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## **Educating for Humanity, Egalitarianism, and Justice**

It is common for me to make big claims about the importance of the study of religion in the courses that I teach at Louisiana State University, a large, public, research institution that is the flagship campus for the Louisiana state university system. In fact, I have been known to say, "I think that religion may be the most important academic field in colleges and universities in America," which I often follow with "and yet it is one of the smallest units in the college (of humanities and social sciences) here at Louisiana State University." The claim is a serious one, and one that I make with conviction. I think that the study of religion should be compulsory in every college and university in America and that state colleges and universities should commit more resources to attracting and retaining qualified faculty and to making resources available for research into the meaning and function of religion in American and global life.

I ground such a declaration not as an economic and political remonstrance that is meant to justify the field as corresponding to definite job choices (which is a major conversation here in Louisiana), but rather in the belief that religion is important for educating citizens for humanity rather than simply for the marketplace. Of course, the two are not mutually exclusive. Religion is ubiquitous, and while it may not be comparable to the sciences and the professional fields in terms of corporate and industry objectives, the study of religion is central to the cause of equality and justice, and to disrupting the reproduction of marginalization in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and class, not to mention the ways in which these factors intersect in public policies, practices, and international relations (I am thinking here of the ways in which America views itself as a “chosen” nation and how it polices the globe ostensibly in the interest of democracy, which most often conceals its own exceptionalist and nationalistic self-interests. It is this exceptionalism that I want to understand as religious). As a result, I want my students to understand the ways in which religion participates in how relations between human beings are arranged in America, often along lines of gender, sexuality, race, and class, and how religion is implicated in these relations. As such, my courses attempt to give them the tools to think critically about the world and to envision the world constituted differently, as more democratic and egalitarian. So, while preparing students for gainful employment is important, educating them for humanity is more critical. My teaching is informed by a number of theories and thinkers, including critical social theory, psychoanalysis, black feminist thought, and philosophy of race, and in particular the works of Anthony Pinn, Charles Long, Sigmund Freud, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, Anne DuCille, bell hooks, and many thinkers who help illuminate the interaction between religion and the body, especially as it relates to race and gender.

Full disclosure here: I am an African-American heterosexual male, whose parents struggled their way into the working classes. I grew up in Southern California, but my grandparents were sharecroppers and laborers in Texas, and my paternal ancestors were slaves in Madison County, Tennessee. Therefore, I am cognizant of my own social location and reflexive about the ways in which I still benefit from patriarchal values in this country that privilege men. Hence, my motivations are just as personal as they are professional. Though I think religious studies is underappreciated and marginalized in the academy — due in part to the misnomer that it is strictly confessional — I am concerned with interrogating and teaching how religion functions socially, culturally, politically, and with inculcating *critical* ideas in and through pedagogical processes.

Having an interest in the study of gender and of both women in religion and masculinity, I am also a faculty affiliate of women’s and gender studies at Louisiana State University. Therefore, I often have students in my religious studies courses who are, likewise, interested in the study of gender. My contention is this: students who are interested in gender, sexuality, and so on, should take courses in religious studies because it is in and through religion that divisions in gender are not only constructed but are also maintained and reproduced. Their reproduction is so constant and normalized that gender becomes sedimented so that it happens to appear as *natural*

rather than

*social*

. The role that religion plays in constituting the realm of human taxonomy cannot be underestimated when it comes to gender, sexuality, and many other social categories. And religion often authorizes the structuring of — and policing of the boundaries of — acceptable behavior, which is quite often hierarchical and privileges the embodiment of those who are perceived as being the

*right*

or most socially acceptable color, gender, and sexual orientation. Yet, religious studies is often taken for granted even in those disciplines and fields that share my concerns for egalitarianism and justice.

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