

TEACHING TACTIC

What We Talk About When We Talk About “Religion”

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The context

I use this tactic during the first week of an introductory religious studies course, which typically has around twenty-five students, though it could be used in any course that deals with theories of religion.

The pedagogical purpose

Most courses in religious studies begin with the question of how to define “religion.” I developed this tactic to address the dissatisfaction my students have experienced with one familiar approach—parsing a pregiven list of popular or academic definitions of religion for their shortcomings. Most students want to dive into the particular beliefs and practices of different groups, but abstract theorizing at the beginning of the course squelches their enthusiasm. This tactic begins reflection on the limitations of religion as a category in a different way: it invites students to generate and critique their own definitions based on concrete examples they themselves choose.

Description of the strategy

Before class, students walk around town with this question in mind: “Where do you see signs of religion taking place in the spaces around you?” After their survey, students (1) make a list of their examples and (2) describe one in more detail by answering these questions: “What makes this an example of religion? How would you define religion in general if this were the only example we had?” Virtually every student will name familiar examples: the university chapel, the 60’ war memorial cross, the biblical text of the school motto, and so forth. Others, however, will include not-so-obvious possibilities: the American flag flying across the street from the chapel, or the famed football field.

In class, each student introduces their list in turn and explains how they would define religion in general using only one of their key examples. I put their definitions on the board in the form of “Religion is _____.” We then work through each definition to see which of the examples on the board, if any, fit.

We note how each definition excludes things other definitions include. We also compare the different student lists to see what, if anything, these particular examples have in common that would justify putting them all in the same category. We conclude by asking if we could ever define religion in a way that would cover all our examples and, if not, what that means for how we should talk about religion the rest of the semester.

Why it is effective

This exercise illustrates in a concrete way the difficulty of coming up with a single definition of religion. It provides a smooth introduction to the work of description and classification because it begins with examples and ideas students are already familiar with: their own. Many student-generated definitions also echo some scholarly definitions and this provides an opportunity to introduce unfamiliar scholars and their concepts. More generally, the exercise provides a touchstone that can be returned to throughout the rest of the course. Whenever students make broad generalizations about religion or assume religion is categorically separate from culture, politics, ethics, economics, etc., we can recall the limits of our first effort to talk about religion.