

Teaching Metaphor

Between Guru and Deceiver? Responding to Unchosen Metaphors in the Religious Studies Classroom

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Abstract. *Two troublesome portraits of religious studies professors often exist in the minds of some students at any given time: the Guru, or wise spiritual teacher, and the Deceiver. These metaphors capture student perceptions of us that may be ill-informed and beyond our control. We will examine and compare how our own chosen metaphors for teaching – theological typologist and neutral enthusiast – respond creatively to the unchosen metaphors of guru or deceiver. We cannot avoid being cast as gurus/ deceivers, but we can discern how our own metaphors for teaching engage “unchosen” student metaphors for us. This exercise can enhance our self-awareness about our own normative agendas in the classroom, and help to sharpen colleagues’ conversations about our sometimes differing assumptions regarding the discipline and teaching of religious studies.*

We would wager that early on in their careers, most religious studies or theology professors are confronted with two common kinds of scenarios: students coming to our office hours and sharing, in pain or wonder, stories of their own religious or spiritual journeys, hoping we will understand and shed further light on their situations; and students avoiding or dropping a course with us because it seems dangerous to their faith or their souls. These scenarios may occur in different proportions for faculty members, given the range of our pedagogical styles and the types of religious studies courses we offer. But most of us are familiar with scenarios like these that occur on a spectrum between what we might call perceptions of us as gurus on one end, and as deceivers on the other: persons who either foster or threaten students’ own existential bearings in the world. We will share examples of these dynamics with some of our own students at Western Illinois University, but we trust that these images resonate with many religious studies professors. In this essay, we examine how an analysis of our own metaphors for teaching – as faculty members – can make us more aware of how we each engage the energy of students’ own metaphors for us as gurus and deceivers.

Awareness of these dynamics can serve as one kind of reality check for our own assumptions about how much we do (or do not) have normative agendas in the classroom; it can also help sharpen interpersonal conversation between colleagues about their sometimes differing assumptions regarding the discipline and teaching of religious studies. The model we stumbled upon for reflecting on just how we engage student metaphors for religious studies teachers had its genesis in our quite different visceral reactions to some of the preliminary findings of Barbara Walvoord’s recent study of teaching and learning in introductory religion courses. It evolved during our preparation of a jointly delivered paper at the American Academy of Religion on metaphors for teaching. Our conversation around both of these events will identify the kinds of internal

dynamics that readily come into play when we are viewing ourselves in the mirror of students' expectations – responses that involve elements of both embrace and resistance. By framing our varied responses to student expectations in terms of the metaphors we have each developed for our own teaching (“neutral enthusiast” for John, “theological typologist” for Amy), we are in a position to do two things: first, to analyze how our respective metaphorical images of our own endeavors as teachers refract the guru and/or deceiver images students may hold of us; second, to compare our metaphors for teaching as a touchstone for wider disciplinary conversations – including conversations about the place of humanistic inquiry in the interdisciplinary context of religious studies departments, and in a wider university culture that tends to define research in empirical or pragmatic terms. Taking seriously what students hope to learn in a religious studies class is part and parcel of taking seriously the place of existential, big picture values reflection in higher education – as one practice space for lifelong learning.

In sharing the fruits of a method of conversation about teaching that we discovered together gradually, we do not claim to represent the range or style of pedagogical (and ideological) differences present in all religious studies departments, nor to cover new ground with respect to debates about the contested nature of religious studies in particular or the place of the humanities more broadly. Nor have we rigorously tested the benefits of this introspective faculty exercise for student learning (though we encourage our more quantitatively-inclined colleagues to do so). Rather, we hope that by sharing the model and insights of our conversation together, others will reflect on their own metaphors for teaching while standing before the mirror of student images of us as guru and deceiver, and will think afresh about familiar disciplinary and pedagogical issues.

Fruits of a Study: A Call to Listen to Students' Spiritual Hunger?

Our own discussion about how to engage student perceptions of us as spiritual guides (good or bad) began when we felt a gauntlet thrown down to us by the initial findings of a teaching study in which we had both participated.

Driving back together from a conference about the early results of this teaching study, one of us felt elated and the other disappointed. Sponsored by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion in August 2005, the early results were presented at a two-day conference attended by fifty-six theology and religious studies professors representing colleges and universities from around the United States. In 2004–05, along with ten additional colleagues for a total of sixty-six religion professors, we had been carefully gathering data on our introductory courses in theology and religious studies for a study headed by Barbara Walvoord. Walvoord's analysis of this data culminated in what she presented as a stunning, even revolutionary finding: the data-supported existence of “a great divide” between faculty and student goals for learning in introductory courses. While students and faculty shared commonalities in goals such as “gaining factual knowledge” and “understanding other religions,” students valued and expected “spiritual guidance” in the classroom. Conversely, providing spiritual guidance as a course objective or learning goal received the lowest rating from faculty (Walvoord 2008, 13–18).

Having been trained in a social scientific approach to the study of religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara, John left the conference energized, feeling a kind of public validation of his inner sense of vocation: a call to work with the spiritual hunger of students by freeing them from their theological imprisonment so that they might stride bravely towards their own authentic spiritual homeland. Amy, on the other

hand, found the “great divide” finding obvious and superficial. The reason faculty members do not state a goal like spiritual direction explicitly – say, on a syllabus – seems perfectly obvious: faculty members want to make very clear to students that the religious studies classroom is not a space of catechesis in which the students are shaped to uphold the teachings of a particular church or religious group. Yet a faculty member may actually share with students the goal of addressing ultimate questions, by making space in the classroom for students’ constructive religious reflection. Trained in theology and the history of religions at the University of Chicago, Amy already had such a goal stated in her syllabus.

The difference in reactions to Walvoord’s finding was not at the level of its content, but at the more ideological level of its potential significance for the profession of teaching religious studies. John was not any more surprised than Amy (or likely any religious studies professor) to learn that students came to religious studies courses deeply interested in sorting out their own religious leanings, or cultivating their own spirituality. But he had been steeped in environments in which a typical response to Walvoord’s “great divide” observation would be the aggressive and defensive insistence that religious studies is not theology. We do not teach people to be religious; in a neutral, cross-cultural, and comparative mode, we teach about religion, using explanatory categories that may not readily feed – indeed, may disillusion – students who come to the classroom in a spirit of spiritual searching. John had rarely been in a professional environment which essentially validated students’ spiritual hunger by suggesting that more effective, motivated learning might require a better alignment between students’ own learning goals and their perceptions of faculty goals for the course. Amy, by contrast, had begun her study of religion in a religious studies context (Carleton College) in which she had never felt pressured to choose between clarifying her religious convictions and learning about the many-layered humanistic and social scientific ways of interpreting the phenomenon of religion. She also felt that the depiction of the “great divide” finding as something stunning was condescending to religious studies professors, each of whom find their own way of dancing with student hopes for spiritual growth, expressing a unique balance of honoring these hopes while challenging students to see with new horizons of understanding. What would have been far more interesting to Amy would have been to glean from the faculty journals (prepared as part of the study) some insights into the range of ways professors perform this dance. There are indeed deep questions for our profession buried beneath this overtly obvious finding, but they have far more to do with how and why we respond to student expectations as we do. Our quite different responses to the finding of a faculty-student divide revealed something about how we each had accustomed ourselves to responding to students’ spirituality-related expectations – and how we felt about taking them seriously at all. Amy felt improperly chastised for not doing something she was in fact already doing, while John felt finally permitted to do what he had somewhat guiltily been doing all along. In either case, we both sensed an invitation to respond positively to student expectations, by more fully and openly embracing spiritual growth as a goal for our introductory courses. To do this – or how we choose to do this – has significant and familiarly controversial implications for the pedagogical aims of religious studies.

While Walvoord’s finding of a faculty-student divide in stated course goals could be framed and interpreted in a spectrum of ways, the context of her initial presentation of this finding was concerned with effective teaching, with the assumption that students learn best if we work with rather than against their intellectual and existential motivations.

To feel challenged to take seriously students' hunger for spiritual growth in a university classroom is an unusual challenge to have thrown down before us in a professional context – at least for those of us teaching within the rubrics of a public state university in which indoctrination in any religious tradition is off limits. Unless carefully formulated, a faculty goal to further students' spiritual growth could seem to many people to cross the line into creating a classroom that is itself an intentional space of religious practice. Nevertheless, the fruits of Walvoord's study prompted us to see ourselves as teachers in the mirror of student expectations of us as in some sense spiritual guides.

Faculty Metaphors for Teaching Meet Student Metaphors for Teachers

Over three years later, the "Teaching Religion" section of the 2008 American Academy of Religion "Call for Papers" included a single-line request for papers on metaphors for teaching. The idea of teaching metaphors reverberated with the issues of student expectations opened for us by the findings of the teaching study, including expectations that might make us uncomfortable. An unexpectedly rich conversation ensued as we returned to the question of a faculty-student divide, in the context of developing a paper proposal that explored how our own metaphors for teaching crisscrossed with the metaphors students placed upon us.¹

Although we had both already developed metaphors for our own teaching, we found ourselves talking just as much about students' own metaphors for us as teachers. Whatever metaphors we thought of that might encapsulate our own experience teaching, we observed that a confrontation with unchosen metaphors for our role as teachers is the price we pay for having the gumption to walk into a classroom. The metaphors are unchosen because they comprise student perceptions of us that, ill-formed or not, are beyond our control. In addition to the metaphors drawn from stereotypical attitudes towards race, gender, attractiveness, health, or age, teaching in the field of religious studies rather uniquely adds at least two other unchosen metaphors. Two troublesome portraits of religious studies professors are likely to exist in the minds of some students in any given religious studies class at any given time: the Guru, or wise spiritual teacher; and the Deceiver, a potential minion of the Evil One here to test their faith.

The findings of Walvoord's teaching study gave plenty of broad evidence for the former metaphor, but we found it was often paired with the latter in our own classroom experiences. While we are convinced that being viewed as at least quasi gurus and potential deceivers is not uncommon in religious studies classrooms, we will share some anecdotal examples from our own context at Western Illinois University, where most students have Protestant or Catholic backgrounds (some actively engaged in religious communities, but others more nominally connected to their faith of origin). We will then describe our own metaphors for teaching, highlighting how they interact with student images of us.

Students' Metaphors for Teachers as Gurus or Deceivers: Some Examples

Here we will limit ourselves to depicting some of the ways that student impressions of us as gurus or deceivers can be unnerving. When we compare our metaphors for our

¹ Our proposal was accepted and our paper became part of a provocatively-titled panel, "Dogs and Deceivers: How Metaphors Inform the Practice of Teaching," at AAR's national meeting in Chicago, October 2008. The paper we co-presented bore the same title as this article, but we have significantly revised the original paper.

respective teaching styles and aims, we will discuss ways that we find ourselves more comfortably responsive to guru-tending expectations of us.

Two examples from John's experience illustrate the sometimes situational nature of guru-deceiver perceptions on the part of students. While Walvoord's study reflects a common kind of spiritual seeking in the classroom (hoping to clarify one's own religious convictions), some kinds of spiritual seeking emerge in the raw of a tragic life experience. Recently, an obviously shaken student came up after class asking John for what amounted to spiritual guidance (the guru perception). The student's younger brother – a bright, athletically gifted nineteen year old brimming with life – was at a Chicago party and had been stabbed twice with a steak knife in the stomach and chest. Due to loss of blood, he was in a coma in intensive care; doctors were not hopeful about his survival. While John was turning off electronic equipment, collecting his notes, and getting ready to head back to his office, he faced a tearful young man asking him profound and moving existential questions: Why would God let this happen, did John think his brother would live, and, most disconcerting, would John pray for his brother? John did the best he could to direct the young man to services on campus that support students in crisis, but he was also aware of being caught between two meaningful personas: his identity, at that moment, was split between a human being who suddenly represented a connection to ultimate matters, called upon to ease the spiritual and emotional suffering of another human being in any way possible, and a professional drawn suddenly out of the modality of teaching about religion in a detached manner.

John found it even more disconcerting to be cast as the community "Satan worshiper," though it was not without an element of humor. Early in his teaching career, he was asked by the University Counseling Center to lead a student discussion on "the occult" because of some disturbing incidents in the residence halls involving students conjuring up demons on Ouija boards. As it turned out, the graduate assistant responsible for organizing the event was terrific on publicity – but short on detail. Posters advertised that John Simmons (no department affiliation or other clarifying information mentioned) would "teach the occult" to all interested parties. When he arrived at the Counseling Center expecting to conduct a short historical presentation of occult history and engage about fifteen students in discussion, what he encountered were several groups of Christians singing hymns and praying, arguing with students dressed up in dark costumes brandishing various supposedly occult symbols. The next day in his Old Testament class, a student came up to John after class, angry and frightened, and said that her pastor at the Assembly of God church announced that John was a "Satan worshiper." She wondered aloud if she should drop the class since she definitely did not want to take Bible from an "outed" deceiver. A representative from a Christian Bible study group from a small town near campus called the president of the university demanding that John be fired. In both instances, the guru and deceiver metaphors were inappropriately cast upon John's professional activity due to circumstances and misrepresentations that were beyond his control.

Amy has felt cast in the deceiver image in less dramatic ways. A middle-aged student once dropped her introductory course on Christianity shortly after the discussion of early Gnostic heresies, saying he faced Satan enough in his daily life, and did not need to confront demonic temptation in the classroom as well. Other students occasionally cite similar reasons for dropping a course. More broadly, Amy finds that learning about the history and diversity of Christianity leads some students with Christian backgrounds

to feel disoriented by the knowledge that Christianity is not what they thought it was (nor does it have as fixed a perspective on all matters as they thought), and leads other students to view the classroom as a test which drives them to better articulate why their own expression of Christianity is the only authentic, biblically-rooted one. Both the more receptive and the more defensive attitude towards Christianity's unexpected diversity reflect encounters with something that seems to undeceive or deceive students: either students become in effect undeceived about a prior deception (their prior lack of accurate or extensive knowledge about Christianity), or they feel challenged to uncover deception in the instructor's presentation of the nature(s) of Christianity. The former experience of being undeceived might feed the side of students seeking their own spiritual or theological growth, or it might leave students feeling disconnected from any secure sense of religious bearings – and in that sense, (un)deceived about the value of Christianity or religious traditions at all. These may not be the intended effects of a religious studies professor. But even when students do not openly regard the professor's aims as deceptive and the classroom as a space in which the student must publicly defend the one right version of Christianity, what the student who regards the teacher as deceiver fears coming to pass may in fact do so, insofar as it is just as possible that other students will become disillusioned with all religion as that they will become excited by the knowledge that a given religion casts a wider net of possible belief and practice than they had previously thought. In short, it becomes especially difficult to discuss a religion held by a student without students feeling that the classroom space is potentially one in which their own beliefs and practices will be either confirmed, deepened, or challenged – under the guidance of a teacher who is thus regarded as something in between guru and deceiver.

Whether the courses they teach focus on religions practiced by their students or religions foreign to them, we suspect our colleagues in religious studies could describe many similar scenarios in which students perceive them as guides who help them form further their own searching or certain religious outlooks, or who might instead demythologize what had once been an enchanted and familiar worldview – twin perceptions captured in the metaphors of guru and deceiver. While the Walvoord study centered on students' hope that their religious studies classrooms will be spaces for furthering their own spiritual journeying, many students find instead that their hoped-for gurus turn out to be crafty deceivers. Deceiver, of course, is the flip side of guru. The cross-cultural and comparative nature of religious studies inevitably draws content into the classroom that is viewed by some students as heresy. If a religious studies professor asks students to question "the truth," then the professor is unwittingly transformed into a deceiver. Whatever our own intentions are, we inevitably encounter both student portraits of us in the classroom: standing before the mirror of such student perceptions of us, we all look like gurus and/or deceivers.

Engaging the Unchosen Metaphors of Guru and Deceiver: Two Approaches

How do we as teachers respond to encounters of the unchosen kind? One way to begin to answer this question is by examining the metaphors for teaching that we discern for ourselves, exploring the ways in which our own pedagogical metaphors work with or respond to students' images of us as guru or deceiver. An analysis of our own teaching metaphors serve as an example: Amy sees herself as a theological typologist, John sees himself as a neutral enthusiast. Yet our metaphors for teaching inevitably dance with the energy of the unchosen metaphors students place upon us.

As a theological typologist, Amy emphasizes the diverse ways that religious insiders form arguments about their beliefs and practices. Although she weaves in comparative, historical, and social scientific approaches to interpreting religion, Amy finds that presenting theological typologies provides a framework for pursuing several pedagogical aims. First, it fosters recognition that every religion is internally diverse. Once aware of a typology of positions on a given theological issue, students find it more difficult to read any religion – their own or someone else’s – reductively or monolithically. Insofar as this aim is a value-laden one, Amy acknowledges that there is a deceiver side to being a theological typologist: she really wants students to see that Islam is not defined by the worst media images of it, that evangelical Christianity does not define the whole of Christianity. There is a moral pedagogical agenda at work here: Amy would like her students to view religion as malleable in such a way that both idealization and demonization of a given religion are misplaced.

Second, being exposed to a typology of theological positions allows students to watch and practice normative, constructive religious thinking. Students who identify with the religious tradition at hand can work on developing their own theological beliefs; likewise, students who do not identify with that particular religion can articulate the reasons for their own convictions about the issue at hand, in a way that is mindful of the arguments of religious insiders. There is thus a guru potential for an instructor who is a theological typologist, but it is a multidirectional potential, because students are given space to develop and voice their convictions.

Third, working as a theological typologist allows Amy to express her own views in the classroom, without explicitly naming them as hers and without presenting her own views exclusively. Insofar as she wants her students to hear a viable theological option they might not have known existed, and insofar as she wants to debunk the idea that a theological position that she finds abhorrent or simplistic is not the only possible position, there is an implicit embrace of both guru and deceiver roles.

By contrast, John describes himself as a neutral enthusiast because he does not passionately embrace the religious insider’s perspective, especially on doctrinal complexities (Simmons 2006, 41–42). What matters for John is the nature of the religious mind at work on any religious phenomena. Neutral implies stepping back, observing, and developing a meta-framework with which to explore religious phenomenon. He passes this on to students under the guise of comparative, cross-cultural exploration of religious activity. Neutrality is not really bracketing his own religious perspective. Rather, for John, the insider’s perspective loses its significance under the bright glare of human existence configured by a trans-institutionally described religious mind. Enthusiasm arises naturally as genuine excitement about the religious mind at work, yet he acknowledges that his approach is binary; there is a good and bad religious mind, especially relating to violence and religion. Ignoring doctrinal concerns casts him as a deceiver for institutionally-connected religious students while for the spiritual but not religious, he is cast as guru because he presents an often appealing meta-perspective on religion.

We found it relatively easy to analyze how our own chosen metaphors for teaching parried and played with the energy of being cast by students as gurus and deceivers. Doing so also made us realize that when we use these (mis)perceptions of our intent as teachers to broaden the scope of our students’ understanding of religion, we are in effect choosing to embrace what was originally unchosen. What startled us, however, was what we learned to see by comparing our respective metaphors for teaching. In standing before the mirror of a colleague’s quite different metaphor for teaching, with attention

to how each metaphor engaged student expectations, we came to recognize how our own etymologies as teachers and scholars of religious studies prompted us, in different ways, to identify with the images of either guru or deceiver. This recognition in turn provided us with an unexpectedly fruitful basis for perceiving and comparing our approaches to the place of normative or constructive reflection in religious studies more broadly. We emerged with a sharper sense of our own department's sensibilities with regard to debates about the nature of our field, and an enhanced ability to participate in those debates with one another in a more autobiographically and contextually grounded way.

A Comparison of Faculty Metaphors for Teaching: What the Guru Reveals about the Normative Dimensions of Religious Studies

Insofar as analyzing our own metaphors for teaching reveals not only how we engage students' images of us as guru and deceiver, but also the extent to which we might implicitly identify with those images, the exercise of comparing faculty metaphors for teaching opens up one avenue for mutually critical conversation about the place of theological or constructive or normative reflection in religious studies – not in the abstract, but with an awareness of how normative impulses actually shape our teaching in our own departments. We will illustrate how this happened in our own case, noting first how our own history as students of religion animates our pedagogical aims, then how a normative face of religious studies emerges out of our identification with some dimension of the guru expectation that students place upon us.

Normative Gestures from our History as Students of Religion

In thinking fully about how we respond to unchosen student metaphors for our teaching, we are faced with a professional question that may be more demanding than it initially appears: “Why did we take up the academic study of religion?” The existential engagements of the study of religion we ourselves began to experience as students may still unconsciously shape our practice as teachers – especially concerning our own ideologically laden intentions.

In Amy's case, her draw to theology and religious studies began with a guru-seeker's effort to make sense of early childhood experiences she would later learn to call mystical – senses of the multi-dimensionality of the universe evoked by a combination of the natural world and sacramental words, like a hymn or psalm or poem. As a child, she felt alone in these experiences and learned to hide them, for when she tried to describe them, others found them weird or unsettling. In college, before she switched from an English to a religious studies major, she remembers feeling afraid of being deceived into being non-religious in a religious studies classroom – then feeling happily liberated when she found that she did not need to pretend to give up her convictions in the classroom, even in a course on a religion other than her own. Instead, Amy recognized an opportunity to develop and express her convictions while nuancing them in conversation with other and opposing points of view, within and without her own religious tradition. Every religion's symbolics – and the symbolics of anthropology and philosophy as well – gave her an ever-richer vocabulary for the exciting process of articulating all she intuited that she wanted to say about living in light of ultimate questions. Working as a Christian theologian has never seemed at odds with teaching in a comparative religious studies environment; instead, the latter feeds constructive argument while making space for diverse sorts of arguments made by both religious insiders and outsiders.

By contrast, in our conversation, it became evident that John is enthusiastic about the content and approach to religious studies, even if he is not as neutral as he thinks he is. In dialogue with Amy, John gained clarity about when and how neutrality actually does – and does not – frame his approach to religious studies content. He is neutral towards the functional religious phenomena familiar to any sociologist of religion. For better or worse, because religions embedded in a given culture absorb the best and the worst of that culture, religions support social norms, provide social cohesion, interpret life cycle events such as birth, death, adulthood, and marriage, release existential dread through ritual, and make the world understandable. He is enthusiastic about guiding students into a more informed understanding of the function religions play on the global stage, even when that entails describing when these functions lend themselves to exclusivity, persecution, and violence.

When it comes to hegemonic, normative interpretations of Christianity, however, John's neutrality flies out the window. Without a doubt, early childhood experiences later came to shape his attitude towards religion and spirituality. John grew up in an extremely strict Christian Science family. His mother could be described as a fundamentalist Christian Scientist in that the family, which she led, went by the Christian Science textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, with no wavering from doctrine or straying from the path laid out by the religion's founder, Mary Baker Eddy. Because the central teaching in this religion calls for radical reliance on spiritual healing for all human woes, a Christian Scientist has to play spiritual hardball. There is no aspirin available for a headache, no trip to the emergency room for a broken bone, no shots to ward off whooping cough or measles, no Novocain when teeth must be drilled. Christian Science doctrine becomes all-consuming, defining identity and guiding all relationships.

Through our conversations about teaching metaphors, John came to recognize that, for most of his professional life, he has suppressed "outsider anger" towards mainstream Christian denominations. For in Christian Science, none of the basic teachings of the Nicene Creed hold true, yet the sacrifices a Christian Scientist makes in his or her efforts to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the Exemplar, are every bit as demanding as those any other Christian might undertake. For John, there can be an annoying arrogance in Christians who embrace the majority perspective, especially when it manifests in the classroom in the unguarded certainty of what he regards as kindergarten Christians who show up in his classroom, present Christianity as a monolithic religious truth, and dominate the discussion.

This attitude put forth by some Christians reflects what many of us in religious studies may dislike about institutionalized religion. In response, John tries to dismantle ill-informed, narrow, and unreflective stereotypes of Christianity or any other religion. Functioning in more of the guru mode, he uses what he calls the "fire analogy" to try to explain the relationship between spirituality and religion in the context of higher education. Human beings create education institutions to control the fire of knowledge; in the same way, people create religious institutions to control the fire of spirituality. Knowledge and spirituality are about crossing boundaries, stepping outside the lines, transcendence and transformation; educational and religious institutions are about control and stability. How do religious leaders control the fire of spirituality without snuffing out the flame? Believers learn the doctrines, follow the rituals by rote, put money in the coffers, but are they really in touch with the deep spiritual yearning that should be a part of any authentic religious undertaking? In wanting to be a guru for those students who hunger

for spiritual authenticity and do not find it in institutionalized religion, John identifies with a student whose voice is drowned out in the cacophony of childhood-shaped assurances built on a monolithic and exclusivist framing of Christianity.

Between Guru and Deceiver: Crossing the Theology-Religious Studies Divide

While comparing our pedagogical responses to being cast as guru or deceiver in the classroom, we were surprised to find that both of us in effect crossed over the theology-religious studies divide in ways that surprised us: Amy the theologian teaches in a more descriptively comparative mode; John the anti-theologian comes closer to advocating a normative view of religious phenomena. Set within the broader debates in the field about theology and religious studies, we know these are not unusual discoveries, but describing what we found by comparing our teaching metaphors immeasurably enriched – and rightly complicated – our own navigation of these debates.

John noticed that he is not nearly as neutral about organized religion as his metaphor of neutral enthusiasm suggests. He actually feels little discomfort with the metaphor of guru and there are some days in the classroom for which deceiver may be too weak to describe his underlying intent when it comes to the doctrinally bound religions of his students; on the worst days, Shiva, the destroyer, might be more like it. Thus, one ironic discovery we made is that John's approach to teaching actually carries a more normative theological dimension than Amy's, even though he explicitly frames his courses around religious studies methodologies (in opposition to theology – a distinction he makes early on in the classroom). A religious studies framework permits him to express how organized religion is problematic insofar as it confuses the cultural expressions of divinity with Divinity; from a theological perspective, he would say that all religions border on blasphemy in their unabashed willingness to ascribe conditions on access to God's love. When he draws on the social scientific analysis of religion, it is ultimately to showcase how dysfunctional limited theological interpretations of God, built on arbitrary culture-based conceptions, really are.

By contrast, Amy introduces theological ideas in a history of religions manner. Indeed, some of Amy's students sometimes think she belongs to whatever religion is being discussed, because she enters into the symbolic imagination of each one and invites students to think like a religious insider about debates interior to a given religious tradition, even if she also regularly poses the question: what other ways might there be of reading this dilemma – ways that someone might offer who did not share the assumptions of this religion? Amy does have her preferred perspectives, and she is sure that they or their outlines are voiced in the conversation, even if she does not directly claim them as her own. But by emphasizing a typology of religious arguments, by inviting students to practice theological reflection in acts of empathetic identification with worldviews not their own, Amy implicitly casts theology as a kind of speculative fiction – fiction not in the sense of being untrue – but like myth itself, as deeply true, or a way of truth-seeking about ultimate things. Just as stories and films can evoke a resonant sense of speaking rightly about something, so too there are many theological or religious symbolics that can address and orient the whole of our lives – many religious perspectives that we can imagine ourselves within as well as without, just as we can with the imaginative worlds of literature or film. While Amy is guru in that she midwives the process of students' sorting out their theological perspectives, and in that sense trains them to be better theologians, she is also deceiver in that her comparative approach resists establishing as normative in the classroom itself any one view.

Whereas Amy the theologian emphasizes a typology or plurality of approaches, like a historian of religion, John emphasizes a single type of religious consciousness that finds plural expression in the world of many religions. In this regard, John functions more like a theologian advocating in the classroom than Amy does – again, a startling recognition of role reversal. (Indeed, Amy has often teased John about being a closet theologian and urged him to write a book on a theology of Christian Science for those who break with Christian Science fundamentalism.) Only in thinking together about our metaphors for teaching did we realize just how much John's neutral enthusiasm does indeed carry its own fundamental agenda – fundamental in the sense of offering a one-sidedly normative view of religion, as theologians are often accused of doing. In his instinctive distrust of institutional religion, John reads all religions in the light of a kind of perennial philosophy, spun out in categories John developed and has built over the years. John presents what is valuable and what is troubling to students in light of those categories, in effect developing his own spiritual perspective, one that creatively reads all religious phenomena, but also interprets them in light of his own inventive rubric whose terms are less sociological than spiritual. In keeping with his Christian Science heritage, he ignores religious positions he regards as unreal – as mere manifestations of mortal mind – just as his parents would ignore as long as possible the physical sufferings that they attributed to the illusionary perspective of an unpurified consciousness. Where Amy amplifies insider perspectives, John largely ignores them – indeed, he does not care about them. His neutral enthusiasm means he fosters neither deep compassion nor hostile condemnation with regard to the particular views of religious insiders (with the exception of strident, naïve interpretations of Jesus' wisdom teachings he perceives in much of evangelical Christianity). Instead, he personally identifies with those who are spiritual but not religious, and develops a religious worldview that the spiritual-but-not-religious can call their own – then in effect universalizes it as the most adequate religious framework, one that is inclusivist in that it acclaims truth in many religious traditions, but itself offers the worldview with the most wide-ranging critical purchase. This discovery leads us to wonder how often those who identify as non-theological religious studies teachers are working with the guru-deceiver energy of the classroom in a way that implicitly seeks to debunk institutionalized religion and to offer a liberating and even full-fledged alternative theology of the spiritual-but-not-religious.

The fact that at least some of us operate with a covert, anti-institutional theology reinforces the notion that the difference between theology and religious studies is not as sharp as we thought. Indeed, as many have begun to observe in earnest (see for example, Cady and Brown 2002; Warriar and Oliver 2008; and Ford, Quash, and Soskice 2005), the line between religious studies and theology can be drawn in many ways, depending in part on the meaning ascribed to theology and to the place given for humanistic reflection as well as empirically-based social scientific interpretations of religion. Our joint reflection about metaphors for teaching fished out not only our sense of our placement upon a theology-religious studies spectrum as teachers, but also our notions about what theology itself might be within a religious studies classroom – and ultimately about what many faculty members fear to state in their course syllabi goals when they leave out naming the constructive spiritual searching that students themselves name as a goal. Is the worry that the course might be seen as advocating a particular religious school of thought – especially an authoritarian, doctrinal theology (even though religious insiders themselves express diverse theological perspectives)? Or is the worry that announcing space for any kind of constructive religious reflection (rooted or

not in a specific religion) renders religious studies too subjective and humanistic, insufficiently objective or scientific? By some accounts, certainly, both Amy and John are too theological (or humanistic) in their approaches, at least insofar as John gravitates towards a perennial philosophy and Amy permits students to articulate their own convictions, provided they engage broader traditions of religious thought. John's perennial philosophy may avoid confessional doctrinal forms of theology, but can also be cast within what some consider the still more theological than social scientific tradition of *Religionswissenschaft*, in which the "sacred" is "the nonsectarian essence common to all religions" (Chesnek 2002, 61–62, fn. 4); or as a form of "mythmaking in need of theorization" (McCutcheon 2002, 18); or as a "liberal ecumenical theology" (Cady 2002, 116).² Despite our own differences, we tend to share the perspective of colleagues, like Linell Cady, who suggest that religious studies classrooms should – and often simply do – involve a blend of "naturalistic explanations of religion as well as humanistic explorations and assessments of religion" (2002, 123). Interestingly, in at least one recent collection of essays about the nature of religious studies (Cady and Brown, 2002), those advocating a place for normative reflection in the religious studies classroom often cite student experience as a primary reason, instead of focusing on a claim about the appropriate nature of scholarly research.³ Indeed, student metaphors for religious studies teachers suggest that those favoring a religious studies free of the "polluting" effects of all theological discourse function as both deceiver and guru – openly advocating that students with religious convictions stand in need of conversion to a naturalistic, anti-theological stance.

It might be stretching the meaning of "theological" too far to claim that any pedagogical agenda with normative elements is covertly theological. However, in discerning and talking about our metaphors for teaching, all of us can refine our understanding of how we interpret and navigate the debate about a religious studies-theology divide. The ways we actually draw the line between religious studies and theology – on the ground of the classroom itself – might surprise us.

Both of us hope, and sense, that our pedagogical approaches productively engage students' tendencies to perceive us as gurus and deceivers by offering them a broader set of lenses through which to see and evaluate religious phenomena. But we must admit that the normative, theological impulses of a guru and deceiver may be present,

² Cady, citing the ideas of Timothy Fitzgerald. A liberal ecumenical theology arises when "myths and rituals across the globe are abstracted from their local cultural context and reinscribed in terms of the self's relationship to God – though more generically framed to preserve the illusion of cross-cultural universality" (2002, 116).

³ Cady claims that if the "quest to wipe out the theological presence that continues to inform religious studies" is ever "fully successful, the result would be an impoverished religious studies that was largely unresponsive to the clearly existential motivations and concerns that drive most of its students," (2002, 111). Paula Cooley places religious studies within the context of a liberal arts education that fosters students' active formation of values and culture-makers as citizens (2002, 181–183). Christopher Chesnek warns that failing to recognize the religious dimensions of the academic study of religion fosters "a kind of academic false consciousness in which scholars do not recognize the religious impact of their classes on students" (2002, 48). Although Chesnek believes that "the religious dimensions of religious studies should remain *incidental* to its critical, theoretical, and historical projects" (49), he acknowledges that bracketing "questions of religious truth" is not "theologically innocent," since "a naturalistic explanation makes the truth of religion redundant, incidental, and completely unnecessary," and students inevitably ponder the existential consequences (56–57).

in some combination, in all of our classrooms. Sorting out exactly how, in conversation with our colleagues, opens a space for critical reflection on our teaching, and on the nature of our field as a whole. Discussing how we each engage students' guru-deceiver expectations in a classroom might prove a fruitful exercise for other colleagues, especially those supposedly on opposite sides of the religious studies-theology divide. Standing before the mirror of students' perception of us as gurus (or failed gurus – deceivers) reveals how we each dance with and define normative dimensions of the study of religion in our own classrooms; standing before the mirror of our fellow teachers' various metaphors for that pedagogical dance exposes each of us to a creatively critical gaze upon the ways normative assumptions play out in our teaching. The implications of what we see for our teaching and for our students depend, of course, upon what we do with what we see – perhaps in a normative debate about the proper range of the kinds of normative reflection acceptable in our religious studies and theology classrooms. Here we have only suggested a practice for pedagogical reflection that may reveal our respective teaching aims to ourselves and to one another more clearly, as they actually occur in our classrooms.

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