

Strategies for Discussing Religion in Secular Studies Classes

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Religion. Faith. Spirituality. Some faculty may view these phenomena as significant influences on the human experience, others as challenges to intellectualism and the scientific method. There are also academics who struggle with their position, perceiving the power embedded in these ideologies and practices as potentially beneficial as well as restrictive. Most would agree that theology elicits a range of strong and often-personal reactions. Why, then, would faculty teaching secular studies courses want to raise the topic of religion in their classes when they could play it safe and leave the subject entirely to the specialists, their colleagues in religious studies?

The reality is that religion plays a formidable role in nearly every aspect of academic, professional, personal, and public life. To fully address the experience of human diversity, privilege, and oppression, it is important to include discussions of religious identity and expression. One cannot completely comprehend music, art, politics, or history without acknowledging the role of faith in these disciplines. Sacred traditions and convictions shape and are affected by business, legal, and health care policies. Beliefs and customs influence interactions with customers, constituents, patients, schoolchildren, and neighbors. Through examination of these dynamics, students can acknowledge a core aspect of the human experience and develop a vocabulary for exploring it in a mature, scholarly, and nuanced manner.

Yet studies indicate that many Americans are significantly limited in their familiarity with and understanding of faith and its influence on world events. Many have not acquired basic knowledge. Fewer than half of respondents in Pew surveys could state the Dalai Lama's religion, Martin Luther's role in the church, the weekday on which the Jewish Sabbath commences, and the faith associated with Vishnu and Shiva (2010, pp. 24-26). Only 10% of teenagers participating in a Gallup poll were able to list five major world religions, while about one-third could provide a brief definition of Ramadan (Wachlin, M. & Johnson, B., 2005, p. 24).

These limitations are reflected among many professors, as well. How can faculty who are not content experts broach discussions of religion in their courses? What if they have strong feelings regarding religious beliefs, institutions, and rituals? What if they do or do not subscribe to a particular faith themselves?

Regardless of how one answers those two questions, it is important to be thoughtful when framing the lesson. Faculty preparing to incorporate discussion of religion into their courses will find it useful to follow these steps:

1. Consider your target learning outcomes. What would you like students to gain as a result the discussion? What will be asked of them? Share that with the class, so they understand your rationale, expectations, and the purpose of the session. Clarify that you are teaching *about* religion, not teaching religion. Acknowledge that there may be a variety of perspectives represented among learners, particularly if you teach at a non-sectarian institution.

2. Develop a plan, drawing upon credible resources. Invite campus chaplains and religious studies faculty to preview your material and determine its legitimacy. Foster engagement through active learning techniques such as cases, service-learning, or by researching their own questions and assumptions. Throughout the session, emphasize critical thinking and information.

3. Establish guidelines for engagement, including acknowledging and honoring diverse experiences and points of view. Robert Nash and Sue Baskette's list of "conversation starters (and) sustainers" (2008, p. 199) includes the following recommendations for framing discussion:

- Explain, clarify, rephrase, respect, and affirm.
- Attribute the best motive.
- Look for the truth in what you oppose and the error in what you espouse.
- No looking for reasons why the course, or...participants, aren't working well (ask yourself why *you're* not working well).
- No positioning oneself on the highest moral ground, (or)... relegating others to the lowest moral ground (p. 199-200).

Mano Singham (2008) also urges students to listen for the *meaning* of identifying with a particular worldview; seek *why* people (including themselves) believe and practice as they do.

4. Acknowledge that faith and religion can elicit a range of emotions. The following practices can help learners recognize and constructively deal with their reactions:

- Link emotional moments to course learning goals as well as world events.
- Honor the risks learners take. Explain that discomfort often reveals learning opportunities – establish your class as a “brave space” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 142).
- Provide time for emotional “cleansing” through writing. Ask participants to attend to note the “textures” of conversations – hot, cool, explosive, vivid, soft, vast, cramped, rough, smooth (Barbezat & Bush, 2013, p. 91).
- Encourage reflection on the consequences of one’s thoughts, words and behaviors.
- Create space in the lesson for silence. Feel free to put some discussions and questions on the back burner for subsequent classes.
- Incorporate physical movement following intense discussion (e.g. stretching, four corners voting, standing on an opinion continuum before and after discussion).
- Take “two minutes each way” (pair-share), with each person taking a turn articulating to a peer — without fear of judgment — what they noticed and experienced during the lesson.
- Tend to ourselves as faculty; take a step back to look at the big picture and observe the dynamics taking place. Trust (and build student trust) in the process of uncertainty and debate, without aiming for artificial consensus.

Throughout history, religion has had considerable influence on human experiences, communication, and action in all spheres of existence. By identifying credible sources, developing meaningful lessons, and preparing to address challenges that may arise, professors can help students become more aware of the role faith, belief, custom, and identity play in relation to the subject matter. As a result, students can increase their facility in conceptualizing, addressing, and responding to a variety of issues in more thoughtful, informed, constructive, and mature ways.



Teaching About Religion, Faith, and Spirituality in Secular Studies Classes

Presenter: Miriam Rosalyn Diamond

By identifying resources, considering a variety of lesson ideas, and exploring options for responding to classroom dynamics around the topics of religion, faith, spirituality, and worldview, you’ll come away better prepared to discuss these sensitive subjects in secular

studies courses, while also cultivating a larger conversation about inclusivity and diversity.

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Resources

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces. In Landreman, L. M. *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from social justice educators*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing. 135-150.

Barbezat, D. P., & Bush, M. (2013). *Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.

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Nash, R. J., LaSha Bradley, D. & Chickering, A. W. (2008). *How to talk about hot topics on campus: From polarization to moral conversation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Wachlin, M., & Johnson, B. R. (2005). *The Bible literacy report: What do American teens need to know and what do they know?* Front Royal, VA.

Warren, Lee. (n.d.) *Managing hot moments in the classroom*. Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning. Harvard University.

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