

# Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach

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*Author's note: I have the privilege of working with secondary school teachers and teacher educators in several parts of world for over a decade regarding issues related to teaching about religion from a nonsectarian perspective. I have learned a tremendous amount from these dedicated professionals and continue to be inspired by their rich competences and shared commitments to empowering forms of education. I have also learned that many of the assumptions they bring and issues they face regarding teaching about religion in the schools are surprisingly similar to those of educators in the United States. Thus, although this article is essentially an overview of themes I address in more depth in my forthcoming book **Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Multicultural Approach to Teaching About Religion in Secondary Schools** (NY: Palgrave, 2007), I have tried to frame my presentation here in a way that I hope will also be relevant for colleagues outside of my own U.S. context.*

The premises of this essay are threefold: First, there exists a widespread illiteracy about religion that spans the globe;<sup>1</sup> second, one of the most troubling and urgent consequences of this illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism, thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for pluralism, peaceful coexistence and cooperative endeavors in local, national and global arenas; and third, it is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from a nonsectarian perspective in primary and secondary schools. 1

By religious illiteracy, I mean the lack of understanding about 1) the basic tenets of the world's religious traditions; 2) the diversity of expressions and beliefs *within* traditions that emerge and evolve in relation to differing social/historical contexts; and 3) the profound role that religion plays in human social, cultural, and political life in both contemporary and historical contexts. Conversely, I define religious literacy in the following way: 2  
Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

These definitions presume that religion is a social/cultural phenomenon that is embedded 3

in human political, social and cultural life. They also presume that religion shapes and is shaped by the social/historical contexts out of which particular religious expressions and influences emerge. Finally, these definitions presume that there is a difference between religion understood through the lens of personal devotional practice and the academic study of religion. One way to characterize this distinction is to recognize the difference between *religious learning* (or *learning religion*) through a devotional lens and *learning about religion* from an academic one. Both are legitimate enterprises that can serve complementary but distinctive ends.

In the following pages I offer a brief explanation of the three premises articulated above and then make a case for the importance of teaching about religion in schools from a nonsectarian perspective. I then offer an outline of both a theory and a method for how to teach about religion that can be incorporated in and adapted to diverse global contexts. I close with brief remarks summarizing a method for educating teachers about how to enhance their own religious literacy.

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### **Premise Number One: There exists a widespread illiteracy about religion that spans the globe.**

In my work with educators in East Africa, Pakistan, India, Indonesia and the United States, I have found that in spite of tremendous differences between and within these communities there is a marked similarity in their approach to and understanding of religion as represented by the following shared practices and assumptions:

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1) Religious traditions are often represented inaccurately by individuals who define themselves as "religious" as well as those who self-define as "non-religious." For those who define themselves as "religious," this inaccuracy often manifests itself in relationship to their own traditions as well as the faith traditions of others.

2) Religious traditions are often represented as internally uniform and static as opposed to diverse and evolving.

3) Religion is deeply and nearly exclusively equated with sectarianism in ways that render the study of religion a difficult concept to grasp and apply.

4) Practitioners of a given religious tradition are assumed to be the best sources of information about the tradition and are often looked to formally or informally as "experts." This fails to recognize the distinction between an academic study of religion and the devotional expression of a particular religious worldview.

5) In some contexts, religion is interpreted as a "private" affair distinct from the secular "public" sphere of political, economic and cultural life.

These common practices and assumptions expressed by educators about religion are widespread and often indicative of their fellow citizens. They are manifestations of the religious illiteracy that I define above and should not be interpreted as evidence of a lack of intellectual capability or awareness on the part of those who harbor these and similar assumptions. Given that the main sources of information about religion come from training

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in or about one's own religious tradition (or none) and the media, it should come as no surprise that these and other forms of religious illiteracy are widespread. Appropriately, individuals who are raised in or convert to a certain faith tradition will learn about that tradition within their faith communities or through sectarian forms of education in the schools aimed at promoting a particular religious worldview and values that are consonant with it. Individuals who are not religious also learn particular worldviews and associated values from family and/or community members. In relationship to religion, these values are often a-religious or anti-religious. The other main source of information about religion is the media whose coverage about religion is notoriously inconsistent at best and not a reliable source for representing the complexity of religious traditions and their diverse manifestations and influences. None of these sources expose individuals to a comprehensive study of religion whereby 1) the diversity within a given tradition is knowledgeable and sympathetically represented and 2) religion as a social/cultural phenomenon is explored and analyzed. Such an understanding requires an academic approach to the study of religion and although there are some schools that offer instruction representing this approach in primary and secondary education, relatively few citizens of the world have the opportunity to engage in this type of inquiry.

**Premise Number Two: One of the most troubling and urgent consequences of religious illiteracy is that it often fuels prejudice and antagonism thereby hindering efforts aimed at promoting respect for pluralism, peaceful coexistence and cooperative endeavors in local, national, and global arenas.**

I am certainly not suggesting that religious illiteracy is the sole or even primary cause of the heartbreaking violence that dominates local and global news stories. I do, however, believe that religious illiteracy is often a contributing factor in fostering a climate whereby certain forms of bigotry and misrepresentation can emerge unchallenged and thus serve as one form of justification for violence and marginalization. Many others share this concern as evidenced by a recent online consultation focusing on this topic that was sponsored by the United Nations.<sup>2</sup> One well-studied example of the negative consequences of religious illiteracy is Christian forms of anti-Semitism that have been promoted wittingly and unwittingly and which have fueled countless atrocities against the Jewish people for centuries, including (but sadly not restricted to) the Holocaust. Another example in countries where Muslims are in the minority is the widespread association of Islam with terrorism and the consequent justification of individual hate crimes against those perceived to be Muslim as well as overt (or barely veiled) political rhetoric that lends justification for State sponsored acts of aggression, including war. A third example is the antagonisms that are fueled between different expressions of the same tradition (e.g. between Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians and between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims). A fourth and final example is when some dismiss religion altogether as obsolete, irrational and/or inherently oppressive thereby offending the dignity and sensibilities of people of faith everywhere.

Training in religious literacy provides citizens with the tools to better understand religion as a complex and sophisticated social/cultural phenomenon and individual religious traditions themselves as internally diverse and constantly evolving as opposed to uniform, absolute and ahistorical. Learning about religion as a social/cultural phenomenon also helps people recognize, understand and critically analyze how religion has been and will continue

to be used to justify the full range of human agency from the heinous to the heroic. Finally, those trained in religious literacy learn to question the accuracy of universal claims such as "Islam is a religion of peace" or "Judaism and Islam are incompatible" thereby helping to deepen discourse about religion in the public sphere. Learning about religion is no guarantee that religious bigotry and chauvinism will cease, but it will make it more difficult for such bigotry and chauvinism to be unwittingly reproduced and promoted.

### **Premise Number Three: It is possible to diminish religious illiteracy by teaching about religion from a nonsectarian perspective in primary and secondary schools.**

Given the prominence of religion in human history and contemporary affairs it would seem that education about religion from a nonsectarian perspective would be widespread and popular. This is unfortunately not the case. There are several reasons for this, but the most prominent and relevant for our discussion is that education about religion in the manner promoted here is not without controversy. Conservative religious practitioners from many faith traditions often oppose learning about religion in schools for they feel that it is the role of faith communities and families to teach about religion from their own theological perspectives. Learning about religion from an academic lens presumes the legitimacy of multiple religious worldviews which is theologically problematic in some circles. On the other hand, many others who identify as religious and non religious alike fear that if religion is introduced in the schools some teachers will inevitably proselytize either by intention or default due to a lack of adequate training and clear understanding of the distinction between an academic and devotional approach. These are legitimate concerns that merit attention and I offer the following two responses below. 9

First, it is important to note that religion is *already* being taught in classrooms across the globe in intentional and unintentional ways. Uninformed and often unconscious assumptions about religion are transmitted on a regular basis to students who, in turn, absorb these assumptions without interrogation. Teachers who have participated in training seminars about how to teach about religion commonly lament with chagrin the false and/or problematic assumptions regarding religion that they unwittingly promoted and reproduced prior to their training. For example, one teacher in Kenya spoke about how before participating in a seminar on Islam she wrongly interpreted Miriam Ba's text *So Long a Letter* as "an indictment against Islam as inherently oppressive to women." This is one of the texts approved for use in the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum and she commented that her entire department made the same problematic assumptions about the text. There are dozens of other examples that I could offer along these lines. Given this reality, I believe it is better to educate about religion directly and to give teachers the training they need to do so more responsibly than they are often currently able to do. 10

Second, the objections cited above highlight an important point: this form of teaching about religion is not neutral and needs to be justified (or not) in light of the larger aims associated with the nature and purpose of the educational enterprise itself as defined in specific local contexts. Most schools and/or systems of education have articulated a statement of purpose or mission statement reflecting the vision of education they seek to promote. On a larger scale, many nations have imbedded in their own narrative histories the 11

values they hope to instill in their citizens through education in the schools. In some cases, the larger educational values that are articulated may lead to a clear decision *not* to include the study of religion from a nonsectarian lens in the curricula. This would be true, for instance, in some (but not all) intentionally sectarian schools whose aim is to promote a particular theological worldview. For many others, however, the larger goals of education are quite compatible with learning about religion in this way. This is especially true in contexts where pluralism and the cultivation of respect for diversity are values explicitly articulated. For example, I make a case in my book for why teaching about religion in the United States is an important dimension of educating for democratic citizenship in the context of our own multicultural, multireligious pluralism.<sup>3</sup> The position I develop in the manuscript is too lengthy to reproduce here, but the point I want to emphasize is that education is never neutral and therefore all educational decisions (including content, pedagogical practices and assessment standards) need to be justified in light of a larger educational vision that is intentionally articulated and embraced. It is sound practice for any educator to consciously align beliefs with practices in this way, but especially important when engaging in potentially controversial issues such as teaching about religion. Being transparent about the larger goals of the educational enterprise also provides a forum for open deliberation about those goals in ways that will strengthen public discourse and accountability.

## **How to Teach About Religion**

Given the widespread culture of religious illiteracy that I outline above, teaching about religion from a nonsectarian perspective poses some particular challenges. I will highlight some of these challenges below and then outline the cultural studies method that I advocate for as the best way to teach about religion in ways that confront and transcend these challenges while simultaneously advancing religious literacy and critical thinking skills.

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### *Challenges*

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The first challenge is that few teachers are trained in the methods and content required to teach about religion responsibly. Gaining even a minimal level of competence in these areas requires more training than typical in-service or pre-service workshops can provide. At the end of this article I outline one model for in-service teacher education that has proven highly effective for acquiring the basic competences required.

A second challenge is that teachers and students often harbor a host of embedded assumptions about religion; some of which are conscious and able to be openly interrogated but many that are unconscious and therefore difficult to discern and engage. In a related point, teachers and students often feel confident about their conscious assumptions about religion when many of those assumptions are profoundly problematic. For example, it is not uncommon for teachers and students alike to make blanket statements about a particular religious tradition or religion in general that they presume reflect self-evident truths. (E.g., "All religions are fundamentally the same." "Muslims hate America." "Homosexuality is a sin." "Religion and science are incompatible," etc.)

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A third challenge is that efforts to teach about religion may well be interpreted by parents, educational administrators and/or community leaders as teaching religion or proselytizing even if the teacher is clearly not doing so. This is another way that the deep association of religion with sectarian practice manifests itself. 15

A fourth challenge is that the pedagogical dimensions regarding *how* one teaches about religion are as significant as *what* one teaches regarding content. In this way, method and content are profoundly interrelated. 16

The cultural studies method that I construct in my book and outline below is well suited to address and respond to these challenges. The method itself is applicable across the curriculum but especially appropriate and helpful as a framework to teach about religion in the face of widespread religious illiteracy. 17

### *A Cultural Studies Method* 18

First, the method is multi and inter-disciplinary and recognizes how political, economic, and cultural lenses are fundamentally entwined rather than discrete. This approach assumes, for example, that economic or political dimensions of human experience cannot be accurately understood without understanding the religious and other ideological influences that shape the cultural context out of which particular political or economic actions and motivations arise. Rather than separating religion into a discrete category, this approach assumes that religion is a near constant ideological factor in social/political life. Sometimes it is more prominent than others, and sometimes the reigning ideology is shaped in *reaction* to religious influences, but religion is a nearly consistent variable nonetheless. It is appropriate, therefore, to assume the presence of religious influences in a given social/historical context or in relation to a given phenomenon until investigation proves otherwise. This is in stark contrast to current practices in schools where religion is usually only engaged when it is itself the main topic of inquiry, and even then it is often approached as a discrete, ahistorical phenomenon. (For example, many world history textbooks have sections outlining the basic tenets of the world's major religious traditions in ways that present them as internally uniform and consistent across time and place.)

Second, the method assumes that all knowledge claims are "situated" in that they arise out of particular social/historical contexts and therefore represent particular rather than universally applicable claims. This notion of "situatedness" is drawn from historian of science Donna Haraway's assertion that "situated knowledges" are more accurate than the "god-trick" of universal or objective claims that rest on the assumption that it is possible to "see everything from nowhere."<sup>4</sup> Contrary to popular opinion, the recognition that all knowledge claims are "situated" is not a manifestation of relativism whereby all interpretations are considered equally valid. Rather, "situated knowledges" offer the firmest ground upon which to make objective claims that are defined not by their detachment but rather by their specificity, transparency and capacity for accountability. Regarding the study of religion, this understanding of "situatedness" offers a tool to recognize that religious claims are no different than other forms of interpretation in that they arise out of particular contexts that represent particular assumptions as opposed to absolute, universal and ahistorical truths. (For example, claims such as "Islam is a religion of peace" and "Islam 19

promotes terrorism" are equally problematic and need to be recognized as representing particular assertions vs. ultimate Truths.)

Third, this notion of situatedness applies to the texts and materials being investigated, the scholarly interpreters of those materials, student inquirers and teachers themselves. Analysis includes an understanding of the social and cultural contexts out of which particular interpretive perspectives arise. This dimension helps to address the second challenge I cite above regarding the assumptions that educators and students harbor about religion. The method recognizes that all forms of inquiry are interpretations filtered through particular lenses. By acknowledging this fact, an essential dimension of the inquiry itself is to identify those differing lenses and make transparent that which would otherwise be hidden. (For example, teachers should be explicit about how an individual's own personal assumptions always shape interpretation and to thus employ learner-centered pedagogical practices that allow for the interpretative dimension of all forms of inquiry to emerge and be engaged.) 20

Fourth, the method calls for an analysis of power and powerlessness related to the subject at hand. Which perspectives are politically and socially prominent and why? Which are marginalized or silenced and why? Regarding religion, why are some theological interpretations more prominent than others in relationship to particular issues in particular social/historical contexts? (E.g., what are the factors that led to the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan and why did their interpretation of the role of women in Islam, for example, gain social legitimacy over other competing claims within the tradition itself? In another example, what were the factors that led the U.S. Southern Baptist Convention to pass a resolution in 1971 that urged Southern Baptists to "work for legislation that will allow for the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother"<sup>5</sup> and to reaffirm that resolution in 1974 as a "middle ground between the extreme of abortion on demand and the opposite extreme of all abortion as murder"<sup>6</sup> only to dismiss both of these resolutions overtly in a 2003 resolution entitled "On Thirty Years of Roe V. Wade" and by inference in resolutions passed from 1976 to the present day?<sup>7</sup>) In another vein, what are the converging factors that lend social credibility and influence to some religious traditions over others and which dimensions of those traditions are interpreted as orthodox and which heretical and by whom? (For example, what were the conditions that allowed Muslims, Christians and Jews to live together in relative harmony in medieval Spain and what are the religious influences that have contributed to shaping contemporary tensions in the Middle East and more globally regarding the "war on terror"?) 21

Fifth, the method includes reflection regarding the relevance and implications of the investigation itself. In other words, it recognizes that the educational enterprise is never neutral and so educators must be transparent regarding their aims. In relationship to teaching about religion, educators need to be clear about why this is a valid and, indeed, important focus for inquiry in relation to the broader educational goals that a given teacher, school, district or nation affirms and intentionally tries to promote. 22

It is worth emphasizing that the interpretive dimensions of inquiry that are foundational to a cultural studies approach need to be modeled in classroom practices for these dimensions to be adequately addressed. In other words, one has to *engage* in interpretation rather than 23

simply *learn about* interpretation from a distance. Thus, as I mention above and develop more fully in my book, I believe that teaching about religion responsibly requires that educators adopt a learner centered, problem posing classroom pedagogy as the methodology that models this interpretive dimension most effectively.

It may be helpful at this juncture to offer an example that will demonstrate how these various strands are integrated in actual classroom practice. 24

### **Teaching About the Holocaust: A Case Study**

I've chosen to focus on the Holocaust as a case study because it is widely taught about through history, literature and occasionally philosophy courses at the secondary level. I also know that many educators struggle with how to teach about the anti-Semitic roots of the Holocaust, especially in populations where their constituencies include conservative Christians who often feel attacked, defensive and/or skeptical when instructors address this dimension of the Nazi rise to power and influence. I teach a course entitled *Understanding the Holocaust* at Phillips Academy and will draw upon my experience teaching this class over the past twelve years in the following brief synthesis of how I teach about religion utilizing a cultural studies model. 25

#### *Constructing the Syllabus* 26

Remember that a cultural studies approach is interdisciplinary in that the subject of inquiry is considered from a variety of differing lenses and perspectives. A cultural studies approach also requires that the focus of inquiry be meaningful and relevant. There are countless ways to organize a course on the Holocaust that meet these criteria. My course is organized to engage the perspectives of the victims, the perpetrators and bystanders, and the rescuers and resisters through memoir, fiction, primary source documents, films, social analysis and philosophical reflections. The underlying questions of the course are simple yet profound ones: How could this have happened? And, what can we learn from this experience to prevent other forms of genocide?

#### *Creating a Learning Community* 27

Much of what is required to teach about religion responsibly in any setting using a cultural studies model takes shape in the first few days of a new class. As all teachers know, it is during these early meetings that a classroom tone, method of inquiry, and set of expectations are established. During the first class sessions of my own course on the Holocaust I have the following three goals that I hope to achieve: 1) to establish a learner-centered, problem posing classroom pedagogy; 2) to establish a cultural studies methodology regarding the nature of the inquiry itself; and 3) to establish the foundations for students to engage the religious dimensions of the cultural studies method by speaking explicitly about the distinction between religion as devotional practice and religion as a social/cultural phenomenon.



During the first class meeting I introduce the course syllabus and articulate the guiding questions cited above. I emphasize how the focus of the sessions will be student responses to the literature via student generated discussions in both large and small group formats. I suggest (but do not require) that they organize their responses to the readings by answering some formulation of the following questions: What did you learn that was new to you? What did you learn that was troubling? What did you learn that was hopeful? What do you want to learn more about? Through a series of exercises that are too involved to outline here, by the second or third day students have usually taken ownership of the learning process and I am able to function as the class facilitator. They engage one another directly in small and large group discussion formats that I organize but discussions are not directed by or through me. I only intervene if the conversation is veering off topic or if a student or students are trying to participate but have difficulty being heard. I also always have a clear idea of what issues are central to the assigned reading that need to be engaged and will intervene in the discussion on the rare occasion when students don't raise those issues themselves. Individual students respond to the course materials in different ways and the discussion-based format of the class allows these differing perspectives to emerge and be engaged directly. Furthermore, the "situatedness" of each student's own lens of interpretation is reflected through this approach.

The overarching goal of a cultural studies methodology is to give students the tools to be able to recognize and understand how a series of factors converge in specific social/historical contexts to create the conditions whereby some forms of human agency and/or beliefs are sanctioned and encouraged while others are discouraged, thwarted or prohibited. The way I structure my course on the Holocaust is based upon this method and I speak about this directly to my students. It is especially clear in relationship to the underlying questions posed and the way the syllabus is constructed as a learner-centered, inquiry-based exploration.

A cultural studies method also requires that I be explicit with students about the underlying assumptions that are inherent in and inform this approach. For example, the method as it relates to the course assumes that all subjects of inquiry (victims, perpetrators/bystanders and rescuers/resisters) are human beings very similar to ourselves as opposed to "monstrous others" in the case of perpetrators/bystanders or "saintly others" in the case of rescuers/resisters and victims. The exploration also assumes that violence and genocide are not inevitable and that humans are capable of making different choices than those that converged to create the conditions that led to the Holocaust. It is important for students to recognize that these assumptions are based in certain philosophical interpretations regarding human nature and that there are other interpretations that are equally valid but which would lead to very different conclusions. For example, some may believe in certain forms of determinism whereby genocide (in this case) would be considered inevitable.

In order to help students fully understand that the entire inquiry is based on certain assumptions as well as to help them identify and shape their own, I always lead them in one or more exercises where they answer fundamental existential questions that do not have right

or wrong answers. Questions such as whether humans are free or determined serve to help them identify their own philosophical presuppositions (or what I call "points of departure") and allow them to recognize the ways that those presuppositions shape how they view and interpret the world. These exercises also help them see that there are many legitimate and differing perspectives. Ultimately, the underlying questions of the course relate to fundamental assumptions about human nature and capacity. The question isn't whether one perspective is right and another wrong, but rather which perspectives are compelling (or not) and why.

### *Establishing the foundations to teach about religion from a cultural studies lens*

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During my introduction to the course and the cultural studies method, I make a point of highlighting how religion has always been a significant factor in human history and the ways in which it functions ideologically to shape cultural norms and assumptions in historic and contemporary contexts. I also highlight how religion has always been used to give ideological justification to the full range of human agency and how religion cannot therefore be accurately characterized as an inherently positive or negative force. I often ask students to brainstorm examples regarding religious influences and they always come up with a broad range of very relevant ones that represent how religion has been used historically to both promote as well as to thwart human dignity and well-being. I also speak explicitly about the distinction between the academic study of religion and religion as devotional practice in order to give them the language to analyze these distinctions as the course progresses. I comment that we will be looking at different dimensions of religion as one factor among many that contributed to shaping the social contexts that gave rise to different forms of human agency during the Holocaust.

Though it is possible to introduce the study of religion later in a class, it is much more difficult to do so and potentially problematic regarding the method itself. For example, one of the reasons that educators often find teaching about the anti-Semitic roots of Nazism so difficult is because it is often one of the only times (or perhaps *the* only time) that religion is mentioned in a given course. Without establishing a larger context to address religion as a social/cultural phenomenon and the ways that religious influences are consistent variables in social/cultural life (including but not restricted to influences related to the Holocaust) it is understandable why introducing it solely or even primarily through a potentially volatile topic such as anti-Semitism might engender discomfort and feelings of defensiveness on the part of some students.

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### **Integrating the Study of Religion Throughout the Course**

With the foundations in place that I establish during the first few class sessions, the topic of religion naturally arises consistently throughout term. All of the main units of the course offer countless opportunities to analyze the influence of religion in shaping particular cultures. For example, the particular manifestations of anti-Semitic influences in Germany, France, Poland, and the U.S. are critical dimensions of Holocaust studies and need to be engaged. Religious influences also inspired cultures of resistance such as those manifested in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the actions of the citizens of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon.

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Religious influences were also clearly a factor in the lives of individual victims, perpetrators/bystanders and rescuers/resistors as is well documented through memoirs, journal accounts, news stories and recollections by family members and friends. Another area of investigation relates to the roles that religious institutions played in shaping relevant social/cultural conditions.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to go into more detail at this juncture. The main point to emphasize is that once students are introduced to the social/cultural dimensions of religion as one lens of analysis among many they are able to apply that lens to recognize religious influences in several arenas, often in ways that they would not otherwise have noticed. They also have an analytical tool at their disposal to help them if they confront issues that are personally challenging (as in the case mentioned earlier whereby some Christians have difficulty accepting the reality of Christian anti-Semitism). 35

Given the depth of religious illiteracy, simply introducing students to the academic study of religion at the outset doesn't necessarily avoid confusion or conflict when religion is actually engaged in the literature and discussions, but it does provide a framework to return to when helping students understand the role of religion in shaping the range of human responses to the Holocaust and events leading to its execution. 36

### **Educating Teachers in the Study of Religion**

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, teachers require more training in the content and methods related to learning and teaching about religion than they can acquire through standard in-service workshops. One model that I have been piloting over the last two years with teachers from across the globe is a peer learning seminar that models a learner-centered pedagogy that is consistent with the cultural studies approach outlined above. This approach is predicated on the assumption that teachers are both scholars and professionals capable of engaging in sustained intellectual inquiry with peer colleagues. I will close this essay with a brief overview of one of these seminars to demonstrate what this model entails and why I think it is especially well suited for in-service educators eager to enhance their own religious literacy. 37

With the support of a faculty research grant from the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard<sup>8</sup> I was recently able to launch a peer learning seminar on the topic of Islam with a team of twelve secondary school teachers from a school in the greater Boston area. The teachers met once a week for a series of 14 ninety minute sessions to read through a graduate level syllabus that my colleague in Islamic Studies Ali Asani and I constructed together. The seminar was entitled *Understanding Islam and Muslim Civilizations* and the syllabus reflected a cultural studies model. The teachers represented a range of disciplines including English, history, foreign languages, and math. They also represented a range of roles in the school, including administrators, regular classroom teachers, teachers who worked primarily with students with special needs and a teacher's aide. 38

The seminar sessions were peer led on a rotating basis with the exception of three sessions (one each at the beginning, middle and end) where Ali and/or I served as session leaders to introduce teachers to the method and to guide them through particularly challenging dimensions of the literature. The rest of the seminar sessions were conducted by the teachers 39

themselves without immediate input or direction from either Ali or me. If questions arose during the seminar regarding their inability to understand portions of the readings, they recorded those questions and sent them to me via email where I responded to the entire group within a day. Each teacher also filled out a simple questionnaire following each session outlining what they learned, what they would like to learn more about and how they rated the assigned materials. They also filled out an extensive questionnaire at the end addressing all aspects of the experience, including the emphasis on peer learning.

This is the same basic template that I've used in other iterations of peer learning seminars in the U.S., East Africa and Pakistan. The response from teacher participants has been overwhelmingly positive. There are still dimensions of the method that need further development (e.g. more guidance for seminar sessions in the form of focus questions, frameworks for peer facilitation and a brief ongoing narrative linking one session to the next) but teachers consistently find the opportunity to engage with peers as scholars to be intellectually rich, professionally empowering, and profoundly enlightening regarding what they learn about religion. 40

As I noted earlier, teachers regularly reported the ways that their own unconscious assumptions emerged through the trainings and were challenged and often shattered as a result of their learning. In relationship to peer learning seminars that focus on Islam specifically, many non-Muslim teachers reported that prior to the seminar they harbored deeply rooted negative beliefs about Islam and Muslims that are frighteningly typical in non-Muslim cultures. Below is a sampling of the most common responses to a question that was asked as part of the final evaluation of a peer learning seminar on Islam. The question read as follows: "Please list 5-10 assumptions about Islam that you held before participating in the peer learning seminar that were modified or challenged as a result of your experience." 41  
"Muslims are all anti-infidel and very violent."

"All Muslim males treat women badly."

"Muslims are mostly found in Arab countries."

"It [Islam] teaches intolerance of others."

"Creates fanatical overzealous adherents thereby contributing to terrorism  
and war."

"Conversion to Islam [historically] was forceful and not voluntary."

"Islam is basically anti-Jewish and anti-American."

"All Muslims are fundamentalists."

And, finally, an interesting comment that is not typical of responses to the question posed above but reflects a common assumption that I highlighted earlier in the essay regarding how many equate religion solely with devotional practice.

"That the [peer learning seminar] was designed to convert us to Islam."

These are anonymous reflections that were collected from groups of extremely gifted and capable master teachers from two separate continents who teach in nonsectarian schools. Most of the teachers participating in the seminars expressed extreme anxiety regarding the ways that they unwittingly or ignorantly passed along these and similar assumptions to their students prior to their participation in the training. All of the participants have since begun to incorporate their new learning into their own curricula in innovative, effective, and accurate ways and many have expressed a desire to continue to deepen their knowledge base through further training. 42

## Conclusion

The teacher reflections cited above offer a glimpse into the pervasiveness and depth of religious illiteracy and they hint at a few of its consequences. Other more overt and dramatic consequences are featured in the news daily. We simply must address this systemic ignorance in robust, proactive ways beginning with one of the world's most precious but undervalued resources: our teachers. If teachers are given the opportunity to deepen their own religious literacy, I have every confidence that they will, in turn, rise to the challenge and teach future generations about religion in a more responsible and comprehensive fashion than most in our current generation have experienced. Literacy about religion will not put an end to the many antagonisms related to religion that are wreaking havoc throughout the globe, but it may well help to temper them. At the very least, it will provide a stronger foundation for understanding across our differences.<sup>9</sup> 43

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<sup>1</sup> By this bold assertion I don't mean to imply that there aren't pockets (even large ones) where teachers and citizens are quite well educated about religion and where the academic study of religion is imbedded in local and/or national curricula. I am indebted to my colleague in the United Kingdom, Robert Jackson, who has done much to publicize many such international efforts. (See Robert Jackson, *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*, London: Routledge Falmer, 2004.) It is, however, through the work of Jackson and others that I have also come to a deeper awareness of the challenges that many international educators face in their attempts to teach about religion and I characterize many of those challenges as manifestations of religious illiteracy. Finally, in a separate but related point, the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum is quite comprehensive and has great potential as a vehicle to foster literacy about religion. In my experience, however, teachers are unevenly trained in the content and

methods associated with the academic study of religion to be able to consistently teach about religion through the IB curriculum in responsible ways. (See the example I cite in the essay regarding Miriam Ba's text *So Long a Letter*.) Based on the evidence highlighted here and elsewhere, I believe it is accurate to state that there is widespread religious illiteracy that spans the globe.

<sup>2</sup> The consultation was sponsored by the "Alliance of Civilizations," a UN program formed at the initiative of the Secretary-General to counter terrorism through understanding. The consultation took place over the month of May, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> In my book I argue that a nonsectarian approach to religion should be required in all US educational contexts, including sectarian ones. I suggest that in religiously affiliated schools, both sectarian *and* nonsectarian instruction about religion should be incorporated into the curriculum.

<sup>4</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (NY: Routledge 1991), 191.

<sup>5</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, "Resolution number 4: On Abortion" in *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1971: St. Louis, Missouri June 1-3, 1971 (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1971), 72.

<sup>6</sup> Southern Baptist Convention, "Resolution number 5: On Abortion and Sanctity of Human Life" in *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1974: Dallas, Texas June 11-13, 1974 (Nashville: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention, 1974), 76.

<sup>7</sup> For a full text compilation of all the Southern Baptist resolutions on abortion from 1971-2005, see [www.johnstonsarchive.net/baptist/sbcabres.html](http://www.johnstonsarchive.net/baptist/sbcabres.html).

<sup>8</sup> See [www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/](http://www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/) for information about the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard.

<sup>9</sup> Diane L. Moore, *Final Report, Islamic Cultural Studies Project: Phase One 2003-2006*. Unpublished document, August, 2006.

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