Alternative Approaches to Introducing Religion(s): Engaging Method and Theory in the Classroom

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Panel Response

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Thanks Ian, Jesse, and Sarah for your very interesting papers, and for offering me the chance to respond to them. I quite enjoyed your application of J.Z. Smith's and Bruce Lincoln's work to an introductory course, and I think you've all made arguments that would lend themselves to a very effective syllabus. I especially appreciated how you addressed concerns that come up in the earliest stages of planning a course and inform later decisions like what specific material to cover and how to evaluate students, concerns like what, ultimately, an introductory class is supposed to introduce students to. In particular, I noted two major themes in your discussions that have greatly informed my own choices when planning a course, and that I also think are foundational elements of any introductory course in religious studies.

One, you all, to some degree, talk about the introductory course as an introduction to analytical activities that are relevant to virtually all university disciplines. For example, Sarah and Jesse, citing Smith, talked about intro classes in Religious Studies as service courses (Bailey 2011: 9-10; Hagel 2011: 1; Smith 1998, 2005). That is, students from a variety of disciplines, with a range of majors and years of university experience, take the course to fulfill degree requirements and, on some occasions, personal interests. In order to meet this role as a service class, and in order to address all the differences between students, Smith argues that the intro class in religious studies is for the most part an

introduction to doing work in a university, and he identifies this work as developing reading, writing, and speaking skills that would allow students to turn narratives into problems (Smith 1988: 729). To put it another way, Smith sees the introductory course as that which introduces students to the practices associated with critical analysis (Bailey 1; Brown 2011: 10-11; Hagel 2-3).

Almost in parallel with this focus on teaching students scholarly activities that facilitate critical analysis, Ian, Jesse, and Sarah all rejected the idea that an introductory course is intended to convey particular data points or neat linear progressions through history to students (Bailey 1-2; Brown 5; Hagel 2) and instead argue that the instructor's emphasis should be on studying and analyzing practices like classification, definition, comparison, and explanation and their relationship to discursive structures. These practices and the discourses that they reflect are certainly not unique to things we call religious, and the analysis of them is therefore not the sole purview of Religious Studies, either. In other words, I see each of you developing a general plan for an introductory course that extends beyond our own discipline in a couple of key ways: one, your objective is to teach students key activities that are necessary for any discipline in the university, and two, you intend to focus on behaviours or practices that can be observed in any facet of cultural life, not just the aspects tied to "religion."

The other general theme I saw you each addressing was the introductory course as an introduction to not necessarily religion and its various and sundry details, but to the study of religion as a deliberate intellectual activity. While you each advocated for an intro class that introduces students to broad university-level skills like critical analysis, you also discussed how these skills would be applied to concepts and objects of study

commonly found in religious studies research: things like myth (Bailey 4-7; Hagel 4), ritual (Bailey 7-9; Hagel 4), text (something Ian spends a good deal of time analyzing [Brown 2011]), religion (Bailey 1-2; Brown 9-11; Hagel 4), and so on. So while Smith rightly points out that there is nothing that absolutely *has* to be included in an intro class (Smith 1988: 727; Smith 2005: 9), you all decided to include things that we all recognize as somehow related to our field. And rightly so, since we as a discipline have common objects of study—objects which students have varying familiarity with before they enter the classroom—so it makes sense to discuss at least some of them.

Instead of seeing your primary goal as instructors as giving information to students, therefore, you all seem to assume that students already have some working knowledge of many of our common objects of analysis and see your jobs as oriented to defamiliarizing these concepts for your students, encouraging them to analyse them in a new light rather than take them as given or supplement them with new data. For example, Jesse applies the critical analysis of classification to representations of Barack Obama as a Muslim. Most undergraduate students are going to be aware of who Obama is, and more importantly what a Muslim is, and they may have at least some tacit understanding of how, in these representations, being Muslim is implied to be a bad thing. Rather than stay at the level of factual accuracy, perhaps offering a "correct" definition of a Muslim and explaining how Obama isn't one, though, Jesse argues that students should be encouraged to reassess what they already know and critically analyze how this contemporary cultural phenomenon relates to issues of identity, race, legitimacy, and so on (Bailey 3-4).

In light of your emphases on the analysis of human practices like comparison and classification, you all discussed how you would reduce the amount of data included in a course (Bailey 1, Brown 6; Hagel 2, 7)—how you would not stick to the amount of information included in a typical textbook and would instead be more selective and, more importantly and following Smith's and Lincoln's examples, you would be explicit and open about the selections you made and why (Bailey 1, 9; Brown 5-8; Hagel 3).

This move to make editorial selections about data explicit also, at least to me, marks a call to make the introductory course an introduction to the practice of studying or thinking about religion, and through that an introduction to religious studies as an academic discipline. Ian had mentioned that he felt that his introductory course did not prepare him for—or at least did not establish a reasonable foundation for—the things he learned later as a religious studies major and a grad student (Brown 2), and I think he raises a good point. Again, the majority of students who take an intro course will not take another religious studies class, so looking at intro as training for majors isn't practical, but students who do choose to go on to take higher level classes should at least not be *surprised* by what they encounter. And in order to make sure that doesn't happen I'd argue that it's important to introduce students to some of the actual intellectual *work* that goes into not only the productions we study, but also our own research: the choices we make and why, the comparisons we make and why, the definitions we create and why, and so on (besides, we put a lot of work into our research: we might as well take credit for it whenever we can!).

In my mind, this approach to introductory classes makes them much more specific than a survey course modeled on most intro texts, since it narrows our object of study—

religion—down to a series of actions or decisions, as opposed to maintaining that religion in its entirety is somehow "out there" in the wild, and instructors are merely describing it for students like some live-action version of Wikipedia (though there is a lot of editorial work that goes into Wikipedia that no one really pays much attention to, either). At the same time, analyzing the academic study of religion as a set of decisions regarding classification, definition, explanation, etc., also establishes scholars as no different than the people we study, in that we are engaging in the same activities, albeit in different contexts and with different discursive influences and effects. By doing this I think Ian, Jesse, and Sarah have all established a really effective framework from which to encourage students to be self-conscious of their own studies and analyses, not only in their introductory class in Religious Studies, but also in other classes as well. Making scholarly choices explicit therefore, in my opinion, builds on and reaffirms the theme I discussed earlier of seeing the introductory class as an introduction to university work in general.

This importance of making scholarly choices explicit brings me to the one question I have for each member of the panel. Given that the panel title refers to integrating methods and theories into the introductory classroom, I found it rather noteworthy that, aside from a quick reference to Müller via Smith in Sarah's paper (Hagel 5), none of you made mention of specific theorists that often come up in discussions of method and theory in religious studies, aside from Smith and Lincoln: folks like Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Eliade, or concepts like functionalist or substantive theories. I can imagine several reasons why you would leave these theorists and their theories out of your arguments, so I'm not bringing this point up as a means of telling you

that I think you're missing something essential (and, to go back to Smith again, nothing is essential in an introductory course in the first place [Smith 1998: 727; Smith 2005: 9]). I can also see how they might be useful to include, too, though. Rather than offering my opinions on this matter, in the spirit of your mutual calls for instructors being explicit about their choices when it comes to teaching, I'd like to hear from you whether you would include the so-called "classic" theories of religion in your course (and, if you would do so, how), and why.

Works Cited

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