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Tips for Teaching
Name It and Disclaim It: A Tool for Better Discussion in Religious Studies

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Anyone who has led discussion in an introductory undergraduate religious studies class has experienced frustrating comments from students such as, "Jews practice empty ritual," or "Buddhists are more spiritual than other religions." It seems that regardless of efforts to set up "ground rules" at the beginning of the course, comments like these still crop up. The worst is when they appear in final exam essays, causing one to wonder whether all of their instruction has fallen on deaf ears.

In fairness to our students, doing analysis within a religious studies classroom is a unique beast. It may seem comparable to discussions they have in a philosophy class or a history class, but there are important differences. Religious studies does entail a critical examination of intellectual propositions and establishing frameworks for determining what we can know about the past. But it also involves cultivating an understanding of how other people see the world, learning how to thoughtfully set up comparisons, and—perhaps above all—interrogating one's own assumptions. J. Z. Smith (1982, xi) famously wrote that for the student of religion "self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study." Unfortunately, by the time most students have any sense of *how to do religious studies*, the semester is over. While a few will go on to take more courses in religious studies, the majority will not. This problem is even worse in a world religions classroom, where the students must master course content at the same time they are learning to think like a religion scholar.

While everyone must muddle through, certain students demonstrate assumptions and patterns of thinking that are uniquely aggravating to religious studies professors. Usually what makes these patterns so exasperating is that they conceal some form of *intellectual laziness*: The problem is not that the student has some unique perspective the professor disagrees with, but rather that they are deploying a

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rhetorical maneuver to avoid the hard work of critical analysis.

The challenge for faculty lies in identifying these patterns and explaining to the student what we want them to do differently. In a perfect world, this would occur through a heartfelt conversation during office hours, as it is much harder to explain such problems while grading a mountain of blue books. What follows is an experiment in identifying certain recurring patterns that emerge in religious studies classes and creating *labels* for them. These labels are a heuristic. They provide a vocabulary to discuss these patterns more easily. The list below is inspired in part by a poster created by School of Thought International called "Thou shalt not commit logical fallacies." It lists and names twenty-four fallacies such as "strawman," "begging the question," and "tu quoque," and even features a simple "logo" illustrating each fallacy. The purpose is to help people hone their critical thinking skills by providing a reference to identify and articulate fallacies.

In the same way, we have identified seven such problematic patterns that tend to occur again and again. Our purpose is not to perfect a taxonomy of poor or incorrect approaches to religious studies. Rather, we aim to create a tool that both professors and students can use to expedite the process of learning to think like a religious studies scholar. We encourage pedagogues in religious studies to identify the patterns that occur most often in *their* courses, name them appropriately, and then share this vocabulary with the students as needed. These terms can be introduced early in the course and then referred to again, especially during discussion or when giving feedback on student writing. They could also be included on the syllabus or a course website for future reference. Again, their purpose is to help students apprehend larger patterns in what makes a strong or weak argument when doing religious studies.

The Less-Than-Magnificent Seven

1. Square Peg, Round Hole: This label refers to analyzing a religious tradition in terms of another religious tradition—and almost always this tradition is Protestantism. Describing religious beliefs and practices in terms of "empty ritual," "superstition," or "a lack of morality" are all examples of "Square Peg, Round Hole." So too are comparative essays with statements like this, "Instead of a church, Jews have a synagogue. Instead of the Bible, Jews read the Torah. Instead of a pastor, Jews have a rabbi." All of this is technically correct, but it doesn't demonstrate much understanding of Judaism as a tradition.

"Square Peg, Round Hole," should not be misconstrued to say that we never use comparisons in our classroom. Students are always making comparisons, whether we ask them to or not, so it behooves us as educators to embrace the comparative strategy when appropriate. "Square Peg, Round Hole" encompasses comparisons that tacitly and uncritically take one tradition as the norm and everything else as a distortion or aberration of that norm.

To point out "Square Peg, Round Hole" is also not the same as claiming that we must to take religious traditions at their word or can never apply the hermeneutics of suspicion. We reject William Cantwell Smith's (1974, 42) proposition that, "No statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers." But before we can apply critiques we need some understanding of the *internal* logic and worldview of the tradition. It is hard to do this if we are constantly contorting the data so that we can measure it solely in terms of some other religious tradition.

2. No True Scotsman: This well-known fallacy is generally attributed to English philosopher Antony Flew ("Obituary: Professor Antony Flew," 2010). It takes its name from an anecdote that usually goes something like this: A Scot claims that Scotsmen never put sugar in their porridge. When shown another Scot who *does* put sugar in his porridge, the first Scot specifies that no *true* Scotsman puts sugar in his porridge. In other words, any counter example to the original claim is dismissed *ipso facto*.

Franklin Graham invoked this fallacy in 2009 when he stated on CNN that "true Islam" is about beating your wife and murdering your children (CNN wire staff, 2010). Presumably an infinite number of peaceful Muslims counter-examples would be irrelevant to this claim because they are not practicing "true Islam" as defined by Graham.

Unchallenged, the "No True Scotsman" argument is very effective for belief perseverance. As such, students may be tempted to reach for it when their preconceived notions about a religious tradition are challenged. Just as Graham used this argument to dismiss peaceful Muslims, students may claim that Buddhists who support nationalism or who are more interested in blessed amulets than meditation are not "true Buddhists."

The "No true Scotsman" argument is also frequently applied to the category of religion itself. In his essay "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion." Robert Orsi describes how his students felt Catholics in the Bronx using holy water from a replica of the Lourdes grotto was *not* an example of

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religion. This led Orsi (2001, 5) to ask, “So if this is not religion, what is?” Orsi’s work demonstrates that numerous labels including “cult” and “superstition” serve the same function as the “No True Scotsman” argument, preserving biases about what religion is and does by screening out counter examples. But we cannot get into the hard work of doing religious studies until we have stopped making such excuses with the data. As Jeffrey Kripal states, “It is very easy to explain everything on the table if you have just taken off the table everything that you cannot explain” (Strieber and Kripal 2017, 11).

3. Loaded Questions: The classic example of a loaded question is the prosecutor asking, “Do you still beat your wife?” We find these kind of indictments framed as questions are often coupled with anecdotal evidence. For example, one student asked, “I went to Turkey and everyone glared at me. Why are Muslims so intolerant?” Invoking a completely subjective experience of Muslim intolerance reinforced a rhetorical maneuver in which the class was pressured to accept the claim that Muslims are intolerant instead of challenging this idea.

But the loaded question can also take a more subtle form. Instead of just trying to mask a claim, in a religious studies classroom it can also be used to abdicate the burden of analysis. When a student asks, “Why would *anyone* believe that?” they are actually making the statement, “This tradition is inscrutable and making sense of it is *not* my responsibility.” But when students sign up for a religious studies class they forfeit the ability the make these kinds of dismissals. As long as they are in the course, it *is* their job to figure out why anyone would believe that.

4. Medical Materialism: This term, famously coined by William James, refers to the practice of “explaining away” religious experiences in terms of medical diagnoses (James 1982, 13). Common examples include the claim that Paul was epileptic or that Islam arose because “Muhammad suffered a hallucination from too much sun.”

As James noted, the problem with medical materialism isn’t that these diagnoses are necessarily incorrect (although they are usually made with minimal evidence or medical expertise). Rather, the problem is that they function to dismiss the cultural and historical significance formed around these experiences. James noted that *all* thoughts and mental states can be reduced to the functions of the nervous system, but we only engage in this analysis when examining ideas we don’t like.

5. The Dumb Ancestors Assumption: Related to medical materialism is a facile attempt to explain all accounts of the supernatural as a misunderstanding of mental illness or some other natural phenomenon. This maneuver conceals a certain smugness that we have greater powers of reasoning and familiarity with the natural world than our ancestors. The Dumb Ancestors Assumption is particularly an obstacle when interpreting myths or accounts of the supernatural. Our ability to imagine the significance of these stories is limited if our default assumption is that these are just-so stories told by intellectually primitive people to explain the natural world. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan alludes to this lack of imagination when he writes, “My point is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally” (Crossan and Watts 1999, 79).

6. Dan Brown Syndrome: This label refers to an assumption that a historical claim about a religious tradition is more likely to be true if it is not believed by the tradition’s practitioners or if the claim would upset them. The most common examples of Dan Brown Syndrome concern early Christianity and include simplistic mythicist claims about the historicity of Jesus or claims that Jesus studied mysticism in India.[1] Less common examples of Dan Brown Syndrome include hyperdiffusionist theories used to explain, for example, why there are five pillars in Islam and five skandhas in Buddhism.[2] Of course, there is good evidence for many historical claims that contradict the official histories of religious institutions. The problem with Dan Brown Syndrome is that it eschews reasoned historical arguments in favor of contrarianism.

7. Epistemological Nihilism: This label refers to claims that we cannot engage in any sort of analysis or discussion unless we have perfect empirical knowledge. One student told an author it was unreasonable when she was asked questions during class discussion like, “What would Bertrand Russell say about this?” because only Bertrand Russell could ever answer this. Another student chose to write an essay on Elie Wiesel’s exegesis of the Book of Job and wrote that Wiesel did not live in the time of Job and therefore was utterly unqualified to say anything about this story and arrogant for attempting to.

This is one of the most galling maneuvers because, while these arguments are often framed in terms of critical thinking or the scientific method, their function is usually to dodge the hard work of analysis. If

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we can know nothing, claims the epistemological nihilist, then attempting to learn or understand anything is a waste of time.

Conclusions

These seven terms could be incorporated into a syllabus, made into a handout, or otherwise used as a reference for class discussion. This list is just a preliminary exploration. Readers should consult with colleagues to identify and name the patterns that reoccur in their classes. This should go without saying, but the purpose of these labels is not to shame students or condemn their ideas. Rather, giving names to these patterns makes it possible to talk about them and therefore to *think* about them. This makes the patterns possible to avoid and challenges students to seek out deeper strategies of analysis. We all were students once and probably at least a little bit intellectually lazy until someone pushed us; we hope to do the same for our students now.

Notes

[1] For an overview of these theories see Ehrman (2013).

[2] On hyperdiffusionism and its role in pseudo-archaeology, see Fagan (2010, 362-367).

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