

Abandoning Breadth for Depth: Reconceptualizing the Introductory Course

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The introductory course in religious studies would be best taught when the objective is not to survey a selection of well-known world religions, but to introduce the students to the study of religion and how to approach religious data in a scholarly fashion. Such an approach would impart a way of thinking about religion such that the student would be continually engaged with employing critical analysis.

Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln both acknowledge religion as a human construction.. For Smith, religion is (in part) the agency that arises out of situational incongruity; “Religion is the relentlessly human activity of thinking through a situation.”¹ Bruce Lincoln acknowledges the social occupation in regards to religion. He suggests that it is common sociopolitical contexts that give rise to commonalities in religion and religious discourse. Lincoln acknowledges that religion cannot be studied separately from the social and historical context in which it is situated.² Smith’s and Lincoln’s approaches to religion can be incorporated into an introductory course by emphasizing university level discourse analysis.

Jonathan Z. Smith proposes that when one is concerned with an introductory course, it is necessary to consider the nature of liberal education and defines liberal education as “training in argument about interpretations.”³ Smith notes that an introductory course is preoccupied with introducing students to work at the college level.⁴ Smith goes on to state that the subject matter of the course is secondary to this goal.

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 32.

² Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 173.

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Introductory Course: Less is Better” *Teaching the Introductory Course in Religious Studies: A Source Book* edited by Mark Juegensmeyer (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1991), 185.

⁴ Smith, “The Introductory Course” 186.

Using the comparative method as presented by Smith in conjunction with Lincoln's emphases on discourse analysis, this paper will present an alternative approach to introducing religion; involving a critical engagement with the processes of definition, classification, comparison, and explanation students should be encouraged towards the end goal of reinterpreting the data of religion.

When approaching the topic of an introductory undergraduate course, one is faced with the impossibility of covering the breadth of any given topic as well as the further impossibility of presenting the subject matter in any way that could be deemed holistic. It is often the case that students are presented with simplified versions of the teachings, history and practice of several of the major world religions, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The diversities inherent in these traditions are presented at a minimal exploration and often times peripheral religious minorities are ignored, such as Wiccan, Neo-paganism and indigenous religions. The students, for their part commit this simplified data to short-term memory and resubmit the information in various assignments and exams. We see very little effort on the part of these students to formulate arguments and critically analyze data. The course therefore fails to teach students how to *think* about and *analyse* religion. When they are presented with critical approaches, it is often presented in the form of lecture and discussion while rarely followed through with appropriate assignments and thorough engagement. It is most often the case that class discussion is abandoned due to the high enrolment in introductory courses as well as the ambition to cover a large amount of proposed data. In order to prepare students for future courses in religious studies, it would be of greater benefit to incorporate theory and method into the introductory course. A focus on theory and method would also serve to dispel the myths about the study of religion and dismantle preconceived notions of "essential" qualities inherently unique to "religion." This is of particular importance in

light of the fact that for many students enrolled in introductory courses, it will be their only engagement with the department of religion or religious studies (as the case may be).

In light of these considerations, it should not be the intention of the professor to provide a quantity of material, but to provide systems for analysis and consideration of data that would inspire creative and critical analysis. That is, to teach the students how to *think* about religion. As Smith advises in the title of his article, “less is better.”⁵ The quality of the education that can be provided to students, especially in terms of theory and methods involving critical and creative interpretation, outweighs the preoccupation to provide a massive quantity of data.

Both Smith and Lincoln call for a self-consciousness of the scholar with regards to their data. In *Imagining Religion*, Smith acknowledges that there is no data for religion. He suggests that data is solely the creation of the scholar’s study, defined for the purposes of the scholar to meet the needs of their individual study.⁶ In relation to this is Lincoln’s acknowledgment that self-consciousness is necessary for the scholar of religion. He emphasizes that academic discourse can never be perfectly neutral, but that it is constructed by the author and shares, with lesser-to-greater degree, in the opinions and bias of the author and is a product of her/his own situation and contexts.⁷ This emphasis on the position of the scholar becomes an important part in the education of religious studies and any course in the humanities. Students in the introductory course will be introduced to the activity of being continually conscious of what they are calling “religion” and remain aware that this data exists within a specific context. In this way, students begin to establish a critical awareness to aid them through the remainder of the course.

⁵ Smith, “Introduction to Religious Studies” 190.

⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) xi.

⁷ Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice*, xvii.

Defamiliarization as Smith utilizes the term, situates the familiar as something strange. This allows our perception of the familiar to change and expand.⁸ Both the self-consciousness of the scholar and defamiliarization can result in rectification and demystifying (to use terms adopted from both Smith and Lincoln). I propose beginning the course by creating for students an engagement with defamiliarization in order to ignite the capacity to think differently. I am reminded of a specific moment in my own undergraduate career. The professor came into the classroom on the first day of class and handed out a copy of a poem to each student. The question posed to the class was “Is this religious?” This led to questions of “What is or is not religious about this?” and so on; The discussion, led by the professor, offered notions of sacred versus profane, sacred space, individual versus collective ownership of religion, and so on. This discussion achieved the result of opening the minds of the students to different interpretations, new to us, that benefited the remainder of the course and future discussions. The classroom activity referenced above is an example of how defamiliarization can be incorporated into the classroom. I think it serves to further my argument to acknowledge, I do not remember the poem, but I remember the impact of the discussion. That was the day I started to recognize “religion” when I was at a sporting event, or a political rally. My understanding of what “religion” was broadened through this example of defamiliarization.

Smith provides, as a project for the study of religion four steps: definition, classification, comparison and explanation.⁹ I suggest that these steps become the outline for the proposed course in its approach to the data presented. For having had an introduction to critical self-consciousness and defamiliarization, these four steps can be introduced and built upon each other with continual reference to previous topics. This will further assist students in retaining the knowledge of the method and theories they are learning. The proposal Jesse has made with regards to a critical

⁸ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, xiii.

⁹ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 197.

engagement with myth, ritual and classification engages with these steps, specifically in his example of classification which calls into questions definitions of religion and its various subpart, definition being the first step discussed here.

Definition

In “Fences and Neighbors” Smith acknowledges that students of religion must abandon notions of essence and the impulse to totalize and integrate religious data into a monothetic definition. In “Religion, Religions, Religious” Smith problematizes the boundaries that such terms continue to perpetuate. In the conclusion of this work he uses James H. Leuba’s example that religion “can be defined, with greater to lesser success, more than fifty ways” and reassures the scholar of religion that her/his data is theirs to define for their purposes.¹⁰

The crucial aspect of this step, as exemplified by Jesse, is the dismantling of commonly held definitions of “religion” and its various parts, i.e. myth, ritual, sacred etc. Smith acknowledges there is nothing inherently “unique” to religion despite the pre-supposition held by the culture.¹¹ When approaching specific religious data, such as myth or ritual with the intention to define what myth or ritual is, the student of religion will begin to recognize the variations of definition. At this point, it becomes obvious to students in the introductory course that by troubling traditional definitions, traditional modes of classification are also troubled.

Classification

Smith and Lincoln offer different, yet complimentary engagements with classification; Smith's work being preoccupied *with how* we classify whereas Lincoln's reflects a concern with *what classification systems reflect* for any given society. In “The Tyranny of Taxonomy” a chapter of his book, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, Lincoln concludes that classification reflects the

¹⁰ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 193-194.

¹¹ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 5.

values and preoccupations of the culture.¹² In this way, Lincoln acknowledges that taxonomies are “epistemological instruments.”¹³ Smith places emphasis on classification as emphasised by Max Müller, “all real science rests on classification, and only in the case we cannot succeed in classifying the various dialects of faith, shall we have to confess that a science of religion is really an impossibility.”¹⁴ Lincoln points out, when classification systems are interrupted or called into question, situations can be reinterpreted.

Smith also acknowledges new interpretations as a possibility stemming from his theory of polythetic classification. By bringing together a greater expanse of data, the scholar is more inclined to make new discoveries as comparing data seemingly unrelated inspires surprise.¹⁵ This idea of classification requires the previously mentioned occupation with definition, but it is also preliminary to the next step of comparison. For within the polythetic classification system, comparison naturally occurs.

Comparison

Both Smith and Lincoln take on comparative analysis. As mentioned Smith's proposed polythetic system of classification led directly to a concern with comparison.¹⁶ Additionally Smith emphasizes comparison by stating, “...something is taught not because it is there, but because it connects to something else.”¹⁷ Smith emphasizes that comparison evokes the acknowledgement of difference and through this the element of surprise that inspires the discovery of new relationships and interpretations as previously mentioned in my discussion on defamiliarization. Therefore, this

¹² Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 133.

¹³ Lincoln, *Discourse*, 140.

¹⁴ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 173.

¹⁵ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 175.

¹⁶ Smith, “The Introductory Course” 187.

¹⁷ Smith, “The Introductory Course” 187.

comparative enterprise becomes a method to rectify misinterpretations. Smith suggests that things are not taught by virtue of their simply being there, but that they are taught in relation to something else.¹⁸ For this reason comparison is best taught according to categories of myth, ritual, sacred space/time, etc. rather than comparison between traditional categories of “world religions” (ie: Hinduism(s), Christianity(s) etc.). These world religions should not be taught in comparison to each other, but the rituals of one should be compared to the rituals of another, like Lincoln’s undertaking throughout *Discourse and the Construction of Society*. This would allow for quality comparison that brings differences to light. Additionally, this provides an occasion for the professor to select materials for comparison that would engage in demystification while at the same time offering a breadth of examples from various religious traditions to meet students’ expectations of a summary course. Additionally, “non-religious” examples should be incorporated as they aid to further demystify commonly held presumptions.¹⁹ As we see Lincoln do in, “The Dialectics of Symbolic Inversion” with Duchamp’s *Fountain* and All-Star Wrestling.²⁰

Lincoln places a different emphasis on the outcome of the comparative method. He reveals how results of the comparative method, when applied to religious myths and rituals will serve to reveal similar social contexts. As we have seen, Lincoln acknowledges the position of social contexts being created and maintained by discourse in its various forms. For this reason, the comparative method compares discourses to reveal their similar social context. This in turn exposes the behavior of the discourse whether it is constructing, reconstructing or deconstructing its social setting. Lincoln further acknowledges that religion cannot be studied separately from the society in

¹⁸ Smith, “Introduction to Religious Studies” 187.

¹⁹ As exemplified in Lincoln, “The Dialectics of Symbolic Inversion,” *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 142-159.

²⁰ Lincoln, *Discourse*, 142-159.

which it is situated.²¹ Additionally, attention must be paid to the multiple voices that result in the different variations. This comparative method rectifies understandings of myth and ritual in light of social discourse.

Issues of difference relate to creating the situational incongruity which is of importance in all these steps. Comparing something like Trotsky's slogans with ancestral invocations (as exemplified by Lincoln) creates an incongruity stemming from preconceived notions and allows for connections to be made, in this example the construction of social forms would not have been obvious without the comparison.²² Comparison utilized in the introductory course as proposed allows a return and continual usage of definition and classification.

As this course of action suggests, the quality of analysis is of greater value than the quantity of data covered. So while religious data will be presented to the students from a comparative standpoint, the emphasis will be on the critical self-consciousness, defamiliarization, defining, and classifying. In other words, emphasis will be on the process of analysis rather than the data itself. In this way we can see that the previous segments of defamiliarization, definition and categorizing continue to build upon each other. This in turn reinforces such methodology in the students' education and ability to think critically.

Explanation

The last step for approaching religious data as proposed by Smith is explaining. Students of the introductory course to religion must be aware of this end goal, preferably in the course syllabus and objectives. Smith notes that scholars often classify instead of explaining.²³ Teaching introductory courses as proposed would help to avoid this oversight. Explanation is accomplished when examples

²¹ Bruce Lincoln, *Death, War and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 173.

²² Lincoln, *Discourse*, 21-22.

²³ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 174.

are described before the comparison and after the comparison. The most important part after the description and comparison takes place is the explanation of what had been discovered through the methods incorporated as well as the new interpretations of previously imagined categories. A course presented with constant attention to a process of learning as indicated through definition, classification, comparison and explanation, will inevitably result in a student's increased ability to comprehend and express their findings.

Conclusion

“Less than one hundred hours may represent for a number of students their sole course of study in a particular subject matter. Each course is required to be incomplete, to be self-consciously and articulately selective. A curriculum becomes an occasion for deliberate, collegial, institutionalized choice.”

J. Z. Smith²⁴

It is not the goal that students will be leaving an introductory course in religious studies with the breadth of knowledge in world religions, an impossible task; but that they leave with the knowledge of an approach with which to study religious data. A course presented with constant attention to a process of learning as indicated through definition, classification, comparison and explanation, will inevitably result in a student's increased ability to comprehend and express their findings. The very nature of such a course is itself rectifying discourse, creating a discourse, within academia, that demystifies and rectifies notions of religion. Approaching the data in this way allows the course to proceed with an almost constant engagement in self-consciousness and critical awareness. Additionally, the comparative method as exemplified by both Lincoln and Smith allows the treatment of religious data according to common categories such as of myth, ritual, topography, space, etc. In this way, carefully chosen examples from a breadth of different religions will satisfy

²⁴ Smith, “The Introductory Course” 187.

the presumptions of students anticipating the survey of various religions while providing them with the depth necessary to formulate arguments and analysis. The introductory course taught in this manner would serve to demystify notions of religion and increase the students' appreciation and applicability of the academic study of religion.

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