

Leslie Smith



Leslie Smith taught for four years as an adjunct instructor at two Midwestern universities before beginning her doctoral work in Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research emphasizes social theory, gender, and American culture.

This is the tale of how all the participants in an “Introduction to Religion” course gained a new appreciation for pedagogy and learning through the use of material culture. Moreover, because of the simple efforts of one guest speaker, both students and instructor alike learned an important lesson on the complexity of social systems and how material culture can transform classroom analysis of these subjects.

The class to which I’ve alluded took place at a large, midwestern university where most students were overwhelmingly white and Christian. Of those who took religious studies classes, most did so for all of the typical reasons: it fulfilled their general requirements; it was offered at a time they liked; they had an interest in world religions, or at least an interest in the issues posed by their own religious commitments. In this sense, my class was probably like many other religious studies courses across the country.

With this particular class, however, a couple of things were noticeably different. First, as a graduate student-turned-brand-new teacher, I was hoping that my speaking skills and song-and-dance routines would compensate for the huge holes in my knowledge. As countless others have undoubtedly experienced, my first lecture was met with a barrage of questions that I simply could not answer. Adding to this was a local community debate involving religion and the constitutionality of its expression that had gained national media attention; it would become a particularly volatile topic that framed the entire semester.

The circumstances inspiring the controversy involved a woman in a small, neighboring town who had challenged the use of a Christian symbol on the town’s flag, calling it an unconstitutional display. The subsequent uproar amongst the community’s members (who had no intention of removing the symbol) grew only more heated when it was discovered that this woman was a practicing Wiccan. The issue made its way boldly into the media and into our classroom. One student hailed from the town where this controversy raged, and consistently expressed strong opinions against the woman’s “right to assault” his community by “forcing her

religious views” where they were not wanted. Many others commented that her challenge was nothing more than an attention-getting device, since the symbol, they insisted, wasn’t hurting anyone. Few spoke up to defend her actions, and few were willing to (verbally) question how things might have been different had the woman identified with any other religious group. My attempts to analyze media representations of this issue fostered further classroom tension.

I had already planned to discuss Wicca during part of the semester, and I had asked a local Wiccan priestess to be a guest speaker. More than one student approached me to indicate that they were uncomfortable with her planned visit. I was continually second-guessing my decision to have her come, as I wanted to avoid her marginalization at a time when she and others feared for their safety. I was also concerned that her religious beliefs and practices had been either exoticized or demonized, despite my best efforts to couch my description of Wicca and its historical/cultural context within a larger discussion on the processes by which dominant groups construct an “other.”

On the day of her presentation, the majority of the students were already in their seats as class began; this was one time when I was convinced that punctuality was not a positive trait. When the speaker arrived, several of the students were visibly surprised (and, they would tell me later, relieved) to find an intelligent, eloquent, funny woman who wore neither robes nor any other garb that might distinguish her from anyone else in our campus community. A number of students gathered around her during the break, eager to ask questions about and handle the artifacts she brought for their viewing, including books, candles, a set of runes, multiple decks of tarot cards, wands, and crystals. Chatting revealed that she was a mother, and that she worked for one of the city’s major employers. Some of the tension that existed dissipated when a class member asked where she got her candles. Nervous laughter filtered through the room at her answer: “Wal-Mart.”

Special interest was directed toward the wands, runes, and tarot cards. A couple of students mentioned that they had experienced physical objects as purely symbolic ingredients in Christian ritual, heightening their interest in these implements to which physical, practical claims were attached. As the speaker described her use of each item, she provided us with a hands-on basis to broaden and further complicate our discussion on the problems involved in defining “religion.” We were no longer theorizing about purely ideological issues; we now had to wrestle with the significance of materiality in our discussions, and whether the distinction between the two was an artificial one.

The debriefing that followed the presentation reflected an interest in the speaker that did not wane. Her presentation initiated an ongoing dialogue between the class and members of a local

coven, and a few of the class members used the data gathered from her presentation as a stepping stone for their final projects. The speaker's visit thus allowed students to investigate some academic areas of interest while trying their hand at ethnography. From a pedagogical perspective, I was also pleased to have a context in which to engage the class in self-analysis, asking questions like the following: "Why did you feel relief when you saw that she appeared, as we've called it, 'normal,' and what's at stake in that word?"; "How might this conversation be different had she been wearing black robes?"; and — the question I could not ask before, "How would our responses to the 'town flag' controversy be different had the person speaking out been a Christian? Does this experience change things, and if so, in what way(s)?" On a much simpler level, the presence and discussion of material objects sparked questions that a straight lecture would not have, and we spent weeks emailing with her about the significance of the objects she brought for our viewing.

Because the class was able to interact with a religious participant and the material aspects of her practice, we were afforded an excellent confrontation with the complexity of social labels. This is, perhaps, the most important point. Textbook representations of social groups are just that; we must all, inevitably, use generalization as an important part of what we do. As a new teacher, I had expected that, at the end of the course, all students would have added substantially to their factual database via this textbook format. After the speaker's presentation, however, I understood how my focus on facts obscured a much more important goal: my students should come away from the class able to grasp a bit of the complexity of society, the categories we use to describe it, and, in light of the "town flag" controversy, the various negotiations that go on between groups for the right to use its most valued monikers — "normalcy" being among them. The speaker provided me a context in which to evaluate my own expectations of student learning when I saw the ways in which she was able to make it happen. My most detailed lecture on Wicca could not compare to the confounding of social categories provided by her presence: she effectively equated "Wiccan" with a working mother who frequents Wal-Mart.

I am indebted, then, to one Wiccan priestess and to forty-five students for demonstrating how the use of material culture can provide a significant lesson on the utter intricacy of society while providing a forum to introduce and investigate some of the central questions of religious studies. Of all of the lessons I learned during those first few semesters of teaching, this was one of the most valuable.