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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



A Difficult Course Evaluation Comment

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Student course evaluations can be fraught. Many of my friends don't even look at theirs, either because it's so stressful/shameful or because they don't think there's anything to be learned in them. Course evaluations are, after all, only one (admittedly limited and often problematic) data point.

I do look at course evals, and I tell students I look at them. I think it's important to consider what the students—that is, the primary audience of and for our teaching—actually experience. That doesn't mean students get the final say. That doesn't mean we have to make every change they desire. But it does mean that I want to know how they experienced the course, and it's a bit hard for me to know without checking.

But it's not often that anything surprises me. It's usually the same old, same old. *This class is a lot of work. Too hard for a required course. Picky grader. Great prof. Class is fun. She really cares. I love our community.* I've read it all before.

But, last semester, I received something new, from a student in my upper-level Religion and Disability class:

Emily Gravett assigned course materials that allowed me to critically think about my views on

religion and disability. However, as someone who is Catholic the way she explained course material did not align with what all people of that religion believe.... The way she portrayed religious people made it appear as if religious people had it out for people with disabilities. This takes away why people are a part of a religion.... By what I read about this class I thought we were going to go in further in depth about the beliefs of religions. Instead, we read content from opinion-based sources that bashed everything about the religion. I think the way the content was addressed was very inconsiderate for people that belong to a religious group. If the whole class is about accepting others and taking in other points of view, why is every positive view of religion being bashed? Overall more theology should be incorporated with the course instead of throwing opinions out in lecture.

Now, this was just one comment. None of the other students said anything like it and I did have other religious (including Christian) students in that class, just like in any class I teach. Certainly, instructors shouldn't focus overly much on the one-offs or outliers in our course evaluations, especially the more negative ones. Yet I felt this student was expressing something important, which I wanted to take seriously—something perhaps other students had felt, but had not dared to express.

It's certainly never been my intention to make anyone feel badly about their religious convictions. I don't set out to dissuade anyone from their identities or commitments, just in the same way I wouldn't proselytize. It should also go without saying that I certainly don't represent religions as (very bad) monoliths—this is a key concept of the course, that religions are diverse—but clearly this student experienced the course as being very critical and negative toward religions, perhaps specifically her own.

And, I have to admit, she may not be wrong. Religions (on the whole, and in the specific) haven't been great on disability—and this was what the course reflected. The Bible often treats disability as something to be fixed/cured to demonstrate God's great power. Disability is understood as the result of bad karma by many Hindus. The choreography of Muslim daily prayer is rough or even prohibitive for some bodies. In this class, we read a piece in which a well-known disability scholar critiqued the pope—the head of this particular student's religion—for singling out a disabled man for a blessing. My guess is that this was the day I lost her.

So, what responsibility do I have to how religions are represented or come across? Do I need to couple every negative portrayal, example, or opinion with a positive one? Do I need to make sure I am presenting rosy or complimentary views of religion, regardless of topic? Do I need to be very selective or cautious with the critical pieces I assign? I admit there's a lot I don't know what to do about this student's concern.

Here's what I've tried to implement in my current Race and Religion course (which faces some similar issues, given the way that Christianity has influenced conceptions of race, in this country and globally):

- Added a statement to the syllabus, which I read aloud in class, that clarifies that I don't

agree with or endorse every single piece I assign

- Forecast that there will be some critiques of religions in this class—and acknowledge this may be (understandably) unsettling or even upsetting if you are a part of that religion
- Reminded students that learning can be uncomfortable and that exposure to ideas that you disagree with is an important (an essential??) part of development and life
- Introduced the notion of meta-cognition and asked them to reflect on certain activities or materials in terms of what they were thinking and feeling during them
- Continued to reiterate that religions aren't just one "thing" and that, of course, for all the bad, there's also quite a bit of good
- Assigned pieces on religion being both/neither good or bad, such as Appiah's TED Talk as well as material demonstrating a range or diversity within traditions
- Clarified that much of what we discuss in terms of religious people's behavior is also just human behavior—that is, that it's applicable to everyone; religious people are usually not different or special
- Emphasized to students that it's okay to stick with values, beliefs, or groups, including the religious, that are imperfect/critiqued (because nothing is perfect)
- Continued to offer caveats when leading a session that was more based on criticism, such as "of course reasonable people will disagree" or "this may be interpreted differently within the community" or "obviously this doesn't represent the whole"
- Assigned more companion (or both-side) pieces for every topic (e.g., "what is Critical Race Theory?" as well as a critique of Critical Race Theory)

But I am still grappling with this issue. The reality is that religions aren't all good (whatever we even mean by this). Robert Orsi, one of my favorite scholars, who grew up Catholic and has written extensively about the study of religion, has written powerfully on just how disgusted he is by the history of Catholicism, that "in the long perspective of human history, religion has done more harm than good and that the good it does is inextricable from the harm." I think I would be doing students themselves a harm if I pretended otherwise.

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