

Thee Smith, Emory University Reconciliation Initiatives

I came to teaching in a religious studies department from a seminary background in liberation theology and emancipatory praxis. Now I realize that even before my seminary days in the mid-1970s, I was "prepped" to make the link between theory and practice by my undergraduate education in the late 1960s. On the one hand I was intellectually shaped by the liberal arts curriculum at St. John's College in Annapolis, with its "A Great Books" program of Western classics. The pedagogical goals of that curriculum included the ideal of a wholistic integration of learning in both the humanities and the sciences. On the other hand an African American student like me, growing up in the revolutionary milieu of the 60s, could readily experience this wholistic ideal as yet another form of alienated learning. Perhaps the insistence on one type of wholism helped expose the comparative absence of another wholism: the integration of cognitive or intellectual pursuits with their experiential (sapiential) and pragmatic contexts.

Or perhaps I was subliminally influenced by the otherwise innocuous recruiting efforts of the local Black Panther Party. At that time it seemed that I provided one of their many failed efforts to radicalize apolitical college students during the post-60s Vietnam War era. Years later, however, I noticed that I had achieved an emancipatory perspective that implies a delayed reaction to such ideological challenges. It happened after Alex Haley completed his research on the Annapolis slaveport and popularized the results in his novel and television series, *Roots*. Only then did the unreality of it all really disturb me. [Recall here Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (Random House, 1960), an impactful critique of college student culture during that period.]

At my college the students were encouraged to internalize Plato's ideal of cognitive liberation developed in his *Republic*. Indeed we saw ourselves vividly represented in the prisoner who is released from the cave of ignorance and false opinion in the Allegory of the Cave. But our teachers were themselves inattentive to an equally vivid, if not more compelling analogue in our own social-historical context. Just a day-trip away from campus, on Maryland's eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay, the slave heroine Harriet Tubman had escaped her own plantation and then rescued a few hundred of her fellow slaves on the Underground Railroad. What an enviable opportunity for an experiential integration of western classics with black studies and U.S. history!

I have tried to attend to and maximize such opportunities in my own courses. The courses most relevant for our topic are my "Religion as Violence and Nonviolence," "Religion and 'Prejudice Reduction'" course, and my cotaught course, "Religion and Conflict: The Sudan." These are

seminar-style reading courses that also feature workshop formats, peer counseling exercises, and midterm options involving either fieldwork (including site visits) or media projects (video or photography, audio recordings, computer or interactive media). The challenge in creating syllabi for these courses involves effectively correlating the readings with the nontextual or experiential components of the course. The goal of such correlations is to create a high degree of coherence of theory and application, so that student learning becomes both cognitive and existential with respect to our psychosocial and social-historical life situations.

Syllabi Excerpts:

Course 1: Religion and Conflict: The Sudan

Note: This course was developed and cotaught by me (Christian studies, religion, and violence studies) and my colleague Richard C. Martin (Islamic studies, comparative religions, and conflict resolution) at Emory in Spring, 1998.

Schedule:

Class 1

Course Introduction. Read Francis M. Deng. *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan*. Brookings Institute Press, 1995.

Class 2

Practicum: A diversity training mini-workshop. Prepare for workshop with a 2-page description and analysis of a conflict situation at Emory, in Atlanta, or elsewhere in the U.S.

Class 3

Seminar Discussion: Conflict Resolution Theory. Read Marc Howard Ross. *Culture of Conflict: Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective*

. pp. xi-69. Yale University Press, 1993. What does Ross mean by "conflict as interpretive behavior"? Read Richard Martin.

Islam Agonistes: The Conflict of Cultures and the Culture of Conflict in Islamicate Societies
. Are "interests" and "positions" substantially different in religious conflicts?

Class 4

Practicum: A conflict resolution simulation (role-play) of the Sudanese (North/South) conflict. Read Deng, *War of Visions*, pp. 35-134, and Cherie R. Brown. *Healing Into Action: A Leadership Guide for Creating Diverse Communities*. National Coalition Building Institute, 1998. (scan latter half of text in preparation for the practicum). Prepare a 1-2 page position statement representing Southern and Northern Sudanese opposing perspectives and be prepared to role-play either perspective.

Class 5

Seminar Discussion: Rene Girard's theory of "sacred violence." Read Girard Reader, chapters 1, 5, 7-8, 11-13, Epilogue.

Midterm Projects

Students present case studies in religion and conflict resolution (not limited to the Sudanese conflict).

Course 2: Religion and Prejudice Reduction: Theory and Practice

Note: This theory/practice course combined the theory of sacred violence developed by Rene Girard (Stanford) with the prejudice reduction theory and practices of the National Coalition Building Institute* and was taught by me at Emory in Fall 1997.

Schedule:

Week 1

Introduction: theory/practice learning as the basis of the course—a preview of the semester.

1. Introduction to class members and syllabus
2. Introduction to theory/practice learning (TPL) as a pedagogy (handout)
3. Practicum: introduction to a prejudice reduction model*

Week 2

Theory: the "Generative Mimetic Scapegoating Mechanism"*** or MSM as the anthropological basis of sacred violence/social prejudice.

1. Rene Girard. The Scapegoat, chs. 1-3, pp. 1-44.
2. Practicum: continue prejudice reduction model 3) (unless already provided) please provide a brief student profile:
 1. Your name and diversity/identity groups
 2. Your background in addressing these issues
 3. How you envision using this course

Week 3

Theory: the mimetic scapegoating mechanism, continued.

1. Theory: Rene Girard. The Scapegoat, chs. 4-5, 7.
2. Practicum: continue prejudice reduction model

Week 4

A new theory/practice of catharsis

1. Thomas Scheff. Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama, Preface and chs. 1-3
2. Practicum: conclude prejudice reduction model

Week 5

Practice: from abreactive therapy* to psychosocial practice.

1. Thomas Scheff. Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama, chapters 3 and 5
2. Practicum: conclude prejudice reduction model and preview or begin midterm projects

* "The Prejudice Reduction Workshop Model" has been developed by Cherie R. Brown, founder

and Executive Director of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), Washington, D.C. The model is the sole property of NCBI, and may not be used in any way without prior explicit permission (for which this course has been approved). The use of the model in this course supplements the diversity programming of NCBI Emory, our campus affiliate. The course does not, however, replace the three-day training program that qualifies participants to lead the workshop. Interested class members are encouraged to register for the next Train-the-Trainer workshop at Emory or with the Atlanta city chapter of NCBI.

** The "GMSM" is the term coined by Robert Hamerton-Kelly in his most recent book on the mimetic theory, *The Gospel and the Sacred: Poetics of Violence in Mark*, (pp. 6-12, 129-31; Fortress Press, 1993). Note especially: "It is a mistake to see the GMSM as tied to the category of sacrifice...because the phenomena [that the term sacrifice] used to encompass are now seen to overflow the boundaries of several categories...The GMSM is a generative mechanism of the psychosocial system of desire whose action can be traced in all kinds of ethnographic and literary texts...Scapegoating is a more appropriate description of the mechanism than sacrifice, because in current usage scapegoating covers a wide variety of actions and attitudes that occur in literature, politics, and academic committees (pp. 8-9).