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Growing up in American suburbia during the early 1960s, I presume I was among the last generation of girls to be advised that proper ladies never discuss politics, sex, or religion. This gender straitjacket never fit me: nowadays I spend my life discussing these three combustible topics! At San José State University, where I have taught since 1995, my regular courses include “Religion and Political Controversy,” “Gender, Sexuality and Religion,” “Religion in America,” and “Pagan Traditions.”

Focusing on controversial issues, though, need not create a combative classroom atmosphere. We've likely all had students who want to affirm the truth of their religion against (the clueless relativism of) the professor. What I've discovered is that if I've established strategies for classroom discussion, partisan students rile their classmates much more than they do me, and the resulting peer pressure generates valid discussion as a byproduct.

My favorite classroom pericope illustrating this occurred when I had read aloud a page of Jonathan Edwards's “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” An earnest young evangelical white man in the class (who had visited my office and thus knew that I was a “visible sinner” as an out lesbian), raised his hand the moment I asked for comments. “Even though it was you reading those words,” he announced, staring accusingly at me, “I still felt convicted by them, guilty before my God!” This was much more confessional than I felt was appropriate, but before

I could formulate a response, a tough young Chicana in the back nearly spat as she countered, “Oh, give me a break! That sermon does the same thing they did to us in basic training: make you feel worthless and weak, then when they pat you on the back, you’re supposed to feel so grateful. I hate being used like that!”

This contrast opened a great discussion of emic and etic perspectives on Calvinist cosmology. Ultimately, both students knew their voices had been heard, but each was also able to go “cosmology hopping,” and understand why their debate partner saw Edwards’s tone as they did. I doubt that either the earnest evangelical or the jaded ex-military student had their minds (and judgments) changed, but their minds had grown (as well as others in that class, and the many other students with whom I have shared this story).

On the first day of class I set the tone for what it means to discuss religion in a religious studies classroom. First, we won’t pass judgment on truth claims. I’m not teaching to defend or debunk any one’s truth claims in the religious studies classroom: we are there to understand the human sources and uses of religion, and the internal logic of religious systems as systems. Second, I make it clear that all religions look absurd from the outside, including one’s own, and thus it is wise to refrain from judgmental terms such as “superstition,” “extremist,” and “fanatic,” as they could just as easily be used against you. I’ve developed a helpful exercise to set the tone of the class for the first day in the “Religion in America” class.

Having presented them with a brief survey of the astounding range of religious diversity in North America, I ask them to reflect on some metaphors for adjudicating all these competing truth claims. Among the more extreme metaphors this exercise has elicited is the lottery model, which maintains that among a huge range of choices, there is still only one winning ticket, and you’d better find it. The chess game metaphor suggests there could be a variety of paths to the same goal; although there are many ways to get to checkmate, winning remains the soteriological goal, and losing a dreaded possibility. More inclusively, religious pluralism could be a hometown buffet of metaphysics: all is laid out for your eclectic choice or rejection. Finally, religious pluralism could be like ecodiversity, where the presence of many plants and animals makes a system viable (still leaving the option of pulling out weeds and invasives), meaning that diversity of opinion should not be reduced, but encouraged.

Students enjoy this exercise, as they can indicate something of their religious perspective anonymously when discussing which metaphor strikes their fancy, without disclosing vulnerable religious identities. But what I most appreciate about it pedagogically is how the exercise decenters truth claims, a point I reinforce by offering my own metaphor of musical genres: you don’t have to like all styles of music equally in order to study and understand their logic; the

same holds true for religions in a religious studies classroom. Indeed, you can loathe your neighbor’s music, but the flourishing of your music does not depend on the silencing of his.

Ultimately, though, two intangible factors explain my often disappointingly placid classrooms. First, as with most large state universities, at San José State, specific humanities courses are not usually required for all students, and when they are, there are so many different sections that students shop around; students can avoid professors who would challenge their views. How many students perceive me as too irreverent, and decide they needn’t listen to an infidel all semester? Second, I find the general attitude of West Coast students to classroom discussion is accommodating rather than argumentative.

In a class “Spirituality and the Arts” that I taught at a Connecticut university, one student flatly declared that Adrienne Rich was a selfish woman who had left her husband for no good reason, and was therefore not deserving of our aesthetic attention. Other students in the class sensed an opportunity to debate, and leapt to it, constructing some defenses for Rich that were quite imaginative. Nothing so dramatically dismissive happens regularly in my California classroom; when some of my San José students raised important ethical queries around why the evangelical ghostwriter Mel White remained in a heterosexual marriage even when he knew he was gay, other students rushed to resolve the potential debate, neatly explaining his behavior as a product of different historical circumstances. This approach short-circuited a feminist critique of White’s journey.

The vast majority of my students are more aggravated when I defend fundamentalism as an intellectual movement than when I present the thought of Maria Stewart or Mary Daly as central to American religious thought. The closing moments of “Religion in America” are often taken up with the story of Harry Hay being blessed by Wovoka in the late 1920s, auguring the rise of both gay rights and the American Indian Movement (Hay 1996, 17–33). I’ve never had a student protest this intersection as a fitting capstone for the course; on the contrary, many cite it on their finals as an intriguing springboard for reflection. However, I’ll still be hearing from those same students that fundamentalism is anti-intellectual, no matter how often I have demonstrated to them that interpreting human reason as finite is hardly a thoughtless, antiphilosophic, or indefensible position.

Similarly, my maverick position on the nature/nurture debate over sexuality can make my LGBTQ students quite uneasy. I maintain that sexuality can be a choice (it can also be innate; this varies as do most human characteristics), and that the question of rights really concerns the social valuation of homosexuality. Once homosexuality is seen as a positive good, and therefore a positive choice, there will be no imperative to retreat from individual agency to what

can be an apologetic appeal to biology.

Because the law in the United States protects both innate characteristics (e.g., no discrimination on the basis of race) and chosen characteristics (freedom of religion does not disappear even if one converts to different religions frequently), there is no logical reason for the LGBTQ movement to secure all its eggs in the precarious basket of biological determinism. When I explained this position at the end of a long class discussion on the nature/nurture debate (featuring the contrasting opinions of Mel White and Gloria Anzaldúa), a few gay male students were alarmed by my perspective. One who had once stubbornly insisted that sexuality was a biological given continued the discussion with me after class. He finally said, in frustration, that even though I might be right, I shouldn't voice such things publicly, because it could weaken gays politically.

Controversy is where the intellectual excitement is, but it can also be a place of violence and danger. The religious studies classroom is one space where controversial issues can be aired as exercises in critical thinking, rather than as contests for eternal dominance. Different professors will create this arena for intellectual play in the manner most suitable for them.

I keep the ground rules clear: my classrooms are known as nonproselytizing zones. If something sounds too much like an unconditional endorsement, I'll ask that student to construct the counter-argument to what she just said. I also model this behavior when students see me arguing for the logical coherence of religious systems that would deny women education, or, in the case of Christian Reconstruction, have me executed. Ultimately, the ability to inhabit the cosmology of another, albeit provisionally, is the learned skill we give our students, one that will help them whether they become science fiction writers, missionaries, financial advisors, or saints.

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