

Let's Talk About Religion

By Richard Schaefer

How are we, as educators, to discuss religion in the classroom? The answer is not and cannot be simple. As everyone knows, religion is a topic that can arouse strong feelings, and that is why we are encouraged to avoid talking about religion at a dinner party. But if following this dictum is crucial for passing the time pleasantly in most social settings, we frequently do not have that luxury in the classroom setting. University and college classrooms are not dinner parties, and discussing religion is crucial for grasping multiple aspects of history, society, politics, and culture. But though talking about religion in the classroom may be unavoidable, there is a similar uncertainty about just how to do it. This stems perhaps as much from institutional culture and practical pressures as from personal unfamiliarity or discomfort with the subject matter. These and other problems make it hard to engage in meaningful dialogue about religion, even among those sincerely willing to try.

The normative rules governing discussions of religion in public are far from consistent or clear. Precisely because religion can be a hot-button topic, the new or untenured professor might be leery of initiating the kind of discussion that might have unwelcome consequences, usually in the form of a call from an irate parent or a meeting with a department chair or the dean.¹ In a short semester, there can also be a somewhat natural desire to avoid going “off topic” by straying too far into the volatile arena of debate. Debates about religion also can be maddeningly predictable, issuing in sophomoric clichés and scripted responses that polarize a classroom and leave many students unwilling to engage their more vocal classmates. In response, many instructors look at potentially controversial subjects, like religion, as something that should be managed with firm control, lest emotions take over from scholarship. While some may be tempted to wade directly into the fray over intelligent design, or abortion, or the growth of political Islam, in order to stimulate “lively” discussion, the net result of this kind of debate is usually a hardening of positions. Coupled with a desire to avoid hurt feelings, the desire to manage classroom discussions of religion is a powerful impulse.

Though historians might be more likely to discuss religion in the classroom, because of its obvious influence in shaping the lives of people past and present, we are no less tempted to neutralize some of the danger that talking about religion poses by restricting it to an object of analysis stripped of affect. Instead of talking about beliefs or practices that might raise uncomfortable questions or irresolvable conflict, religion is presented to students as serving a variety of other functions. Whatever it might mean to the believer, religion is “really” a form of community building, or an ideology that supports the status quo, or the pre-reflective source of normative impulses. Reduced to its function in

society, in this way, religion is better thought of as being “about something else,” rather than in terms that try, at least, to plumb its perhaps ineffable meaning for adherents.²

As essential as it is to illuminate religion’s constitutive role in shaping social and political life, I have been led increasingly to wonder about the effects of this bracketing of belief on students. For what exactly do we say when we tell students of faith that religion is not what they believe it to be, or at least not in a way that takes account of the irreducible role of conviction? And likewise, what are we saying to those students who are decidedly not among the faithful, and who might even be hostile to religion? By unmasking religion as fundamentally about something else, do we unfairly prevent them from the kind of encounter with challenging and even alien ideas that forms the core of a liberal arts education? How can we claim to teach anything about religion by separating what it does from what it means? I am not suggesting that we forgo our primary responsibility to present the results of historical analysis, whose undeniable merit is to show just how religion has been deployed by people to serve a variety of interests in different contexts. But I do wonder if it is possible to encourage an analytic attitude to religion without unduly (and perhaps unfairly) narrowing the range of possible approaches or acceptable answers. How, in other words, do we represent religious experience, in all of its various forms from apostasy to rapture, in ways that remain faithful to the rules of careful historical scholarship, but without inadvertently denigrating the experience as such by making it seem subordinate to other goals?

In my experience, there is as little to be gained in simply asking students to share their personal religious or spiritual beliefs as there is in encouraging students to debate creationism versus evolution extemporaneously and without a solid grasp of the historical facts and relevant contexts. Though many are eager to discuss their beliefs, others are not. Any discussion of religion in personal terms must be governed, therefore, not only by the baseline rules of politeness, tolerance, and respect for multiple points of view, but also by a keen awareness for precisely how personal commentary can influence subsequent discussion in unpredictable and perhaps unwelcome ways. Nevertheless, historians can do much to show how religion is deeply embedded in human life, and that the passions people feel for or against it are as much a part of history as the other interests it might be said to serve. In my own teaching, I have found novels to be an especially good way of drawing out the deeply historical and contingent reality of religion in a lived context. Especially complex works, such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, or Goethe’s *Faust*, present students with complex characters who, whether zealous or disdainful of religion, act on complex motives in ways students understand. To give only one example, by following Alyosha Karamazov’s struggle with his own faith as it unfolds in the context of tense family dynamics, institutional religious politics in a monastery, and his own coming of age, I find students are much better able to take seriously how being religious is not reducible to choice in any simple sense of the word. In sharp contrast to discussions of reason versus faith that take a detached view of the issues, from above, as it were, engaging these issues from within the lived time of a novel helps to ground them and defray the potentially alienating effect of simply analyzing religion’s other social and political functions. There are other ways, of course, to evoke the lived context of religious life, biography being perhaps the most obvious example. But no

matter what the genre, carefully selected primary sources can help reveal much more about the lived reality of religion than textbook generalizations. For it is in the moment, when religion presents itself as something with certain real consequences for life, that we encounter the meaning of religion, not in post facto summaries of its historical significance. However one decides to do it, what needs to be remembered is that historians have a vital role to play in showing just how people have remained religious over time precisely because it means something special to them, something irreducible.

If recent reports are any indication, there are signs that religion is making a comeback among undergraduates across the United States.³ Though it still remains unclear how and in what ways, this signals the potential for a renewed classroom interest in how religion has played, and continues to play, a decisive role in history. How should historians respond? One thing is for certain, it will be necessary to re-evaluate the ways we have (and have not) helped perpetuate a “master-narrative” of secularization that no longer seems tenable.⁴ And there are rumblings throughout the humanities and the social sciences that strongly suggest we will not be alone in this.⁵ This is a welcome prospect, and we should think hard about how we might add our unique voice to the conversation. But successfully recasting this paradigm won’t itself make us better able to talk about religion in the classroom. For that, we will need to take stock of how and why we have not talked about it much at all.

—Richard Schaefer is assistant professor of history at the State University of New York, College at Plattsburgh. Trained in modern European history, Schaefer received the PhD from Cornell University in 2005. He is currently working on a manuscript titled “Catholic and Modern: German Scholars and the European Catholic Imagination, 1815–69.”

Notes

1. Mark C. Taylor, “Faith that refuses questions,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 21 2006.
2. R. Laurence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).
3. C. Calhoun et al., “The Religious Engagements of American Undergraduates,” (Social Science Research Council, 2007).
4. Jeffrey Cox, “Secularization and Other Master Narratives of Religion in Modern Europe,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 14 (2001).
5. Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Descularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).

Copyright © American Historical Association

Last Updated: April 22, 2010 12:19 PM