



TEACHING TACTIC

The Class Masterpiece

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The context

First week of a lower-level Introduction to the Study of Religion (small classes or large lectures with discussion sections).

The pedagogical purpose(s)

To help students see “religions” as dynamic processes developing through time, highlight how religion may be internally incoherent, and to encourage creative interaction.

Description of the strategy

I start by drawing a simple house (rectangle surmounted by a triangle) on the board and suggest that we view any religion as a creative, communal enterprise. Handing the marker to a student, I ask them to add something appropriate (door, windows, etc.) and then to pass the marker to their neighbor to add something else, until everyone has a turn. While the drawing develops, I turn to other topics slated for that day while keeping an eye on the drawing process. When everyone has drawn, I call attention to the [class masterpiece](#), noting how it morphed from a sketch to an elaborate scene, pointing out that we can still discern the original.

Besides being easy to draw, a house is a familiar, commonplace object. On a deeper level, a house provides the setting for much of daily life, can be altered or remodeled when the need arises, and often engenders emotional attachment. And of course, various religions employ the metaphor (a temple is the House of God, Muslims speak of the House of Islam, etc.). Students get a sense of how, like the drawing, a religion develops more associatively than logically; this provides fodder for class discussion. For example, some features (like flowers blooming next to a snowman) may clash with each other yet still make sense in that they depict things we associate with a house (landscaping, signs of kids living there, etc.). Similarly, religions may teach that eternal life should be our paramount concern while encouraging this-worldly practices (offerings to support the clergy and earn merit, etc.). In addition, some features may reflect [current events](#); for example, a student once drew a hurricane that was approaching our campus. Such elements can spark reflection on how certain features of a religion (like prophecies of persecution) are rooted in very specific historical circumstances. To what extent are certain things essential (versus accidental) to a religion?

Students enjoy this exercise. It permits them to be funny or to show off their artistic skills and it also sets up a reflection paper (1-2 pages) about how they anticipate the course changing their understanding of religion. Instructors can shorten this exercise by asking for volunteers or randomly picking students (8-10). This saves time but the drawings are simpler and the point about the creative and communal nature of religious development can get lost. It's also less fun!

Image 1



Image 2



Why it is effective

This assignment gets students involved in a shared endeavor directly connected to an abstract and theoretical idea and adds a playful aspect to what many consider a dry subject. Most importantly, it vividly illustrates aspects of religion that are easy to overlook: religions change over time, often through the accretion of details that may have little relation to the original situation.