

Religious Scholarship and Insider Status: The Question of Teaching and Faith

James Wellman

University of Washington

Assistant Professor, Comparative Religion Program

Jackson School of International Studies

I teach at a secular public university. This short essay looks at the following questions: how does my religious faith affect my teaching? How does one negotiate religious bias when teaching about religions? As an insider on a religion, what criteria guide and shape my scholarly life? Officially, because of my affiliation with a state institution, I am obligated to be neutral in the advocacy of one religion over another. I will not witness to a faith and I should not dismiss or denigrate a faith. But how does my insider affect how I approach my subject?

To begin, in the study of religion, an insider status does not necessarily guarantee greater insight or knowledge on the subject. Whether an insider or outsider, one should be guided by what my colleague, Martin Jaffee, calls “disciplined curiosity.” We are scholars trained in the disciplined study of religion. We understand the theories, methods and approaches to this phenomenon. We are obligated to do good work; to let the important questions rise and seek out the best way to understand, explain and present our findings in way that stimulate discussion, understanding and new knowledge.

Biases always intrude. We should be aware of them. What is their source? How can we overcome them? In the field of American religions, there is a long-standing bias against certain types of minority religions. As scholars we are obligated to understand and overcome these prejudices. We lift the veils of prejudice and reveal their source and expose their misconceptions. We also must be careful not to trumpet our own tradition or give short shrift to other traditions. I check my teaching by asking students what they have heard and what has not been covered.

We need to know our biases, but we also need to know our passions. Some religious scholars are passionately anti-religious. They enjoy putting down religions and showing their dark side. At times this is helpful; it is a disenchanting process that is necessary. At other times it is gratuitous and one wonders why scholars study subjects that they detest. I have a passion for the study of religions; to understand their weaknesses and strengths. I teach an introductory course in the study of Western religions. I say to my class, “If you get nothing else out of this course, understand the power of these traditions to move, inspire, and build civilizations. But just as importantly understand the dangers inherently linked to this power.” The religions of believers build communities and redeem lives; they also exclude, destroy, and sometimes kill others in the name of god(s). I try to embody the example of a scholar who, as a believer, is aware of both the power and the danger in religions.

Inevitably, students ask about my religious affiliations. Sometimes I share in class, sometimes I don't. Both work. It depends on your attitude toward your religious beliefs. If you are defensive they will think you are hiding something or trying to advocate a position. But if you simply say where you stand then most often they will say, “Okay, that is where he or she stands.” They may or may not find it interesting, and then they move on. Of course, if you do share your faith, then you must remain neutral and equally interested in each religious tradition. One of the ways I do this in my Western religions

course is by lecturing on each of the great mystical traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each is enormously complicated, powerful and inspiring. I reflect this respect and passion for each of these traditions to my students.

When I do share my beliefs, however, it is most often during an announced informal coffee time with students, separate from the formal lecture. During these moments I say, "All questions are open. I won't hold what you say against you, and you can't hold what I say against me." That doesn't mean I say whatever comes to mind. I simply answer their questions - not every one, but most. I encourage them to pursue their questions. I say to them, "Your questions are your treasure; pursue them with all your passion." This is the joy of scholarship, and indeed, the joy of faith.

Why faith in a specific religion? It is because through many years of struggle and debate, I have come to the reasoned conclusion that the faith I claim makes sense. It is true for me and I am committed to it. Does that mean it is always right? By no means. Indeed, I would argue that an authentic faith demands questions, can sustain challenges, and never ducks interrogation. The Christian faith that I uphold is authentic to me because it claims no special privileges and takes responsibility for its errors.

Moreover, I argue that an authentic faith inspires scholarship. It opens the world to questions of depth and breadth. It refuses easy answers. It is motivated by a love for truth, even when these truths cause fundamental reevaluation. It is motivated by a love and human longing for the next question. These questions prompt the scholar to create new theories, methods and, in the end, new knowledge. This faith is inspired by the beauty and complexity of life that contains multiple religious traditions, and multitudinous faith perspectives on these religions. Finally, this faith is ignited by a desire for justice, for fair play when it comes to minority religions and the need for humility from the dominant religions of the world.

So, in the spirit of disciplined humility, I am a believer and a scholar of religion, who teaches about the power and danger of religions.