coincide with increasingly abstracted electronic communication technologies and epistemologies.

By the end of the course students are familiar with a variety of supernatural phenomena, with a focus on practice and lived experience. They have also encountered and worked with several approaches to this material, and they have expanded their notion of haunting to encompass social, historical, and material analysis and interpretation that is more complex than the question of the independent existence of supernatural beings or forces.

Haunted America

In a classroom discussion, a student describes his trip over the summer with two friends to a cemetery in Stull, Kansas, the location of one of seven earthly “doorways to hell” and site of many legends about terrifying demonic appearances.

Two members of a fraternity that operates a haunted house every Halloween report about strange experiences they have had in the building’s basement, which they say was used as a hospital during the Civil War.

An adult woman visits a slave burial ground one evening, recording the silence of the night on a digital audio recorder. Later, she will play back the recording at various speeds to try to discern the sound of voices carrying a message to her from the invisible realm. Light orbs on the pictures she took with her mobile phone camera have already confirmed for her the presence of ghosts.

Why teach a course like “Haunting and Healing” in a department of religious studies? It is a subject matter largely underexplored in the discipline and in my subfield of American religious studies. Yet all around us there is widespread belief and practice and representation of the supernatural, and there is strong student interest in this material (personally and socially, if not necessarily academically). The supernatural, seemingly so fundamental a component of religion, seemingly so omnipresent in American culture, has seemingly also been classified by scholars of American religion as the stuff of “others”—so-called “primitive” or “premodern” peoples, or groups like Pentecostals, charismatics, or new religious movements who are also relegated to the margins of the American religious mainstream—or it has been considered to mainly be a concern of psychology, explaining why people

would hold irrational beliefs. As I have come to understand it, this neglect of the supernatural is the result of several factors influencing the way that religious studies, and in particular the study of religion in the United States, is studied and taught. It assumes a secularization thesis of a sort, a narrative of disenchantment. It also privileges an institutional focus. And mainline Christian groups, as well as other modern/mainstream religious institutions, do not emphasize supernaturalism (the narrative goes). Those religious groups that do are almost by definition not mainstream. Yet there is so much of the supernatural all around us, and the study of religion in America has passed it by. I began teaching this course because I wanted to account for this and correct for its neglect.

Another reason for wanting to teach a course on the supernatural was my conviction that many (if not most) Americans come by many of their religious ideas and practices not from the sources that scholars generally recognize as religious authorities. Rather, they get them from popular culture—movies, television, novels, music, etc.—and folklore (stories they hear others tell, hearsay, rumors, etc.). They are disseminated and maintained by cultural practices that make up memory, identity, and sense of place. And these ideas and practices are more of a repertoire of familiar idioms and affects than they are “beliefs.” They can provide a subject matter around which to stage debates about what matters and what is real and what is not, and they often have cultural force and resonance in either case. I also wanted to focus on real people’s involvement with the supernatural—that is, the course would not be just a literary or popular cultural catalog and analysis of treatments of supernatural themes and stories, but real instances of this stuff in practice, in real people’s lives. Part of understanding how religion is actually practiced in the United States means taking ghosts and haunting seriously.

Finally, I also justify my course by way of my interest in what has been called the “spectral turn” in cultural studies, a consideration of haunting and ghosts as a way of thinking about culture and society that has seemed to me to be a particularly fruitful and exciting development, and a fitting method for religious studies to think with. The spectral turn not only takes ghosts seriously, viewing them not as superstition but as real markers of lingering, unfinished business; it also treats haunting as an affective reality of material life. Seemingly paradoxically, it is the limitations of materiality that give rise to the felt presence of invisible worlds: The absence of people who were once present; The unfinished business of justice deferred in history; The unacknowledged debts and sacrifices that have made the present possible. I felt that placing these cultural critical methods, which can be traced back to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s “Theory of Ghosts” (from their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), in connection with more “familiar” examples of haunting and ghosts might help students to find new ways of seeing and thinking about both the supernatural and about cultural and social formations and forces.

The Reality of Ghosts

The danger of a course on the supernatural in America is that it risks becoming too amorphous, a show-and-tell or a cataloguing of varieties of ghostly experience. “Haunting and Healing” has gone through several transformations over the years as I have tried to reign it in and give it more coherence. It began with more of a balance between content focused on ghosts and haunting, on the one hand, and content that focused specifically on supernatural healing (faith healing, Audrey Santo, exorcisms, that sort of thing) on the other hand. After one or two iterations, I decided that I was covering too much material and lacking a focus. The current version of the course really took shape from the following quotation from sociologist Avery Gordon’s (1997, 8) book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*:

The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.

I discuss this passage in class at the beginning of the semester, then we revisit it at the end. That revisiting shows students how much they have learned as they show how they can apply it and explain it. Whether supernatural beings or forces have independent existence, I tell students, is a question for physicists, theologians, paranormal researchers, and other specialists. But examining the cultural and social uses and practices of ghosts and haunting in America, we find, among other things, that ghosts and haunting are signs of unresolved or complex issues—personal, social, and cultural—and therefore cry for healing of one sort or another. And they are therefore a real part of our reality as social, cultural beings in time and place. Through taking haunting seriously, we end up with a new perspective on thinking about history, identity, and place. As Avery Gordon notes, sometimes being attentive to ghosts, rather than fearing or dismissing them, can help us to see our world more clearly by disrupting our taken-for-granted-realities.

Conclusion

There is a teaching goal embedded in this perspective on haunting that I believe is relevant for religious studies and the humanities more generally: to be comfortable with ambiguity and ambivalence, to be willing to try various methodological and theoretical approaches, to refuse a single positivist answer. Ghosts and haunting, as we treat them in this course, push against black-and-white, dichotomous analysis and interpretation. They evade absolute answers. They return to remind you that your “expertise” is neglecting something. The course as a whole is a series of exercises for entering into different epistemological modalities through which to explore different conceptions and perceptions of reality and experience, while still maintaining academic integrity and not resorting simply to statements of faith or belief. I see it as a possible method of religious studies for a post-secular age, intent not on debunking but on reflexively exploring “reparative” or creatively constructive readings of cultural phenomena. This approach practices the expansion of an analysis of religious subject matter to pertain to more widespread social, cultural, and material phenomena. Likewise, it takes seriously the interdisciplinary nature of our discipline and the humanly-constructed nature of our categories (including the category of “religion” itself), and thus explores multiple methods, meanings, and applications towards both the subject matter and its objectivity, opening epistemological cracks and engaging creative redeployment of analytical, interpretive, critical description and subject matter and categories. As the spectral turn, like the literary turn in cultural studies before it, imagined new ways of seeing familiar phenomena, and therefore new ways of producing knowledge and engaging the world, so too this haunted approach to the study of religion and culture.

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Reflecting on the Occult: Nurturing “Critical Being” through Exposure to Marginal or Controversial Ideas

Madeleine Castro, Leeds Beckett University

What’s Important about the Occult for Critical Thinking?

“Critical thinking” is a bit of a hornet’s nest. Scholars do not agree on how to define it and at times it has been (problematically) upheld as a distinctly Western phenomenon. There are also disagreements about how it can best be taught or demonstrated to students. This centres on whether it can be directly taught as a skill (the preferred option within the literature) or whether it can successfully be embedded within the substantive educational experience. I would argue that “critical being” (Barnett 1997) is the cornerstone of higher education. *“Critical persons are more than just critical thinkers. They are able critically to engage with the world and with themselves as well as with knowledge”* (1). This fundamental “state” can be actively encouraged in teaching on the occult or paranormal phenomena.

My teaching focuses on nurturing critical being and encouraging nonjudgmental perspectives. These aspects are embedded in much of my teaching and I have found certain activities to be quite effective. One of these is to actively encourage questions and promote discussions in traditional lectures as “stop and think” (Moon 2008) moments. These moments are either student-led (e.g., a student asks a question or challenges the material being presented) or teacher-selected (e.g., I consciously stop the lecture to pose a question or problem for consideration). When these moments occur, a meaningful exchange between students is the priority. This might be achieved by requesting multiple perspectives (e.g., actively inviting students to play devil’s advocate) allowing them to “try on” or inhabit diverse standpoints. For instance, in a session on spirit mediumship, some students express incredulity. This can quickly become ridicule or mockery. However, after introducing mediumship, I ask students to envisage one of the following possibilities, either:

- a) that they believe in spirits and that mediums can contact the spirit world, or
- b) that they feel neutral about, but open-minded to this possibility

They then reflect on what purpose or use mediumship might have. This exercise exposes the students to views often radically different from their own and encourages them to respectfully consider other people’s experiences and beliefs.

Sometimes I probe a student’s question. Students regularly ask, “Are near-death experiences (NDEs) real?” In response, I might query what is meant by “real” or ask what we need to know before we can answer the question. Throughout this, the aim is to foster and support exploration in a safe space where they can take risks. All viewpoints are encouraged; dismissal of another’s beliefs or ideas is not. Once

this is established, I might ask for differing views on the “causes” of NDEs and encourage students to critically explore the underlying assumptions and evidence associated with each view. During this, it is likely that ambiguities and paradoxes about what constitutes “death” are discussed and students are exposed to these. Such ambiguities, Meyers (1986) suggests, can create “disequilibrium” that can prepare students for key shifts in thinking.

These shifts can also be facilitated through the introduction of marginal ideas. In discussing the implications of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) for our understanding of consciousness, the filter theory of consciousness can be effectively used. This is a theory which suggests that the brain is a conduit for consciousness, rather than a store. Exploring radical or controversial ideas such as these appears to promote much more inquisitive and freer thinking. It seems to help students think more creatively and independently. A subject with controversial elements (e.g., the paranormal, the occult, religion) can, in line with Meyer’s (1986) ideas about posing controversial questions, help to foster critical being particularly well as there is plenty of room for discussion and inherent ambiguities in these subjects.

These moments are important for several reasons. Firstly, they break up the lecture and provide a different focus which is fundamental for effective and active learning. Secondly, they promote dialogue and interaction between the students. “Critical thinking is a social activity” and dialogue in this way encourages the practical demonstration of the fact that there are “different views of the same idea” (Moon 2008, 132). These moments can help students to shift their thinking and demonstrates multiple perspectives. Embedding this active engagement aims to engender a critical ethos throughout.

How Did This Come About and Why?

In 2009, I was a researcher exploring the incidence of reported paranormal experiences (RPEs) in Great Britain (Castro et al., 2014). Our results indicated that well over a third of people (36.8%) reported at least one paranormal experience. We argued, in line with Greeley (1991), that the paranormal is (*still*) normal. That is, a significant minority of ordinary people reported these experiences. From my own doctoral research (Castro, 2009) it is also clear that RPEs are sometimes profound and meaningful; they can be important, sometimes pivotal, moments in experients’ lives. Historically, experients have been considered delusional, suffering from psychosis or hallucinations. Furthermore, whilst the public may have an appetite for paranormal entertainment and an expressed fascination with occult phenomena, the acceptance of RPEs (as meaningful even) is inconsistent. There remains a dominant perspective that RPEs are not important and that those who report them are potentially gullible. In other words, the broader social context in which these experiences are understood tends not to be supportive: there is still a degree of social stigma associated with RPEs. This, and my experience with students, motivated me to challenge these dominant ideas about RPEs. We are not obliged to accept the objective reality of an RPE when we appreciate that the experience is subjectively real for the person reporting it. But accepting the “experience” can legitimate and acknowledge subjectivity, help to promote understanding, and reduce stigma.

Successive cohorts of students possess general curiosity about paranormal or occult phenomena and many find the subject interesting and intriguing. However, there is a dominant view of experients as indiscriminating, coupled with an impulsive reaction to reject knowledge or theories seen as alternative or marginal to dominant forms. Seeing experients as naïve and remaining restricted by dominant ideas can lead to belittling people’s experiences and reductive thinking. It is too easy to be dismissive of views and beliefs that are different or contradict cultural narratives. Therefore, it is vital to cultivate an openness and respect for different experiences and worldviews, which includes exposure to research and traditions from non-Western cultures.

If I maintain that the fundamental purpose of higher education is to nurture “critical being” (Barnett 1997), then I am responsible for consciously reflecting on how this might be achieved. Dewey’s (1909) idea of *reflective thinking* is instructive here: the process of thinking is active, not passive, and the exploration of evidence, how we arrive at conclusions, and the consequences of beliefs are important. “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” (Dewey 1909, 9). Vital to this process is the ability to question underlying assumptions, the premises of an argument, and the trustworthiness of the evidence or methodology under scrutiny. Barnett (1997) further argues that critical being is an existential notion about embodying a habit of mind and critical reflection that is connected to action. Inhabiting a state of critical being requires transformation.

Moon (2008) argues that relationship to knowledge is crucial to this: transitioning from absolutism (knowledge as “facts”) to relativism (knowledge as contextually driven and constructed). Supporting and motivating students to experience this shift and inspire the development of “metacognition” (awareness of and ability to reflect on one’s own thinking) involves challenging them. Stimulation is most effective when it is just outside an individual’s comfort zone—a principle based on Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development. There are two main aspects that inform this strategy. One concerns the emphasis on and recognition of the importance of interactive and dialogic forms of learning (influenced by the work of Vygotsky and Bakhtin). The other is a critical response to the assumption that “critical thinking” is best taught instrumentally as a skill. Both strands are directed towards nurturing free, independent, and creative thought.

Reflections and Applicability

These are laudable aims, which, in an ideal world, each student would embrace. The reality is that not all students manage to develop critical thinking or critical being. Whilst what we do with them in the classroom is important, and we can aim to foster and nurture critical being, as Jenny Moon (2008, 131) rightly indicates “**one person cannot make another think critically**” [original emphasis]. Teachers can help facilitate critical being but there are many other factors that can affect its development including “environment, motivation and emotion” (Moon 2008, 107), skill in language use, intellectual curiosity, and interest (127). There is no *one* model that fosters creativity and criticality. I like the analogy of teachers as “midwives” (Belenky et al. 1986) offering encouragement and support (rather than knowledge or skills transmission).

Despite this caveat, this approach has various potential positive knock-on effects, particularly for subjects as contested or controversial as religion, the occult or the paranormal, as tolerance feels like an incredibly low expectation regarding RPEs and differing perspectives on existential or metaphysical matters. So, firstly, in promoting understanding through fairmindedness and openness and thereby hopefully reducing stigma. Secondly, in nurturing nonjudgemental positions that are imbued with sensitivity and respect. And thirdly, in elevating the status of differing bodies of knowledge (e.g., cross cultural) and aiming to reduce ethnocentrism.

I have observed that many students respond well to this approach. The nature of the topics covered—as often quite controversial and of intrinsic interest—allow for a broad discussion with a wide range of perspectives. It is also notable that students respond well to opportunities for active and dialogic learning: for instance, “stop and think” moments (Moon 2008). Supplementing traditional teaching formats with simple, but effective practices, are the moments that can kindle improved student engagement and more empowered learning contexts. This approach is supportive of and open to creativity and independence of thought, which may at times challenge dominant ideas and knowledge in

the West. Exposure to, and engagement with, culturally diverse material and sometimes radical or controversial perspectives, especially where they challenge deeply held beliefs or subject “sceptical” ideas to serious examination and promote an original but respectful, sensitive, and balanced approach, can be effective.

Conclusion

Much of the literature argues for a skills-based approach where “critical thinking” is separated out from the substantive content of the higher education experience. Skills-training has some benefits broadly as a foundational aspect of what it means to learn. Furthermore, students have other opportunities to be supported in developing a critical mind set implicitly across the whole degree programme. However, having consciously embedded them into the way I teach and approach this material, and having witnessed the way in which students respond to this strategy, it appears to be effective in nurturing critical being. It works to demonstrate, allows students to practice and experience this and, finally, works to deepen and embody this state. The beauty of this kind of strategy is its simplicity. It can easily be applied in differing teaching contexts. There are ambiguities and paradoxes in most topics and it is eternally possible to find controversial topics to discuss within religious studies. The aim is to encourage intellectual autonomy, reason, and fairmindedness: working towards the cultivation of a sensitive and respectful approach to different perspectives, and aiming to foster a non-judgemental position as a foundation for inhabiting a state of critical being well beyond the educational context.

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Teaching Demonology, Possession, and Exorcism in Texas

Joseph Laycock, Texas State University

Introduction

I am an assistant professor of religious studies at Texas State, a rapidly growing state university in San Marcos, Texas. Texas State offers a minor in religious studies and is currently creating a major. I was hired to help build the new major and generate student interest in religious studies. Specifically, I was encouraged to teach a class through the Texas State Honors College that would “get butts in seats” and show why religious studies is a fascinating field. I had just finished editing an encyclopedia called *Spirit Possession around the World* for ABC-CLIO and this seemed like the perfect basis for a high-interest course. So I designed a course called “Demonology, Possession, and Exorcism” that was offered in the fall of 2015. The course was popular enough that the Honor’s College asked me to teach it again in the spring of 2017.

“Spooky” Topics in the Classroom

Exorcism is a serious subject in Texas. Texas State’s library owns an autographed copy of *Pigs in the Parlor*, a seminal text in the deliverance ministry movement that formed in the 1970s. The authors, Frank and Ida Mae Hammond, studied theology at Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth. The first day of class we watch cellphone footage of some young men allegedly performing an exorcism in an Austin Starbucks. Several students said the scene didn’t look improbable at all—that they had seen exorcisms like this performed in the small Texas towns where they grew up. Some students told me their parents had concerns about them taking the class. I asked them whether their parents were worried they would get possessed or whether they would stop believing in demons. Their answer was both: they might stop believing in demons and then get possessed.

Even though exorcism seems so ubiquitous as to be banal, teaching a class about it at a university remains somehow scandalous. (In fact, when word got out I was teaching this course, I was asked to appear on the paranormal radio show *Coast to Coast AM*). Religious studies has historically regarded exorcism or anything that smacks of the “the paranormal” as slightly embarrassing—especially where these beliefs and practices concern contemporary Americans instead of, say, far off indigenous cultures or medieval Europeans. This unstated “two-tier model of religion” has come under increasing scrutiny from the academy, but it still shapes the way undergraduate courses are organized. Spirit possession or similarly “spooky” topics are still much more likely to be discussed in the anthropology department than in religious studies.

While spooky topics help boost enrollment, they come with their own set of challenges. The single greatest obstacle I’ve encountered is that students find the material interesting but have difficulty imagining what it would look like to approach it in a rigorous and critical fashion. This problem takes

several forms. Some students assume that because the topic is fun, the course must be easy. These students may be disappointed when, for example, they submit a shallow analysis of their favorite horror movie as a research paper and receive a poor grade. This isn't simply laziness: These students often don't understand that their peers are getting higher grades because they are doing better research and producing more rigorous work. Other students mistake simple skepticism for analysis. They regard the thesis that demons are not real as the end of analysis instead of the beginning.

Finally, I have noticed that there is a flip side to the two-tier model of religion: Some students seem to assume that because these topics are more frequently discussed on internet forums and YouTube videos than in college classrooms, that professors are merely tourists to this material. There is a certain type of student I call "a lore master" (or a "lore mistress"). The lore master has typically invested a lot of time learning about the paranormal through popular media and is proud of their knowledge. The lore master is often adept at, for example, listing various Goetic demons and their powers, but not yet good at contextualizing this data. Rather than regarding these demons as mythic personages with interesting variations across cultures and centuries, they understand them as data that is universal and self-evident, like the periodic table. A lore master may feel slighted when their favorite fact or story is treated as a mere datum in a much larger pattern of beliefs and cultural practices. At worst, the lore master may come to the class expecting to be praised for the knowledge they have already attained and feel resentful when they are asked to rethink this knowledge within a larger context or from a new perspective. In many ways, the lore master resembles a familiar problem in teaching biblical literature, where students who have studied the Bible from a confessional perspective want college credit but are resistant to learning about historical approaches to their sacred text.

Teaching about Demons

Most cultures on Earth have some tradition of spirit possession, so the amount of material that could be included in a course called "Demonology, Possession, and Exorcism" borders on the infinite. It is a struggle to show students the breadth of the material and the theoretical lenses for approaching it while still giving the course some coherent structure. The course focuses primarily on the history of Western tradition, moving from the ancient Near East, through the Bible and apocrypha, to early modern Europe. The second half the course looks at the Spiritualist movement, medical models of spirit possession beginning in the 19th century, and the resurgence of Catholic exorcism and deliverance ministry in the 1970s. The last week considers Ufology and conspiracy theories as forms of contemporary demonology. Along the way, I found ways to insert comparative cases from Hinduism, Islam, Vodou, and Native American religion.

To add more breadth, I tried an exercise in which each student was given a recent news article on possession. They were then asked to give analysis of what they thought was happening and present it to the class. I deliberately selected cases from as many continents and religious traditions as possible. This effectively created over twenty miniature case studies. I emphasized that the point of doing this was both to "survey the territory" and also to begin thinking of topics for research papers. I have also tried to select readings that are accessible but allow students to approach this material from multiple angles. I have assigned selections from Carl Sagan to introduce basic epistemology, Erika Bourguignon's work on spirit possession for anthropology, Christopher Bader's et al.'s (2011) *Paranormal America* for sociological approaches, David Frankfurter's (2006) *Evil Incarnate* for discourse analysis, Freud's essay on demonic possession for psychoanalytical approaches, and the work of Richard Noll for psychiatric approaches.

Assessment is built around class discussion and a research paper. Class participation is worth a whopping 30% of their grade. Each class begins with a short lecture to supplement the reading material. Then I put some discussion questions on the board. We move in a circle and each student is required to say something of substance about the reading. Their comments do not have to relate to one of my discussion questions, but the questions help the students to think of something to say. Although we move in a sequence, students do not have to “wait their turn” to talk. They are encouraged to raise their hand and piggyback or respond to someone else’s point. The advantage of this method is that every student speaks at least once. Students who have not done the reading can fake their way through discussion, but they can’t arrive to class with the hope of keeping their head down and letting other people talk. As we talk, I make a note of students who have specific passages from the text they want to talk about. If students sheepishly confess they have not done the reading, I note that too. Halfway through the semester I give students a preliminary participation grade with notes about how I would like them to improve.

I believe in student research papers. I think they hone skills students need for the job market and a life well lived and also give them a sense of ownership over their learning. Unfortunately, even in the Honors College, I get students with no idea how to write a research paper. They never learned these skills in high school or, worse, they left high school thinking a Google search qualifies as college-level research. I invest a lot of time and energy into giving students the training and guidance they need to write a great research paper. We take a field trip to meet our librarian, who shows students how to use databases, interlibrary loan, and other services. (Many students do not know how to check out a library book.) We also take a field trip to the writing center and discuss how to make an appointment. I require a prospectus with an annotated bibliography, an outline, a draft, and a final product. Combined, these assignments are worth 70% of the student’s grade. Having these benchmarks makes it impossible for students to procrastinate. It also allows me to guide their research as it develops. Thinking of a good question for their prospectus is the single most important part of the process.

Additionally, I offer extra credit assignments to encourage students to physically enter the library and engage with its resources. Students can take a “shelfie” (a cellphone “selfie” photo taken in the library stacks), bring a library book to class, or bring an interlibrary loan book to class. Each of these small assignments is worth an extra point on their research paper grade. I also offer students a point if they take a picture of themselves holding *The Compendium Maleficarum*. Texas State owns a copy of this text, and giving students an incentive to track it down opens their eyes to the kind of resources available to them. I created these assignments when I realized some students were unwilling to use resources if they couldn’t access them online.

Most importantly, I emphasize to students that professors are professional researchers and that they are practicing doing what we do. I explain that when I edit a peer-reviewed journal, I am essentially giving the same kind of critique and guidance that I do with their papers. I also encourage students to either submit their work to journals or present it at research conferences. There are journals and conferences that seek undergraduate research. Few students actually pursue this, but talking about it conveys that their analysis is significant and meaningful and not just an arbitrary exercise to get a grade. Two students from the demonology course have gone on to produce honors theses with me as their supervisor.

Wrestling with Demons

The biggest challenge I have teaching a demonology course is getting students to find a balance between credulousness and smugness. Finding some balance between the hermeneutics of respect and

the hermeneutics of suspicion is a problem for all of religious studies, and there is hardly a consensus among religion scholars about where this line should be drawn. But this problem is exacerbated when looking at claims of extraordinary experiences.

I often encounter the attitude that anyone claiming to experience spirit possession is either mentally ill or lying and that anyone who fails to understand that is simply unintelligent. This view is often accompanied by a certain self-congratulatory attitude. One thing I try to get students to see is that even if demons are not real, a dismissive attitude makes it hard to see the intricate social functions that possession and exorcism serve or interpret experiences of spirit possession.

On the other hand, some students exhibit an alarming lack of suspicion. While discussing *The Demonologists*, a book about Ed and Lorraine Warren, one student expressed that all the stories of the Warrens' adventures seemed plausible until we began discussing them in class. I added Carl Sagan to the course partly to give students a basic tool kit for assessing extraordinary claims. I have also found myself telling students that religious truth claims should not be exempt from critical thinking. As researchers, we shouldn't refrain from questioning claims of spirit possession just because they are part of someone's religion.

In their research papers, I often advise students to avoid making claims about demons that are difficult to prove so that they can devote more space to proving their thesis. Most papers don't actually need to prove that demons categorically do not exist. Conversely, if a student's paper is dependent on proving the literal existence of demons, I usually advise them that they do not have space to prove such a claim in an eight-to-ten-page paper.

Analyzing extraordinary experiences like spirit possession is a great entrée into theory and method in religious studies. In fact, the two-tier model of religion, which has subtly influenced undergraduate introductory religion courses, seems designed to push these theoretical conundrums aside in favor of the "world religion" model. Of course, basic religious literacy is an important part of a college education, but no one can really call herself a religion scholar until they have wrestled with demons.

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Experiencing Occult/Paranormal/Spiritual Phenomena in the Classroom

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Experience as a Way of Knowing

In both my “Sociology of Religion” class and my “Science, Knowledge, and the New Age” class, there are treatments of such occult, paranormal, and/or spiritual topics as spirit mediumship, ESP, apparitions, and spiritual healing. Especially in the latter class, the emphasis is on the sociology of knowledge, or ways of knowing. The main course objective is to understand both scientific and “intuitive” (broadly defined) ways of knowing and to compare and to see interconnections between the two.

To this end, I have students meditate almost daily and write about their experiences in a journal which also includes other intuitive exercises such as ESP games, hands-on healing, and spirit mediumship (or psychic reading), both inside and outside of class. We begin with simple forms of meditation and mindfulness, working our way from ten minutes a day to twenty or more, and varying the instructions and options throughout the course. This is like “swinging the leaded bat” in baseball and opens them up to other forms of intuition later on. Eventually there are other classroom exercises in ESP (such as psychometry, trying to get information psychically from objects placed in envelopes by their classmates), hands-on healing with individuals or groups of classmates, and giving psychic/spiritual messages to classmates in a circle, after demonstrations by a healer or medium.

This always “works” in that students become engaged and gradually dare to share their experiences and feelings. These feelings range from surprise (even astonishment sometimes) at informational accuracy or healing results, to skeptical evaluations or frustration at having trouble meditating, for example. “I could really feel the heat around my knee.” “I can’t believe the details she told me about when I was in New York.” “I think I’m just making stuff up; nothing was accurate.” “Meditating is just making me more irritated.”

We also compare their experiences to the content of video clips (such as Dr. Herbert Benson’s Harvard studies of Tibetan monks meditating, turning the cold water in the towels on their backs into steam with their elevated body heat) and class readings about scientific attempts to study spiritual healers and spirit mediums.

Journal entries generally show a progression to greater comfort with meditating, for example, although some students, maybe 10–20%, make little progress or say that they just can’t do it or can’t think of ways to reflect very much on their experiences. I emphasize that they can’t “do it wrong,” and that the more trouble they have meditating (due to stress, etc.), the more likely they are to benefit from it. I also give them articles about studies of such benefits. Occasionally I get communications from students years later about how taking this class saved them from dropping out of college due to stress-reduction from

meditation or other healing benefits. One student said that she had been healed in class one day permanently of a chronic infection and was inspired to open a health-food store and spa with a partner.

How Students Learn

Students are used to academic or scientific ways of learning, but how are they to understand intuition without practicing it? There is a great deal of discussion in higher education about student engagement in learning, but this is mostly within the usual academic frame. It involves writing and communicating orally in class, and doing creative research in the library or in gathering original data. There are growing exceptions to this limited focus. For example, I know of some other classes in which students learn some yoga (in someone else's sociology class) or do some meditating (in a religious studies class). Most students are hungry for complementary learning methods. This includes not only my particular experiential method described here, but also service learning, study abroad, and internships. Ever since the 1970s when I was the Gettysburg College campus coordinator for internships in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, I have tried to get students to integrate academic and experiential learning, instead of divorcing academics from the "real world."

One issue with my method is that some students might object to the intuitive exercises on religious grounds, for example. This is why I have stated for the past fifteen years in "Science, Knowledge and the New Age" that I will give anyone an alternate assignment if this is the case. Not a single person has ever asked for an alternative. One reason for this is probably that Gettysburg College has very few students with strongly conservative religious views. At another college in the 1970s, I was told by a sociology professor with very liberal views that one of his students said, "The Devil [was] lurking in the classroom."

I have also seen resistance to spiritual aspects of yoga from local residents in a yoga class I have attended in the town of Gettysburg. The highly secular context of Gettysburg College (never mind that it is loosely affiliated as a Lutheran College) means that opposition is more likely to come on scientific grounds. I have heard some derision from faculty over the years about my interest in the sociology of the paranormal but very little if any from students, who are more likely to be curious about it. One professor did tell one of my students recently, "Oh, Professor Emmons is doing that in class? Well, he believes in ESP, you know." My response to students about such things is that I do not believe in belief; as a (social) scientist I am interested in experience and other forms of evidence.

How Do We Know What We Think We Know?

Sociology is by nature a subversive exercise. Taken seriously, it questions not just authority but everything that is taken for granted, including how we know anything. I tell my students, "The only thing I know is that I don't know anything for sure." This is a paraphrase of Socrates, who claimed to know nothing, but I say that I might actually know something and not realize it. My favorite subversive topic is the sociology of knowledge. One view of this is that all knowledge has a social origin or context and that scientists and academics in general have a privileged way of knowledge-creation based on objectivity. I say that we must look at ourselves in the mirror and make no exceptions to the principle that all of our knowledge is socially (and individually) constructed. Ultimately, objectivity is an ideal in science, but it is not a completely attainable reality as long as human beings with interests and social origins are involved.

Doing experiential, intuitive exercises in the classroom acknowledges that there are other ways of knowing besides mainstream science. And there is evidence that scientists rely on their own experience, just as the rest of us do, especially when taboo forms of knowledge or "paranormal" (occult) phenomena are concerned. As [Andrew M. Greeley](#) said, "The paranormal is normal." In other words,

most people have so-called paranormal experiences. It is just no good to ignore such experiences and ways of knowing on the grounds that they are unscientific or “pseudoscientific”.

At the very least, we need to study occult/paranormal/spiritual phenomena because they are part of human experience. Studying them from “objective” distance can be useful but is neither entirely satisfying nor completely effective. Sociologists and anthropologists employ many research methods, among which are ethnographic interviewing and participant observation, both designed to get closer to the experiences of the people they are studying.

Conclusion

In our postmodern world, scholars talk about tearing down the barriers to understanding caused by “othering” people of different cultural and demographic categories from us. Too rigid a differentiation between scientific thinking and magical or spiritual thinking heightens barriers between ways of knowing and creates distance from understanding the beliefs and experiences of others.

With the experiential, intuitive exercises in “Science, Knowledge and the New Age,” students are learning to share the perspectives of those who experience paranormal or spiritual phenomena, including themselves. But they also learn to stand back and reexamine their experiential evidence from scientific perspectives as well, perhaps integrating the scientific with the intuitive.

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Teaching and Learning from the Uncertainties of Occult Phenomena

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The Séance as a Teaching Event

There are many ways one could frame a course in American occultism. I structure my “Occult in America” seminar around a certain set of highly bizarre and contested phenomena that have set in motion a number of cultural and religious movements variously labeled as “harmonial,” metaphysical,” or “occult”—and that continue to elicit both fascination and denouncement today. These phenomena include the reports of spontaneous healings and parapsychological activity (e.g., telepathy and clairvoyance) that circulated in 18th century Europe and 19th century America with the advent of mesmerism. They also include alleged demonstrations of the survival of consciousness after death: accounts of mediumship in the 19th century, and modern research on near death experiences over a century later. By the end of my class, students will have learned the histories of mesmerism, Spiritualism, and Theosophy in 19th America, and they will have explored at least one 20th century occult religion. But gaining such historical knowledge and perspective is not the primary goal I have in mind for my students in this course. More than anything else, I want to provide them with exposure to some of what Charles Fort called the “damned facts” lying at the heart of modern occultism—situations that are not supposed to happen, but seem to anyway—and to accompany them through the complexity of analyzing and narrating what they might be. Depending on how they end up interpreting the data, the “Occult in America” might be for many students a fifteen-week immersion into the miraculous and/or paranormal dimension of human experience. Or it might prove to be an introduction to the history of fraud and pseudoscience. Or it might be a foray into a social and epistemological space charged with the valence of deviance and taboo. But whatever they might ultimately choose to call it, by the end of the semester, the “Occult in America” course will have introduced students to contingency and fluidity of interpretation itself, for to dwell on the occult is to study the tricksterish nature of knowledge.

I did not set out to teach American occultism with this goal of academic self-reflexivity so explicitly in mind. It was only seven years ago, after giving up on the search for a good documentary on modern mediumship, that I decided to invite a medium whom I had met during ethnographic research into my classroom, both to discuss the history of American Spiritualism and to deliver readings. The effect was electric, and ever since then attendance at a séance has been a strongly recommended, though optional, part of the course. It is important that this event does not happen too early in the semester; we need time to explore a few methodological lenses through which the nature of mediumship might be understood. Derived from readings and lectures on the histories of Spiritualism, psychical research, and stage magic, these consider the séance respectively as a demonstration of thaumaturgy, telepathy, and/or performance art. The point is that none of these frameworks have ever succeeded in fixing the meaning of mediumship. What was true in the 19th century is just as true today: the séance is an

underdetermined phenomenon, a fact-in-the-process-of-becoming, a highly contested performance that elicits everything from accusations of deception to on-the-spot mystical experiences. But it is one thing for the students to read about this, or hear it said in lecture. It is an entirely different thing for them to interact with a medium in real time, or watch others interact with her, and then narrate what, exactly, just transpired. It is at this point that the class crosses over the line from learning about the occult to writing its meaning into being.

The fact that the *séance* is an optional component of the seminar has not seemed to detract from its power to enliven the subject matter of the course for all students enrolled. The classes held after the medium's visit evolve into open-ended discussion, for those who attended, to make sense of their experience. For those who have not, it is an opportunity to witness the powerful effects this occult ritual typically has on their peers, and to field their own doubts and questions. There has never been a unified, consensual explanation of what, exactly, the medium did when she brought through readings—or how those in the audience helped create the experience. These conversations are lively and charged. The nature of the *séance* coaxes us out of whatever protective shell, intellectual or personal, to which we are accustomed; both the students and I put our interpretive cards on the table, and together actually elaborate on the medium's messages through our own reflections, critiques, and self-disclosures. In these discussions, the undetermined status of the occult is no longer a philosophical abstraction, but a dimension of our efforts to narrate religion. Students thus develop an experiential understanding of why the "occult" is so notoriously hard to pin down, and why it circulates in modern society as a term fraught with so much controversy. This realization not only adds a noticeable depth to our subsequent explorations of occultism, but exposes in a powerful way the complexities of studying and writing about religion in an academic setting.

The Occult Art of Writing about the Occult

My continued choice to structure the occult seminar around indeterminate paranormal phenomena reflects my own scholarly approach to and experience with the material, which as I have already mentioned is rooted in ethnographic research. Beginning in 2007, I spent three consecutive summers immersing myself in various occult-related gatherings across the United States, where mediums delivered messages from my deceased relatives, alien abductees recounted to me their otherworldly journeys, and dowsers passed on their arts of finding underground water or distant objects with everyday household items. I had already conducted ethnography as a graduate student years earlier in a very different corner of the American religious landscape, among predominantly Latino Catholics. In that context, I met people who found in their faith tradition a powerful set of resources to articulate religio-cultural identities. Setting off to document occult subcultures, I assumed that this project would entail using the same basic set of skills I had used before: composing thick descriptions of rituals and sacred spaces, recording and transcribing interviews, and finally contextualizing the data into extant historical and anthropological literature. But this did not prove to be the case. First, in sharp contrast to the subject of my earlier research, one of the signature features of modern occultism is its decidedly liminal nature. It was not simply that the experiences I recorded and sometimes witnessed went beyond ("para-") the perceived limits of the everyday world; it was also true that the gatherings I attended were charged with a ludic and sometimes carnivalesque air. I could never be sure when I was part of an earnest exploration into some aspect of metaphysical reality, or when I was participating in a kind of collective, improvisational performance art. How was the project of ethnography—a mode of scholarship premised on the goal of "making the strange familiar"—equipped to represent such a tricksterish strand in modern culture? What I was encountering was strange, and as a writer I needed to keep it that way, lest I distort the subject matter to the point of misrepresentation.

Second and even more saliently, I came to the conclusion that at least in the North American context, there is no such thing as an occult “tradition” to record, if by this term, we mean a set canon of sacred texts, an identifiable genealogy of interpretation, or, with a few exceptions, stable communities of practitioners. Even if I might succeed, as a writer, in producing thick descriptions of ambiguity (both in relation to the phenomena themselves, and the communities coalescing around them), it was not at all clear to me which body of extant literature on the “occult”—or was it “paranormal”? or “pseudoscientific”? or “supernatural”? or “esoteric”?—these descriptions belonged. The people with whom I interacted and from whom I learned could come to no consensus among themselves on the nature of the phenomena at hand: hence, for example, the currency of the term “unidentified flying object.” The many scholarly works I read on the occult were helpful in illuminating some aspect of what I had encountered during research, but no one scholar or study exhausted its meaning entirely. What I was trying to describe and analyze was very much a work of grassroots bricolage, an attempt to create a religious tradition *ex nihilo* in which every interpreter had as much, or as little, authority as the next. The ambiguity of the term “occult” struck me as a powerful analog for the concept of “religion,” and the efforts of my subjects to create a tradition from the ground up an analog for our scholarly efforts to elaborate upon a concept for which there is ultimately no stable meaning. The occult thus became a mirror in which to ponder the inherently poetic dimension of scholarship. It would not be for several more years that I would find a way of replicating this realization for and with my students by inviting a medium to bring through “messages from the dead” into the classroom—and asking the students to narrate their experience.

An Invitation to Live with the Questions

In my seminar, we analyze the emergence of American occultism as one attempt to build bridges between the ailing liberal Protestantism of the 19th century (ala Ralph Waldo Emerson’s description of Unitarianism as “corpse cold rationalism”), and various scientific discoveries of the day, particularly those pertaining to the nature of consciousness. Within this framework, my students tend to take one of two major insights from the course. Among non-science majors, many students incorporate insights gleaned from the occult into their pre-existent religious understandings of the world, which at my college is mostly Roman Catholicism. Science majors, in contrast, typically express surprise and enthusiasm that there are modes of religious inquiry outside the domain of institutions, and that the study of the natural world can enhance the search for meaning. In either case, however, it is the open-ended, underdetermined nature of the damned facts of occultism that opens for them new and exciting vistas of thought.

For students drawn to the religious implications of occultism, the course seems to open an intellectual space in which the mystical dimension of Christianity takes on a fresh allure. This might sound surprising since occultism in general, and mediumship in particular, are denounced in many Christian denominations. But given occultism’s fascination in exploring interiority and the frontiers of the human psyche, the fit with contemplation suggests itself. My Catholic students appreciate the seminar’s approach to extraordinary experiences and phenomena as open questions that they can explore and debate, rather than predetermined facts they are obliged to accept. Many students who had long abandoned vital engagement with religious questions typically report a renewed interest in their own traditions, as well as a curiosity to learn about new faiths.

For students coming out of science backgrounds, the class serves as an introduction to the history of science, which is not a major offered at my college. Most of them have never had the opportunity to step back from their disciplines to ask broader questions about the evolution of western science against the background of a Christian culture. Particularly when we discuss aspects of the occult in the context

of neuroscience or integrative medicine, many of these students reclaim the sense of wonder that animated them to pursue the natural sciences to begin with, but that had become lost at some point in the demands and pressures of their studies. They, too, appreciate the fact that there are open questions left to explore, that studying science entails much more than simply “learning the answers.”

I have no way of telling how my seminar would play differently in another part of the country, or at another school, but my students—today, members of the spiritually seeking Millennial generation—are especially open to pioneering new intellectual ground in the interstices of institutionalized religion and science, finding many of their own questions reflected in the speculations of earlier American occultists. The nature of the material covered in our seminar is bound to raise more questions than it is to deliver any certitudes, but this is precisely what they seem grateful to discover. As a teacher in the humanities, I can think of no better way to catalyze their excitement for learning than to expose them to questions that I have yet to answer myself.

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