Teaching Critical Religious Studies

Pedagogy and Critique in the Classroom

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Teaching Critical Religious Studies in the World Religions Public Sphere

Henry Goldschmidt

Introduction

This essay will explore a fundamental tension in my work at the Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY), where I develop religious diversity education programs for a range of audiences, including K-12 teachers, social workers, police officers, and the general public.[1] On the one hand, ICNY's education programs work to subvert and exceed the limitations of "world religions" pedagogy—a pedagogic model that reduces the vibrant diversity of religious life to a fixed set of relatively static traditions, each of which is defined by a fixed set of ostensibly common characteristics, including its doctrines or beliefs, sacred texts, and major holidays. On the other hand, however, ICNY's education programs need to meet the needs of partner organizations and professional audiences who tend to think about religion in just such terms.

This tension is at once conceptual, political, and pedagogical. Like a growing number of religious studies scholars, I am convinced that world religions pedagogy constitutes a form of cultural imperialism—reimagining the practices and beliefs of diverse communities in conceptual terms dictated by European Christian, and largely Protestant, thought. While it sets out to celebrate religious diversity, it ends up (in Tomoko Masuzawa's memorable phrase), "[preserving] European universalism in the language of pluralism."[2] Even more importantly, to me at least, world religions pedagogy simply does not do justice to the depth and complexity of religious life. It misses all of the subtle details, and thus promotes a superficial form of religious literacy—substituting a decontextualized knowledge of dates and doctrines for an empathic understanding of one's neighbors' lives. Let's just say I'm not a fan.[3]

And yet, like a growing number of civically engaged scholars, I am convinced that academic knowledge production must be shaped by the needs and concerns of the communities it serves.[4] Public educators in academia and the nonprofit sector cannot simply impart expert knowledge to passive audiences. We are not Moses, coming down from the mountain. We must meet our partners where they are, engaging together with a shared social world, even if they see that world in terms we do not entirely share. In my case, this commitment to community-based education means teaching in ways that help professionals work effectively in social contexts structured in terms of "world religions"—in what I will describe as the world religions public sphere.

Let me offer an introductory example, to flesh out this dilemma in practical terms. In 2016, ICNY collaborated with the filmmakers Lea Sheloush and Sean McGinn to create a twenty-minute religious diversity training video for the New York City Police Department, which came to be called *Policing in Today's Multifaith New York*.[5] The video offers extremely brief introductions to the city's seven largest religious communities (Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and members of African diaspora faith traditions), while highlighting the diversity within these communities, and resisting generalizations about them. It is built around interviews with local religious leaders, and images of local religious life. By exploring themes that cut across communal boundaries—like religious dress and sacred space—it places the city's faith traditions in conversation, rather than setting them apart with artificial clarity. In other words, we tried to meet the needs of NYPD officers while avoiding world religions pedagogy.

In 2020, however, our partners in the NYPD approached us to ask if ICNY could create a new series of training videos. They liked *Policing in Today's Multifaith New York*, and were using it for training in the Police Academy and other contexts, but they were concerned that a twenty-minute video was not accessible to officers while they are "on the job." They asked if we could create a series of seven separate three-minute videos, each introducing a single religious tradition. Ideally, they said, all seven videos should follow a uniform structure or template, so officers can easily find the same information about each tradition, including key beliefs, major holidays, and advice for respectful interactions. In other words, they really want world religions pedagogy.

As the project moves ahead, we will likely find a middle ground between our differing approaches to religious diversity, but let me be clear about one thing: the NYPD's insistence on world religions pedagogy will not stand in the way of our collaborative work. We at ICNY may feel that a series of brief videos following

a uniform—arguably cookie-cutter—template does not do justice to the rich religious diversity of the city, but we trust our NYPD colleagues' judgment that this is what police officers need. We might be the experts on religious diversity, but we are surely not experts on community policing. We have never sat in a patrol car in front of a gurudwara, for example, trying to learn something about Sikhism in the five minutes before our appointment with a community leader. ICNY is working to build a more inclusive city for all New Yorkers—in this case, by helping NYPD officers understand the religious lives of the people they serve—and this sometimes means sacrificing theoretical principles in order to work collaboratively with partner organizations, in a way that respects our partners' understandings of their own needs.

In the body of this essay, I will explore some of the pedagogic principles and teaching tactics that have helped me navigate the tensions sketched here—exceeding the limitations of world religions pedagogy, while helping professionals work effectively in the world religions public sphere. I will stress the importance of teaching about the diversity within all faith traditions, as well as the personal stories and political projects that connect those traditions to people's lives. I will argue that one way to do so is by facilitating panel discussions with diverse religious leaders, and suggest guidelines for structuring such conversations.

First, however, I will connect the tensions shaping my work at ICNY to broader questions of teaching, learning, and knowledge production by discussing Michel Foucault's distinction between "universal" and "specific" intellectuals, as well as his underlying arguments about the relationship between power and knowledge. This theoretical detour will raise—and hopefully clarify—far-reaching issues about the role of academic knowledge in social life.

"Compatriot of Power": Working within World Religions

There is a second-order, analytical tension running through my description of the pedagogic tensions that shape my work at ICNY. On the one hand, I have argued that world religions pedagogy is inadequate, in part, because it does not do justice to the complex realities of religious diversity. On the other hand, however, I have argued that world religions pedagogy is appropriate, even necessary, at times, because it reflects widely shared perceptions of religious diversity—perceptions that are themselves realities, as they are linked to social practices and institutions. World religions pedagogy, in my account, seems to both betray and reflect our everyday experiences of religious diversity.

This is an important tension, but not a contradiction. The world religions framework is undoubtedly a historical product of European colonialism, Christian hegemony, and other social forces—a "social construction," in the overused but still valuable slogan of contemporary critical theory. But that does *not* mean it is not real. It is a poor description of religious diversity, yet it has shaped the contours of that diversity, including the self-described religious identities of many New Yorkers, as well as the ways that authoritative institutions—like K-12 schools, the police, and social service agencies—engage with the city's religious communities. I may not be a fan of the world religions framework, but I still work within its constructed-but-real constraints. I cannot simply wish it away, and I cannot teach effectively if I pretend to do so.

According to the historian and social theorist Michel Foucault, this is the predicament—and power—of the "specific intellectual." In a written response to a 1977 interview question, later published in English as "Truth and Power," Foucault distinguishes between two ways academics have sought to contribute to civic life and social justice struggles.[6] For Foucault, the "universal intellectual" claims to speak as a kind of secular prophet, from an ethically or epistemically privileged position outside of the systems and institutions they critique. They render judgment "as the spokesman of the universal,"[7] giving voice to timeless truths and principles. Think Jean-Paul Sartre in the mid-twentieth century, or ironically Foucault himself as he is often read in the twenty-first. The "specific intellectual," by contrast, makes more limited assertions and targeted interventions, "within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them."[8] Far from occupying an ethically privileged position, they are often compromised by their morally ambiguous role within the systems or institutions they critique—they are "technicians," working "in the service of the State or Capital."[9] Foucault's example is the dissident atomic scientist Robert Oppenheimer, whose peace activism rested, in part, on his uncomfortable relationship with the military-industrial complex. Somewhat similarly, though on a much smaller scale, my efforts to build a more just and inclusive society rest, in part, on my ambivalent relationships with institutions like the NYPD—hardly a consistent champion of social justice or inclusion.[10]

As a "specific intellectual" working at a small nonprofit organization, I draw whatever power I may have from this network of relationships, and this network situates me—like it or not—within the world religions public sphere. My modest ability to advance truth claims with an impact on the world is entirely dependent on my personal and professional ties with religious and civic leaders, teachers, social workers, police, and countless others, as well as ICNY's institutional ties

with peer organizations, civic institutions, government agencies, foundation funders, and others. My work must meet their needs and expectations, as a threshold of its viability—even if those needs and expectations are shaped by flawed assumptions about "world religions."

Of course, this is equally true of university-based scholars, whose research and teaching must meet the needs and expectations of their students, colleagues, administrators, publishers, and many others. Indeed, for Foucault, *all* truth claims are produced within such power-laden social networks. There is no truth without power, and therefore no innocent or unfettered position from which to make assertions about the world. As Foucault puts it:

> The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint.[11]

This is as much the case in a graduate seminar as in a police training video, but these constraints are made particularly clear in education programs for professional audiences, as these audiences—unlike many academics—are primarily concerned with truth as "a thing of this world."

The people who participate in ICNY's education programs are not generally interested in learning about religious diversity for its own sake. Most are curious about the topic personally, but they attend (and sometimes pay registration fees) to gain knowledge they can *use* in their work. In Foucauldian terms, they are concerned with the power effects of knowledge—the practices and relationships made possible by an understanding of religious diversity. As Foucault argues: "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it."[12] ICNY's education programs "[induce] effects of power" for the audiences we serve, helping them reshape the everyday social world through the application of expert knowledge—for example, by helping teachers, social workers, and police officers build relationships with religiously diverse students, clients, and community leaders, or by helping them design what we hope will be more inclusive lesson plans, treatment plans, and public safety plans.[13] This "circular relation" between power, knowledge, and practice is what Foucault famously describes as a "regime of truth."[14]

This regime depends upon the conceptual fit among its constituent discourses, practices, and institutions—never a perfect fit, but at least a working alignment

of ICNY's education programs, New York's religious communities, and the professional lives of teachers, social workers, and police. Which brings us back, in what I hope are more precise or subtle terms, to the familiar dilemma of "world religions." If ICNY's education programs were entirely defined by world religions pedagogy they would fail to "[induce] effects of power" for professional audiences, because they would not reflect the realities of religious diversity. But if they entirely disregarded it they would fail just the same, because they would not reflect the institutional structures within which our students work. Our programs might still be interesting—perhaps *more* interesting—without world religions, but they would not provide knowledge people can use.

This does not mean, however, that we have no freedom of movement within constraint—no space for critique or creativity in the ways we teach. We can and do find ways to exceed the limitations of world religions pedagogy, while still meeting the needs of the audiences we serve. Again Foucault, in a written answer to another 1977 interview, later published in English as "Power and Strategies":

> It seems to me that power *is* "always already there," that one is never "outside" it, that there are no "margins" for those who break with the system to gambol in. But this does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination … To say that one can never be "outside" power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what. …[R]esistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power.[15]

I can now restate the fundamental question of this essay, in what I hope are helpful Foucauldian terms: How do ICNY's education programs offer meaningful resistance to the world religions "regime of truth," while working as a "compatriot of [its] power"? The next two sections will answer this question by describing some of the pedagogic principles that guide our work, and one of the teaching tactics that brings those principles to life.

Pedagogic Principles: Internal Diversity, the Personal and Political

In this section I will sketch two broad principles that help ICNY's education programs complicate—and occasionally subvert—world religions pedagogy from within. In each case, I will introduce a scholarly critique of the world

religions framework, point out some of the challenges in applying this critique to education programs for professional audiences, then show how ICNY's pedagogy nevertheless addresses key elements of the critique.

Highlight the Internal Diversity of Faith Traditions and Communities

Scholarly critiques of the world religions framework often highlight the colonial histories and artificially clear boundaries of the phenomena typically described as "religions." A growing number of scholars have argued, in short, that the "ism" in terms like Judaism or Buddhism—the process of reification that makes these fluid traditions appear to be static objects—is a product of Christian hegemony and cultural imperialism. Of course, this does *not* mean that the world's diverse faith traditions were simply fabricated by colonial powers. But it does suggest that their contemporary forms emerged through power-laden encounters with dominant Christian societies—they are, in David Chidester's phrase, "European and indigenous cocreations."[16] For example, in *Religion and the Specter of the West*, Arvind-Pal S. Mandair shows how European Christian assumptions about the exclusive nature of religious identity led nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Sikh reformers to highlight, or perhaps invent, a clear distinction between Sikhism and Hinduism—a distinction that betrayed the multiplicity and fluidity of South Asian traditions.[17] "In this view," writes Mandair, "every time an Indian responds to the word 'religion' s/he is obliged to speak … in another's language, breaking with her own and in so doing giving herself up to the other."[18]

In time, I hope critical analyses like Mandair's will help scholars and others understand the heterogenous languages of identity, community, and cosmology that are simultaneously translated and obscured by the category of religion. But in the short run, unfortunately, this deconstructive or genealogical approach is not so helpful for K-12 teachers, who are often required—by both state standards and community expectations—to use curricula structured in terms of distinct and equivalent "religions." It is difficult to interrogate the distinction between Sikhism and Hinduism, for example, when each is found in its own textbook chapter—and when Sikh and Hindu students, parents, and community leaders insist, for understandable reasons, on separate and equal curricular representation. Similarly, questioning the boundaries of familiar faith traditions will not help social workers or police work effectively with self-described Sikhs and Hindus, or Christians and Jews, regardless of the fraught histories of

such terms.[19] As I have argued, these categories are constructed but real. The professional audiences ICNY serves cannot simply step outside of them.

Rather than interrogating the external boundaries of religious traditions, ICNY's education programs highlight their complex, shifting contents—stressing the racial, ethnic, gendered, generational, and doctrinal diversity within all faith traditions and communities. This emphasis on intra-faith diversity takes different forms in different contexts. For example, the panel discussions I will discuss below often place diverse faith leaders from a single tradition in conversation. A panel of Christian community leaders at ICNY's summer institute for teachers might include the White, female, purple-haired pastor of a theologically progressive mainline Protestant church, a theologically conservative but politically radical Latino Pentecostal pastor and seasoned community organizer, the young volunteer bishop of a local ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and an Irish-American social justice educator from Catholic Charities—and their conversation would soon be followed by a visit to an African-American Baptist church. Similarly, our 2016 NYPD training video includes, among other examples of internal diversity, a visual montage of Muslim New Yorkers—Arab, South Asian, African-American, African immigrant, Albanian, and others; young and old; men, women, and children; with and without hijab and niqab. By highlighting such forms of intra-faith diversity, we emphasize the fact that faith traditions and communities are never static or monolithic.

This approach splits the difference, so to speak, between the homogenous "religions" of conventional world religions pedagogy and the fluid heterogeneity revealed by critical religious studies scholarship. We remind our students that religious identities are never as simple as they are sometimes made to seem, while leaving in place the fundamental categories that structure the world religions public sphere.

Highlight Faith-Based Personal Stories and Political Projects

While the world religions framework focuses almost exclusively on canonical doctrine, ritual, and text, scholars of what is often called "lived religion" tend to explore quirky forms of religious practice and belief that flout formal doctrines or cut across the boundaries of established faiths. This emphasis on religious creativity stands in contrast to stereotypic images of hidebound, rule-following religious life. One influential example of this approach is Robert Orsi's analysis of the "Bronx Lourdes" grotto—a replica of the Grotto of the Apparitions in Lourdes, France, built in 1939 in what was, at the time, a working-class Italian-

American neighborhood in the Bronx.[20] Orsi shows how a wide range of New Yorkers (not all Catholic) put the grotto's "holy water" (which comes straight from the tap, as nearly all visitors are well aware) to creative uses such as filling their car radiators "for protection on the road."[21] Orsi argues that such practices:

> invite a redirection of religious scholarship away from traditions—the great hypostatized constructs of "Protestantism," "Catholicism," and so on—and likewise away from the denominational focus that has preoccupied scholars of American religions, toward a study of how particular people, in particular places and times, live in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them in culture—*all* the idioms, including (often enough) those not explicitly their "own."[22]

Orsi thus finds a transgressive fluidity in contemporary American religious life much like that which Mandair locates in precolonial South Asian traditions.

ICNY's education programs have been deeply shaped by scholarship on lived religion. In fact, we regularly bring K-12 teachers to visit the Bronx Lourdes grotto, and encourage them to teach about such practices and beliefs. Our

Figure 9.1 K-12 teachers Lavie Raven (left) and Aaron Bible explore the Bronx Lourdes grotto at the 2017 Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers. Courtesy of Kevin Childress.

conferences for social workers, religious leaders, and others are committed to showing how diverse New Yorkers "live in, with, through, and against … religious idioms." But Orsi's call to look beyond the "hypostatized constructs" of traditions and denominations is not especially useful in programs for social workers and police. These professional audiences tend to seek clear, more-or-less causal ties between faith traditions and the actions or perceptions of community members, so it would undercut their impetus to study religion if ICNY programs highlighted the ways New Yorkers draw on "religious idioms … not explicitly their 'own.'" Why, our program participants would justifiably ask, should I learn about Buddhism or Islam, for example, if the Buddhists and Muslims do not follow their own traditions in patterned, consistent ways?

To convey the vibrant creativity of lived religion, while (usually) remaining within the boundaries of established faiths, ICNY's education programs stress the role of religious values and beliefs in people's everyday lives and political projects. Rather than asking speakers to discuss their faith in abstract, theological terms, we ask them to tell stories that illustrate the role of their faith in their personal life, professional work, or social activism. For example, at a 2019 conference for social workers exploring "Faith-Based Perspectives on Trauma and Healing," faith-based mental health professionals shared the scriptural passages, ritual practices, and other spiritual resources that helped them heal from their own personal traumas, or treat religiously diverse trauma survivors. At a 2020 conference for religious and civic leaders exploring "The Climate Crisis and New York Faith Communities," faith-based activists and community leaders discussed the religious values that inspire them to work for environmental sustainability.

Every once in a while, a Jewish or Muslim leader, for example, will share how they have been influenced by Thich Nhat Hanh or the *Bhagavad Gita*—or by the moral wisdom of their grandma. But most of our speakers reflect on authoritative sources from their "own" faith traditions. ICNY's focus on personal stories and political projects thus blunts the transgressive edge of lived religion scholarship, while nevertheless complicating the static view of doctrine at the heart of the world religions framework. By eliciting stories from religious leaders, we offer human portraits of what Orsi describes as religion "taken up in [people's] hands."[23]

Teaching Tactic: Panel Discussions with Religious Leaders

There are any number of ways for classroom teachers and public educators to highlight the internal diversity of religious traditions, and the personal stories

and political projects that connect those traditions to people's lives. These pedagogic principles may be adapted to serve a wide range of students, in different curricula and classroom settings. For example, students can explore the diversity within religious communities by reading classic novels like Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* or James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*—each of which portrays interpersonal conflicts linked to deep tensions within American Jewish and African-American Christian communities, respectively.[24] And the Pluralism Project's Case Initiative offers a remarkable collection of case studies for use in classroom teaching—decision-based cases that place students in the shoes of diverse Americans, as they take their religions "up in their hands."[25] Given such resources, I do not mean to suggest a one-size-fits-all approach to subverting world religions pedagogy from within.

However, in most ICNY education programs we realize the pedagogic principles sketched above by facilitating conversations between program participants and groups of diverse religious leaders. These panel discussions sometimes explore multifaith perspectives on a topic or theme, and sometimes explore the diversity with a single tradition. Despite the reservations expressed by the American Academy of Religion,[26] such conversations with religious leaders seem to be increasingly common in religious studies

Figure 9.2 Brooklyn rabbis Avi Lesches (left) and Heidi Hoover speak on a panel discussion at the 2012 Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers. Courtesy of The Interfaith Center of New York.

classrooms, as a growing number of college and university faculty members incorporate community-based, experiential education into traditional academic curricula.[27] In this section, I will therefore suggest a few guidelines for structuring panel discussions with religious leaders, based on my teaching experience at ICNY.[28]

For panel discussions exploring intra-faith diversity, I would encourage faculty members and other facilitators to *choose speakers who reflect social, political, or ideological differences within local faith communities*, as much or more than doctrinal or denominational differences within the faith tradition writ large. For example, in panel discussions with New York Muslim leaders I always try to include both Sunni and Shia community leaders, but frankly it is more important to include racially diverse speakers (given the mistaken popular equation of Muslim with Arab, and the historic significance of New York's African-American Muslim community), and to include women who both wear and do not wear hijab (given the extensive public discourse about Muslim women's religious dress). If the Sunni–Shia divide were a "hot issue" in local community life it would be essential to include both doctrinal perspectives, but in today's New York the racial, ethnic, and gendered diversity within Muslim communities is far more pressing.

For multifaith panel discussions, which usually have just one speaker from each tradition represented, I would encourage facilitators to *state clearly at the outset that the panelists are not speaking on behalf of their faith traditions or communities*—they represent *a* Jewish or Buddhist perspective, for example, but not *the* Jewish or Buddhist perspective. It is essential to flag the diversity within all faith traditions, even (or especially) if it is not represented in the conversation. Nearly all speakers welcome this clarification, which invites them to speak for themselves rather than their faith.

For all panel discussions, I would encourage facilitators to *choose speakers who exemplify different forms of community leadership*—a mix of clergy members, lay leaders, faith-based social activists, educators, or social service providers. If you limit the conversation to clergy members you are more likely to exclude women's voices, as well as faith communities that do not have ordained clergy. And *choose a mix of conventional and quirky or surprising speakers*—some who fit comfortably in the "mainstream" of their faith community, and some who defy assumptions about it. For example, in panel discussions with New York Christian leaders, I have often invited a speaker from a small, progressive "dinner church" in Brooklyn, where the worship service consists of a sacramental meal, rather than speakers from more typical "tall steeple" Protestant churches.[29] The dinner

church is hardly the largest or most influential congregation in the city, but it stands against the stereotypic stodginess of mainline Protestant denominations, and highlights emerging forms of Christian liturgy and community.

I have pointed out a number of different forms of diversity one should ideally include in a panel discussion, but facilitators must *be prepared to make difficult, imperfect decisions in choosing speakers, because you can never include everyone*. It is almost always a bad idea to have more than three or four speakers on a panel, so facilitators need to set priorities and make tough calls. Inviting six or eight speakers may be more inclusive, but it can also be restrictive or even dehumanizing. If your speakers do not have enough time to tell stories and engage in conversation, they will turn into cardboard cutouts of themselves. And if too many speakers go on for too long, your students will almost inevitably lose interest.

As you are reaching out to speakers and confirming their participation, it is important to *communicate clearly about the format and learning goals of the panel discussion*. Tell speakers a little about your course and your students, and share the syllabus if they are interested. Suggest topics or guidelines for their presentations (which they may or may not follow), as well as clear time limits (which they may or may not respect). Establish ground rules for the conversation if necessary. At public universities—and most private ones, for that matter—it is essential for speakers to understand that the panel discussion is not an opportunity to promote their religious practices or beliefs.

In suggesting topics for presentations, facilitators should *never ask speakers to summarize their faith traditions' "main ideas" or canonical doctrines*. I generally hesitate to declare hard-and-fast rules for panel discussions, but in this case I really mean *never*. It is a wasted opportunity to ask a religious leader doing important community work—or, for that matter, to ask anyone with a fascinating personal story—to serve as a walking world religions textbook. Students do not usually need to know the Five Pillars of Islam, for example, in order to learn a great deal from their Muslim neighbors,[30] but if you feel your students need a basic introduction to a faith tradition before speaking with a community leader, it is your job to provide it.

At the same time, however, facilitators should *discourage panelists from speaking entirely personally about their beliefs or experiences*—try to keep their faith traditions in the mix. I have sometimes been frustrated by speakers telling lengthy stories that make no reference to their faith, and have tried (with mixed success) to redirect them toward the topic at hand. Panel discussions should explore the ties and tensions between received traditions and personal creativity,

and it is sometimes the facilitator's job to ask follow-up questions that connect speakers' stories to their traditions.

In order to strike this balance between tradition and creativity, facilitators should generally *ask speakers to discuss practical applications or implications of their religious values or beliefs*—faith-based personal stories and political projects, as I argued above. The framing question for a panel discussion should almost always be some variation on "How does your faith tradition shape your life?" Speakers' answers might touch on their everyday experiences, personal faith journeys, family lives, community leadership, social activism, professional work, or what have you—but always religion "taken up in their hands."

As these suggestions make clear, it can be a complex, time-consuming process to organize and facilitate panel discussions with religious leaders. It is anything but a day off from your classroom teaching. But it is well worth the time and energy spent, as a rich conversation with diverse faith leaders will inevitably exceed the limitations of world religions pedagogy—or any other conceptual framework you might apply to it.

Conclusion: We Are All Specific Intellectuals

This essay has touched on a range of topics, from theoretical issues in religious studies and other fields, to the social and intellectual contours of the world religions public sphere, to practical advice for civically engaged classroom teaching. Each section speaks in a different register, but they all revolve around a few basic facts. Whether in academia or the nonprofit sector, educators are rarely, if ever, free to teach precisely as they would like. We are all constrained by the needs and expectations of our students and colleagues, as well as the conceptual systems and institutions we inhabit together. But these constraints are never absolute. More often than not, we can find creative ways to accomplish our pedagogic goals—workable compromises with the "regime[s] of truth" that bind us.

Given my position at the Interfaith Center of New York, I have highlighted the distinctive constraints placed on religious diversity education programs for professional audiences—teachers, social workers, and police who expect, and arguably *need,* to learn about "world religions" because they work in contexts and communities that are often defined in such terms. This is my predicament as a critical scholar of religion working at a community-based nonprofit organization. This is, in Foucault's phrase, "the precise [point] where

[my] own conditions of life [and] work situate [me]." But honestly, I do not think my predicament is dramatically different from that of most university-based academics. We are all "specific intellectuals," ethically and epistemically compromised by our role within systems we are working to critique. There is no space outside of power for us to "gambol in," but that does not mean we are "trapped and condemned to defeat." To the contrary, our work gains whatever power it may have by successfully navigating the limitations that shape it.

any group (like minority racial, ethnic, or religious groups, or gender, sexuality, and other identities)? What if the audience shifted? Giving students freedom to play with these categories can spark imagination and creativity that a "textbook" form may not.

20 David McConeghy, "Narrating the USA's Religious Pluralism," in *After World Religions*, eds. David G. Robertson and Christopher R. Cotter (Basingstoke: Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2016), 139–40.

Chapter 9

1 For more about the Interfaith Center of New York, see https://interfaithcenter.org (accessed June 28, 2021). For our "Religious Worlds of New York" summer institute for teachers, see https://religiousworldsnyc.org (accessed June 28, 2021).

2 Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). For other helpful critiques of the "world religions" framework see: Christopher Cotter and David Robertson, eds., *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jonathan Z. Smith, "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion," *Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 4 (1996): 387–403; and the closely related critiques of "pluralism" in Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen, eds., *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

3 My own critiques of world religions pedagogy are developed in more detail in Henry Goldschmidt, "From World Religions to Lived Religion: Towards a Pedagogy of Civic Engagement in Secondary School Religious Studies Curricula," in *Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education*, eds. Vince Biondo and Andrew Fiala (New York: Routledge, 2014), 177–92.

4 There's no way to survey the world of public, civically engaged scholarship here, but for useful introductions see: Gregory Jay, "The Engaged Humanities: Principles and Practices of Public Scholarship and Teaching," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 51–63; and Svetlana Nikitina, "Applied Humanities: Bridging the Gap between Building Theory and Fostering Citizenship," *Liberal Education* 95, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 36–43. For religious studies perspectives, see Forrest Clingerman and Reid Locklin, eds., *Teaching Civic Engagement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace and Noah Silverman, eds., *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

5 Interfaith Center of New York, *Policing in Today's Multifaith New York* (2016). Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iieScd-bmng (accessed June 28, 2021).
6 Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 109–33.
7 Foucault, "Truth and Power," 126.
8 Ibid., 126.
9 Ibid., 127.
10 It is important to note that in addition to ICNY's collaborative work with the NYPD, we have also participated in advocacy coalitions pushing for police reform and accountability, including efforts to end NYPD surveillance of Muslim communities and "stop and frisk" policies targeting young men of color. It is also worth noting that *all* of the civic institutions we work with—K-12 schools, social service agencies, police, city government, foundation funders, and faith communities themselves—have served as instruments of both exclusion and inclusion, domination and resistance.
11 Foucault, "Truth and Power," 131.
12 Ibid., 133.
13 Unfortunately, I must admit, our work may also help the NYPD design more effective surveillance plans for local religious communities. ICNY's closest partners in the NYPD are working to develop inclusive strategies for community policing, but as I noted above (n. 10) some of their colleagues engaged in unconstitutional surveillance of New York's Muslim communities in the years following 9/11. For the troubling details, see Muslim American Civil Liberties Coalition, et al., *Mapping Muslims: NYPD Spying and Its Impact on American Muslims* (2013). Available online at https://www.law.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/page-assets/academics/clinics/immigration/clear/Mapping-Muslims.pdf (accessed September 9, 2021).
14 Foucault, "Truth and Power," 133.
15 Michel Foucault, "Power and Strategies," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 141–2.
16 David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), xiii.
17 Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). For similar analyses of the histories of other "religions," see for example: Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), esp. 159–80 and 205–256; Daniel

Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019); David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, eds., *Secularism and Religion-Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mark Elmore, *Becoming Religious in a Secular Age* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); John Stratton Hawley, "Naming Hinduism," *The Wilson Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1991): 20–34; Hent de Vries, ed., *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), esp. 101–279; and arguably Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991 [orig. pub. 1962]).

18 Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West,* 9.

19 There are important exceptions to this generalization, like when professionals work with people of faith who question familiar categories of identity, such as Messianic Jews and Black Hebrew Israelites. For a concrete example, see James Sonne's discussion of a religious liberty legal clinic's work representing a Messianic Jewish inmate denied kosher food by a prison chaplain who did not consider him Jewish. James Sonne, "Cross-Cultural Lawyering and Religion: A Clinical Perspective," *Clinical Law Review* 25, no. 1 (2018): 255–8.

20 Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3–6. For additional scholarship and reflection on lived religion, see for example: Nancy Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America*; Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Robert Orsi, "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2003): 169–74; and Robert Wuthnow, *What Happens When We Practice Religion?: Textures of Devotion in Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

21 Orsi, "Everyday Miracles," 4.

22 Ibid.. 7.

23 Orsi, "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant," 172.

24 Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1987 [orig. pub. 1967]). James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013 [orig. pub. 1953]). For more on teaching lived religion through literature, and especially *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, see Henry Goldschmidt, "Teaching Lived Religion through Literature: Classroom Strategies for Community-Based

Learning," in *Teaching about Religion in the Social Studies Classroom*, NCSS Bulletin #117, ed. Charles Haynes (Silver Spring: National Council for the Social Studies, 2019), 53–60.

25 For more about the Pluralism Project's case study teaching initiative see https://pluralism.org/case-initiative (accessed July 6, 2021); and Ellie Pierce, "Using the Case Method in Interfaith Studies Classrooms," in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, eds. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace and Noah Silverman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 72–84.

26 The AAR's 2010 *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* specifically discourage K-12 teachers from inviting religious leaders into the classroom as guest speakers or bringing students to visit houses of worship. Available online at https://www.aarweb.org/AARMBR/Publications-and-News-/Guides-and-Best-Practices-/Teaching-and-Learning-/Teaching-about-Religion-in-K-12-Public-Schools.aspx (accessed July 9, 2021). The 2019 *AAR Religious Literacy Guidelines* for higher education are a bit more open to such community-based, experiential pedagogies, including them on a list of "other approaches" that "can supplement a religious studies approach to religious literacy." Available online at https://www.aarweb.org/AARMBR/Publications-and-News-/Guides-and-Best-Practices-/Teaching-and-Learning-/AAR-Religious-Literacy-Guidelines.aspx (accessed July 9, 2021). I entirely agree with the AAR that conversations with religious leaders cannot be equated with, or take the place of, the academic study of religion. But I would argue that a *civically engaged* study of religion must be both academic and experiential, placing scholarly and faith-based perspectives in conversation.

27 As far as I know, there are no reliable statistics for the number of religious studies faculty members incorporating conversations with religious leaders into their classroom teaching. My claim that this "seem[s] to be increasingly common" is based on anecdotal evidence, as well as the broader trend toward academic civic engagement. For a discussion of guest speakers in the religious studies classroom see Marianne Delaporte, "Giving and Receiving Hospitality During Community Engagement Courses," in *Teaching Civic Engagement*, eds. Forrest Clingerman and Reid Locklin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 61–73.

28 For a detailed description of a specific panel discussion see Goldschmidt, "From World Religions to Lived Religion," 187–90.

29 The church in question is St. Lydia's, which is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America but charts its own path in many ways. For more information see https://stlydias.org (accessed July 11, 2021).

30 For a critique of Five Pillars pedagogy in teaching about Islam and Muslim communities, see Hussein Rashid, "Mustafa: Teaching Beyond the Five Pillars," (this volume).