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Accepting Ambiguity: A Conscious Style of Course Design and Comparison for Teaching New Religious Movements

Lydia Willsky, Fairfield University

For many undergraduates, engaging with the undefined and the ambiguous can be uncomfortable. It is far simpler when ideas or people fit into neat categories like “good,” “evil,” “true” or “false.” Yet reality is rarely this neat, particularly in the study of new religious movements (NRMs). This article presents a model of conscious course design focused on revising the narratives surrounding certain controversial NRMs and on creative alternative comparative contexts, both of which help to guide students away from a position of mutual exclusivity and towards the notion that the people involved in NRMs are neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but a mixture of both. I employ William Perry’s scheme of intellectual and ethical development to illustrate students’ progress from a “fully dualistic” point of view to a more relativistic, or less “mutually exclusive” worldview.¹

Establishing “Mutual Exclusivity”: A Strategy of Course Design and Assessment

During the first week of most of my courses, students write a short paper addressing their perceptions and presuppositions about the given topic of the course. Sometimes I provide them with prompts such as, “What is the ideal relationship between religion and society? Does America achieve this ideal?” At other times I have them poll their peers about a given issue. These papers serve as points of departure for the course and as excellent assessment tools at the conclusion of the course—a way of showing them, “look how far you have come in your own understanding of religion.” In my course, “New Religious Movements,” taught at Whittier College in Spring 2014, I asked the students to read and respond to John Barbour’s (2013) book, *Renunciation*, a fictionalized account inspired loosely by Barbour’s own time as a member of 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization, a Sikh-derived new religion).² The book traces the story of two brothers, one who is a member of an NRM and the other a PhD student of religious studies, and their respective grappling with their own religious identities, as well as the younger brother’s conversion to the fictional Bhakti Dharma. Students were asked to contemplate their own reactions and responses to NRMs using the novel as a lens. Among the questions I used to prompt my students were the following: “How do you perceive the leaders and the members of NRMs? What characteristics do you believe leaders and members of NRMs possess, respectively? Why?” Their answers, with one notable exception, all pegged leaders as master manipulators and followers as the manipulated—a fully dualistic point of view.³

At the end of the course, I asked the students to reread their *Renunciation* papers and assess whether their views of NRMs had changed, if they had, in what ways, and if they had not, why. In reflecting upon his answers to these questions, one of my students responded that he did not necessarily feel any differently toward NRMs as institutional entities, but that his perspective on the leaders who begin such movements and the followers who join them had changed. He noted that the pivotal shift in his perception of NRM members from mindless automatons bewitched by a charismatic leader or false

promise to active and engaged religious persons with their own agency came during our unit on the Branch Davidians. David Koresh, noted this student, was the best example of someone who was both good *and* bad. He said it was the Davidians that allowed him to understand and abandon the concept of mutual exclusivity and move toward a position where leaders and followers of NRMs could be manipulating and manipulated, respectively, as well as genuinely devoted believers in a religious message. I had purposefully placed the unit of the Branch Davidians not with its constant companion, The Peoples Temple, but in the segment of the course entitled “Alternative and Millennial Christianities.” In a unit that included Latter-day Saints, Christian Science, and Transcendentalism, I sought to show Waco as the culmination of a long history of experimentation in reading, interpreting, even adding to the Bible.⁴ I hoped to change the narrative about Waco to allow the students to push the bounds of mutual exclusivity by simply changing the historical and theological context in which it often appears—as Jonestown redux. Introducing new comparisons and crafting a story that showed the Branch Davidians to be active participants in a religious lineage founded on biblical “language,” helped students to see them as genuine believers and active agents rather than the manipulated and the manipulator.

Finding a Common Language: The Branch Davidians and the Theory of “Relativity”

I had first encountered students’ struggle with moral ambiguity and mutual exclusivity—the stage that Perry refers to as “full dualism” (discussed below)—within NRMs in general and the Branch Davidians, specifically, in an introductory course with the rather broad title of “Religion and Society.” The course examined how various religions, religious people, and religious identities interacted and engaged with American society across four primary themes: the relationship of church and state; religious protest and social movements; religion and “the law”; and religion and popular culture. The class on the Branch Davidians stood in the third unit, religion and the law, a unit devoted to examining the limits of pluralism in the legal system and in engagements with law enforcement. Given the fact that my students had little training (at least in my course) in dealing with NRMs and, therefore, hoping to give them point of reference, I purposefully juxtaposed the Lakota Sioux Ghost Dancers with the Branch Davidians on the syllabus. Unsurprisingly, the students were overtly sympathetic to the Lakota Sioux and their apocalyptic, militaristic ghost dance and overtly suspicious of the similarly apocalyptic, militaristic Branch Davidians. The Lakota Sioux, after all, were a historically oppressed minority whose harsh treatment at the hands of the US government is accepted as historical fact. And the Branch Davidians? Well, they were entrapped and led to their deaths by a megalomaniacal leader—hardly another Wounded Knee. In the particular stage of intellectual development described by Perry as “full dualism,” many students believe that “truth and falsity are easily distinguished” and that “the world is divided into those who know and those who don’t.” Filtered through narrow portrayals in the media, my students came equipped with their own settled understanding of what was good and what was bad. What came out during these two days of class was that students tended to believe that the Lakota Sioux were the “good” victims reacting to the “bad” government, whereas the Branch Davidians were the “bad” antagonists to “good” government agents trying to remove a dangerous man from his deluded flock.

It was this sort of dualism that led to the crucial moment in the class when one of my students drew a comparison between the Lakota Sioux and the Branch Davidians. He expressed empathy for the Sioux massacred at Wounded Knee, noting that they were victims of an oppressive government, unwilling to “speak their language,” which he then contrasted to the situation between David Koresh and FBI negotiators at Waco. Unknowingly, this student had offered an entry point into my particular thesis of that class, namely that the tragedy at Waco was a result of a similar unwillingness to speak the language of this NRM. To illustrate this breakdown in communication, I came to class equipped with a handout of the transcript between David Koresh and the FBI Negotiator on April 18, 1993, the day before the fire. I

had planned originally to have the students read the transcript toward the end of the class, but this student precipitated the need to address this concept of a “different language.” I hoped with this unscripted segue and my handout to show that just like the Lakota Sioux, the Branch Davidians, and Koresh especially, were true believers and moral agents whose own “language” was woefully ignored and to devastating consequences.

The greater goal of this particular exercise was to have students move from a fully dualistic to a relativistic view of the Branch Davidians. In Perry’s scheme, separating full dualism and relativism is the interim stage of “multiplicity.” Multiplicity involves a transition to the idea that established authorities may not “have all the answers” and may not be wholly righteous, either. This stage involves a realization that there may or may not be any definitely right answers, but rather, that everyone perceives situations and ideas differently, thus leading to vastly different interpretations and responses. This stage can lead to open rebellion against established authorities and the view that all opinions are “equally valid.” As Perry notes, this can lead to the filtration of students’ ideas through their own experience—there are no facts but those that make sense within my own scope of experience. Generally, students’ experiences with NRMs have been either nonexistent or simply based on what they have seen or read through various media. Thus, their opinions during this stage do not necessarily change drastically. However, the notion that one’s experiences help to shape perception does open the door to the next stage, relativism.

The tag line used to describe relativism is, “It all depends.” The notion that context matters, that certain situations are not necessarily straightforward, and that the concepts of good and evil are relative arise during this stage of development. All sides are examined and the notion of “truth” is examined, not as an absolute category, but as something that can mean something different to each person. “This is possibly the most uncomfortable of all the stages,” writes Perry and yet, I would argue, one of the most productive for the study of NRMs. I have found that one of the hardest realities that students must cope with is the notion that there might not be a right or wrong answer. Asking students to exist in the liminal and to allow for all possibilities seems to go against some primal, human need to categorize and define. It is certainly easier to categorize David Koresh as bad, but this is neither the most accurate nor the most helpful characterization for trying to understand the man and his religious community.

Like all the best laid plans, my lesson for that day was delightfully hijacked by a much more productive conversation about the importance of understanding religious people on their own terms and in their own language. The comparison between the Lakota Sioux and the Branch Davidians helped students to reshape their schema about both groups, to see them as sharing a similar story—one that highlighted the tragic results of miscommunication with the government. My students were better able to understand (if not whole-heartedly accept) that the Branch Davidians were whole people with an active investment in their faith and with the same flawed humanity as the initially much more sympathetic Lakota Sioux.

Of course, it was unrealistic to hope that in 50 minutes students would achieve full relativism. At best, my students recognized (intellectually at least) that there were similarities between Wounded Knee and Waco, between the Lakota Sioux and the Branch Davidians. However, the two lessons on the Lakota Sioux and the Branch Davidians helped me to create a model of course design and pedagogy for my future courses on NRMs. What was clear to me was that structuring the course to allow for this particular comparison enabled my students and me to reshape the story of the Davidians and to establish the possibility that “good” and “bad” were not mutually exclusive categories when describing the people of Waco. Comparison seems to be a very simple tool, but as the discipline of comparative religions reveals, comparison is a useful tool for creating a mental and emotional bridge between concepts that seem foreign, strange, or bad and concepts that are familiar, comfortable, or good. For

example, the Branch Davidians become far more human, relatable, and sympathetic when compared to the Lakota Sioux. In the case of this class, this impromptu comparison was crucial in establishing a nuanced, scholarly stance toward this controversial subject matter among my students.

Making New Stories, Creating New Dialogue

I often tell my students that “stories matter.” As teachers, we are storytellers, but with the added obligation of crafting the most inclusive and balanced story possible. Further, as much as we may struggle against this at times, we cannot lecture our students into accepting a particular point of view; rather, they must become invested in the story before they can internalize it. We can aid them, however, in interpreting and understanding a given story. What I have found in my experiences teaching NRMs is that syllabus creation is crucial. Placement of certain NRMs away from their more conventional pairings and in new comparative contexts opens up new channels of discourse. In one course, avoiding the juxtaposition of the Branch Davidians and Jonestown and instead placing Waco in the context of a narrative that focused on a lineage of Bible-minded people, helped to direct our discussion away from the violence of cults and toward the millennialist interpretive tradition from which David Koresh drew. In the other course, setting the Branch Davidians in comparison to the Lakota Ghost Dancers helped students better understand the two groups as closely related in terms of their religious language and anti-government posture, rather than as crazy people and poor “Indian” victims, respectively.

Creating a new narrative and a new comparative context, in turn, enables students to regard Koresh from a different angle, one that complicates the traditional narrative and also urges them to reconsider their more dualistic understanding of Waco. In other words, carefully selecting which topics come before a controversial subject in the syllabus can fundamentally affect students’ perceptions and can even help them adopt a more scholarly and objective stance—a practice that could be applied to courses on NRMs more specifically, and courses on religion or history more broadly. Though not all of my students fully accepted the idea that Koresh was *both* a prophet *and* a man who used his power for personal gain, several did move toward Perry’s fourth and final stage of development, “commitment,” where a student commits to a particular set of moral beliefs, which in this case this meant committing to accept that the labels of “good” or “bad” were problematic categories. Moving beyond labels and accepting ambiguity is not always the most comfortable intellectual space in which to exist, but it is often generates constructive destruction and is particularly helpful for students engaging religions both strange and new.

Notes

¹ The scheme is also found in William G. Perry, Jr., 1970. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. Perry’s fourfold scheme can also be found on the following website: <http://www.cse.buffalo.edu/~rapaport/perry.positions.html>.

² John D. Barbour, 2013. *Renunciation*. OR: Resource Publications.

³ The one student who provided a more nuanced answer had actually participated in two NRMs herself and came to class with a tremendous level of sympathy and openness toward NRMs.

⁴ I used the same sort of placement to change the narrative around Jonestown, placing it in the context of utopian movements or religions of protest, to provide intellectual context for many of the ideas of Jim

Jones.

Resources

Barbour, John D. 2013. *Renunciation*. OR: Resource Publications.

Perry, William G. 1970. *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.