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Lemons into Lemonade: Interfaith and Contextualized Pedagogy as Adaptation to Twenty-first Century Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In response to shifting demographics, financial strain, and an existential crisis about their value and place in the twenty-first century world, small liberal arts colleges are changing—some choosing to close while others make drastic changes to curricular and programmatic offerings to demonstrate innovation and adaptation. This paper will present a case study of these tensions and responses through discussion of one college's simultaneous commitment to interfaith engagement and discontinuance of the religion major and minor. This reality crystalizes the tension and disconnect between the curricular and civic projects of interreligious studies and interfaith engagement. This article explores a pragmatic solution that intentionally integrates these two in a manner that promises to provide both an effective response to a budget-driven problem and a potential new paradigm for curricular and co-curricular integration and a contextualized approach to the study of religion.

KEYWORDS

interfaith, interreligious engagement, cities, immigration, community-based learning, curriculum

As the field of interfaith and interreligious studies has grown within the academy (as chronicled by Peace [2013]), so too has resistance from within the field of religious studies.¹ Recognition of the need to prepare students for an increasingly pluralistic world and the particular possibility of the college environment for such skill building

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and community creation finds friction against fears of the ways in which anything smacking of devotionism might soften the intellectual rigor of religious studies as a field. Recent annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion have showcased both this growth and resistance.

Though the challenges to the field of religious studies at a time when higher education is in crisis are very real, such critiques speak more to anxieties within the field than they do accurate or well-reasoned arguments for caution. In a time when college budgets are in the red, enrollments are down, and religious studies programs are often understaffed and struggling to justify their existences, such territorialism should not be surprising. Moves toward vocational skills, professional training, and marketable majors have put religious studies scholars in a defensive posture relative to both administrators and each other. What the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2019) has termed the “Looming Enrollment Crisis” (with a special data and case study driven report) has led to experimentation, rapid change, and fear throughout academia.

In some ways that defensiveness is warranted. The race to capture the declining enrollments has led many colleges to embrace enrollment strategies that shift higher education in troubling ways. The focus on cultivating a learning experience that builds on all the latest psychological research for retention or even the shift to interdisciplinary and problem-based learning has the potential to weaken not only the integrity of the field of religious studies but of all disciplines. With shrinking budgets, programs such as religious studies that struggle to articulate a clearly defined and lucrative career path risk facing reduced resources and marginalization. With challenges coming from these many sides, maintaining the integrity of the discipline remains key.

And yet, what I want to suggest here is that some openness to these new pedagogies and focus on skills makes it easier for religious studies programs to clarify their value proposition and creates new ways for our students to connect with the material of our discipline in a way that is transformative and lasting. This essay is a defense of the continued conversation and mutual fertilization between the academic field of religious studies and the emerging field of interfaith and interreligious dialogue and engagement. Moreover and more specifically, it argues that interfaith pedagogy utilized in the study of religion in context offers students grounded religious literacy combined with practical skills that are more useful than ever in an increasingly diverse and fractured world.

This argument emerges from a very particular context with very particular challenges: a small liberal arts college where the reality means sustaining majors in programs of sometimes one or two faculty members, teaching well beyond our expertise, and often teaching classes mostly full of students for whom the class will be their one and only academic exposure to religion. In this context, we are not usually preparing our students for PhD programs in religious studies. We are preparing students to be school teachers, nurses, nonprofit workers, and the like. And we have the potential to teach them the skills and knowledge they need to be able to communicate and cooperate across religious difference. In this way, the integration of interfaith pedagogies and contextualized study of religion into religious studies courses is both good teaching and an inevitable means of adaptation in times of austerity.

These skills need not be taught in a course with that explicit and singular focus. Rather, they can be integrated into a variety of topics that introduce rigorous content and increase religious literacy. What follows is an engagement with the current debate in the field through presentation of one such course—a course that grew out of necessity in a time of financial strain and program discontinuance. This course utilizes the very techniques, pedagogical strategies, and intellectual and moral commitments that characterize the growing field of interfaith and interreligious studies. While these ideas are not mine alone and are supported by a growing literature on pedagogy and innovation in the emerging field of interfaith and interreligious studies, my case study provides a unique context for application in a small liberal arts college facing difficult programmatic cuts (see, for example, Patel, Peace, and Silverman 2018; Wertheimer 2015; Peace, Rose, and Mobley 2012; Larson and Shady 2016). Moreover, this case study will offer practical advice for how other religious studies faculty might engage with these themes in their classrooms. It is a call for a more rigorous engagement with students’ religious identities and the lived religion that surrounds us, not only in our cities but in our classrooms, as essential to truly beginning to bridge religious difference and graduate students who are more likely to embody and enact the values our institutions espouse.

A Tale of Too Many Courses

To explore the possibilities of interfaith and interreligious pedagogies in religious studies broadly, I turn now to the very particular context of my academic journey and specific institutional context. While not shared by all, my experiences in two very different institutional contexts and over a decade of adaptation and program development touch on many of the evolving issues in higher education in terms of the pressures of recruitment, enrollment, employment preparation, financial strain, and the demand for applicability. These experiences also highlight the importance of flexibility and adaptability on the job during these turbulent times in higher education.

Coming out of graduate school, I understood the field of religious studies to be made up of scholars trained with relatively narrow expertise and slightly broader teaching scope. Part of my training involved serving as a teaching assistant in a variety of courses, many outside my sub-discipline of American religious history. My first teaching assistantship involved dense material that students had a hard time approaching. I quickly found the utility of my role as synthesizer and explainer and was able to fulfill this role by staying even just one step ahead of my students. This gave me a confidence to teach more broadly that I carried well beyond graduate school. Needing to find employment wherever I could in my final years of graduate school, I taught even more broadly still in a local community college and in my university's adult education program.

Upon beginning my first tenure-track position, I balanced that understanding of the field with a pragmatic understanding of the need for flexibility. Moving from a school with a religious studies program of nearly thirty faculty to a religion program of two at Goucher College required quite a shift in perspective. While both programs offered a major and minor in religion or religious studies, these programs were understandably very different. Because I was a new hire and not a replacement, I understood my role as not only teaching courses already on the books but as someone who would add to the curriculum and broaden the major. I broadened and broadened and developed new courses each semester out of a sense of obligation to serve our students with as wide a curriculum as possible. Without knowing any different, I could not imagine a religion major without something like the breadth of offerings I enjoyed as an undergraduate and graduate student. That is how this historian of American religion ended up teaching Introduction to Islamic Thought, Theories of Religion, and New Testament and Early Christianity. Hindsight is twenty-twenty but it is hard now not to marvel at my naivety in thinking the work of thirty might be done by two.

Personal fatigue, strong advice from the Provost following my pre-tenure review, and sage advice from an external review of our program suggested that an extended course rotation and plentiful offerings were not the best use of our time. It not only stretched us too thin but made it impossible to regularly repeat courses—something necessary for word of mouth to help populate our courses with new students and for current students to predict and benefit from a regular two-year rotation. We rewrote the major yet again with a narrower scope. Our major would be rewritten twice more in the subsequent years to allow for more interdisciplinary inquiry (for example, integrating courses outside religion as a way to ease our course burden and expand student choice) and to reflect a college-wide move from 3-credit to 4-credit courses.

As my course rotation narrowed and I worked to include courses that more directly reflected my training and research interests, I slowly developed a different pedagogical perspective. Coming to terms with the reality that most of our students would not enjoy the breadth of courses I did as a student, I knew they did enjoy smaller class sizes and closer mentorship relationships with our faculty than most students at large institutions experience. For those not in the major or minor, the smaller course offerings mattered little as they would likely only take one or two religion courses in their life. The focus moved from coverage of content toward mentorship and the development of skills that could be applied to new contexts, new knowledge, and that will allow them to fill in any missing areas independently, as they are motivated to do so.

The shift from discrete knowledge to skills has been much theorized in this era of smart phones and instant knowledge.² While interfaith engagement is easier to integrate in some ways into an Introduction to Religion or Introduction to World Religions classroom than a class on biology or psychology, for example, the integration is very much possible. And, if you

2 This reality of contemporary teaching has often been mentioned by Goucher's former president José Bowen who oversaw the curricular change chronicled above and has written and spoken extensively on the new landscape of higher education. His techniques for teaching in this new environment are chronicled in his book (Bowen 2012).

are hoping to advance interfaith initiatives on a small liberal arts campus where there are few religious studies faculty and courses, this is not only possible but necessary. Much of that work for other disciplines can come less from the content of the course and more from the framing of class discussions and assignments. No matter the topic, people approach the material with particular worldviews, with particular life circumstances, and with particular predispositions that shape their engagement with the course. This is true not just in relation to religious worldview but also to their gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and so forth. And, whereas faculty have traditionally lectured in a one-size-fits-all format, classes in a small liberal arts college are small and structured such that individual personalities are able to emerge and those distinct worldviews come clear.

In this context, the challenge for the professor is to create an environment in which individuals feel comfortable bringing those identities to the table without having to compartmentalize. Faculty can also communicate to students that not only is it not detrimental to learning and class discussion for students to bring their full selves but it enhances the learning and the engagement—not just for that student but for the entire classroom. Indeed, in discussions about diversifying college admissions and thereby college student bodies and faculty, one of the primary goals is not just equal access and civil rights but also a realization that *all* students benefit when there are diverse perspectives and backgrounds in the classroom. The religion student benefits from there being a variety of Muslim students in a class on Islam and the pre-med student will benefit from having Jehovah's Witnesses in a class on patient care. But, as Interfaith Youth Core's Eboo Patel (2016) notes, diversity is just a description; it is only active and thoughtful engagement with diversity that leads to pluralism rather than factionalism.³ In the case of the classroom, it is one thing to know that the diversity exists. It is another to actively engage and integrate that diversity into the learning environment. Without that active engagement, students may feel isolated or alienated in their difference or, at the least, may compartmentalize and leave those parts of themselves at the door when they enter the classroom.

These commitments manifest in unique ways in the context of a small program at a small liberal arts college at a time when religion frequently serves as the root of injustice and the motivation behind fights for justice the world over. Religious illiteracy and religiously-motivated bigotry divide communities and result in personal and institutional violence at home and abroad. At my small liberal arts college I am not training students for a long career in academia. In my career I may have only a handful of students who go on from my classes to graduate school in religious studies. Instead, I have the vital role of preparing students to engage with religious diversity in whatever field they choose and as citizens of the world. These future nonprofit workers, teachers, and nurses will encounter religious diversity in their daily work, in friendships, and at the grocery store. They will encounter religious texts and rituals and hear horror stories related to religious difference on the news. I can give them the skills to engage with that news critically, encounter the other charitably, and build bridges in their daily lives.

As I began to integrate this perspective into my courses through direct discussion of interreligious dialogue and infusion of geographical, historical, and cultural context and social justice into every class, changes at my institution further encouraged these efforts. I had the pleasure of attending an Interfaith Youth Core Interfaith Leadership Institute (2015) in Chicago with Goucher's Chaplain, Director of Hillel, and several students. Soon thereafter, we participated in a multiyear IFYC grant to assess Goucher's current interfaith resources and to develop a plan for the future. Under the mentorship of our Chaplain, Goucher students started an Interfaith Council that led discussions and held a variety of events. Our administration recognized the value of this work in fostering community and encouraging the growing religiously-diverse population on campus by announcing plans to build an Interfaith Center connected to the Chapel ([Goucher 2021d](#)). Fundraising efforts began and plans developed for the design and use of this space—practical and needed for the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, but also symbolic in its location at the center of the small campus. While some faculty colleagues questioned why I, a faculty member, was partnering with Student Affairs in this way, most understood and supported this move to recognize students as whole beings who bring their identities to the classroom and learn in a variety of contexts during their college careers. Several colleagues participated in faculty workshops I designed to encourage interreligious engagement in a variety of disciplines. Campus partners grew in numbers as our student body continued to diversify. The momentum was moving in the right direction.

³ This understanding of the differences between diversity as description and interfaith dialogue and pluralism as positive engagement with difference is at the heart of Eboo Patel's book *Interfaith Leadership* (2016).

A Pragmatic Response to a Painful Loss

Even as my pedagogy and course offerings increasingly built on a strong engagement with the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and excitement about growing religious diversity on campus and institutional commitment to engaging religious diversity as a site for learning and growth, the college was undergoing extensive change. With new leadership came a new general education curriculum and reorganization of academic departments into interdisciplinary centers.⁴ Building projects combined with declining enrollment to create a financial strain that was partly addressed through a process of “program prioritization.” After the creation of rubrics, crafting of narratives, and examination of admissions, financial, and enrollment data, this process resulted in the discontinuation of several majors and minors, religion included. These cuts were covered by local and national media, including this *Inside Higher Ed* article ([Flaherty 2018b](#)).

As happens in times of disruption, several faculty and staff left voluntarily, and such was the case in the religion program. After remaining alive through the use of visiting professorships, the discontinuation left me the only religion professor on campus. Though I no longer had a major or minor in my discipline, I was able to retain my job thanks to the protections of tenure and the continued utility of my classes to other programs. Thankfully, though the particular metrics of the program prioritization process rendered the religion major no longer necessary, the institution recognized that religion remained an important subject for study, if primarily in the context of other disciplines. My tenure home moved to American studies, in keeping with the American focus of my research and teaching, though I retained “religion” in my title as well, to reflect my training and professional commitments.

The loss of my program has taken time to absorb and I continue to believe strongly in the importance of religion as a driver of culture, social justice, and identity and the vitality of this study to a liberal arts education. In part due to a desire to see the thick dust of change settle and in part due to my own need to dramatically reorient my understanding of my role at Goucher, it took over a year before I was able to regroup and imagine what the study of religion might look like post program prioritization. After mourning what was lost, I chose to focus on these changes as a catalyst for a change already underway in my courses. I am trying, you might say, to make lemonade out of lemons and, much as my institution has on a campus-wide level, I have been trying to use this unfortunate turn of events as motivation to more fully implement innovative and nontraditional pedagogies for religious studies.

Without a major and minor to defend and sustain—and I say defend because, as all religious studies academics know, such programs are often small, are not career focused or outcome driven, and thus are often under fire—I had an opportunity to teach more freely the courses for which I was trained and in ways that fit the needs of my students and this historical moment. As a (discontinued) program of one at an institution ready for innovation in response to contemporary challenges, I felt supported to change and adapt my curriculum, even if the original impetus for this quick adaptation was negative. What resulted was an opportunity to engage in interfaith pedagogy more directly and to focus on classes that put religion in geographical, historical, and cultural context, and that reflected my own research interests and particular training.

This shift began in earlier courses but has been more fully implemented in a course first offered in fall 2019: Religions of Baltimore. This course is offered in American studies and replaced Introduction to World Religions, which was a foundational course of the religion major. The course’s most basic goal remains same—religious literacy—but it adds context and additional learning objectives. The course objectives are as follows:

Throughout the semester, students will encounter world religions from historical, sociological, and theological perspectives. These encounters will reveal the family resemblances, commonalities, and disjunctures between these religions and how these characteristics match or challenge the religious paradigms of the Western world. Particular attention to how these religions arrived in Baltimore, developed over time, and manifest today will lead to exploration of immigration (forced and voluntary), redlining and other forms of discrimination, and faith-inspired social justice work around immigrants and refugees. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

⁴ For an *Inside Higher Ed* profile of the changes, see Flaherty ([2018a](#)). For information on the curriculum itself, see Goucher College ([2021b](#)). For information on Goucher’s Academic Centers see Goucher College ([2021a](#)).

1. Describe the worldviews under study and their basic beliefs, rituals, and organizing structures.
2. Explore how these religions have found a home in the Baltimore area and identify the contributing factors to various types of differences, inequalities, and power structures.
3. Analyze how the characteristics of each worldview allow it to find welcome or resistance in the U.S. generally and Baltimore specifically, and what this suggests about religious privilege and assumptions in this country and city.
4. Use primary sources from a variety of religious traditions to explore belief systems and current societal engagement.
5. Plan a community event to facilitate dialogue amongst community groups engaging directly with religion and immigration.

Below, I narrate three of the pedagogical shifts that manifest in this course: engagement with identity in the classroom, presenting religion as always contextualized, and direct discussion of social justice as frustrated by and forwarded by religion. I will discuss each concept in turn, followed by discussion of concrete ways in which these emphases manifest in my classroom.

Identity in the Classroom

Goucher College has a long history of religious diversity and a commitment to welcoming such diversity in its student body. Founded by John Goucher as Baltimore Woman's College in 1885 to provide higher education for the women of Baltimore who were not allowed to attend Johns Hopkins University, Goucher has long had a substantial Jewish population—currently between one quarter and one third of the population. The college now attracts an eclectic mix of students, many of whom are progressive and few of whom are actively religious. Though we have increasing numbers of students who identify as Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh, the majority of our students do not identify with a particular religion but instead might describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious, or spiritual seekers. As a result, the building of an Interfaith Center or the framing of events as Interfaith engagements have the potential to alienate many of our students.

In our early interfaith programming on campus, we have tried a number of strategies to address this issue. For example, we designed discussions to allow for multiple voices. In an interfaith dialogue organized by Chaplain Cynthia Terry, a variety of faculty picked texts from different religious traditions on a common theme. In one case, that theme was “suffering.” The handout did not identify the texts by tradition or by faculty member. The faculty provided no introduction or context for them but jumped right into reading the texts in turn and reacting. Though some texts were clearly drawn from a particular tradition, this method allowed all students an opportunity to respond to a common text. It removed the layers of power and hierarchy that can often stifle conversation by eliminating the authority in the room (the faculty member or the representative of the religion under question). We were all addressing the text from the same starting point and responding strictly to what we read. Moving through the texts, we all began to see disjunctures and connections that reveal the commonalities of the human experience of suffering and the varieties of philosophical and theological responses to it.

Engaging the nonreligious in interfaith dialogue is a pragmatic necessity, not only on a college campus with a significant nonreligious population, but also in a world in which the number of unaffiliated is rising steadily, particularly amongst the young adults. It is also necessary because these voices are an important part of the conversation. In his memoir *Faithiest*, Chris Stedman (2012) makes a compelling case for the importance of atheist engagement in interfaith. In contrast to the New Atheists who are often bent on ending religion, he sees his engagement not as anti-religious but as a means of connecting with his fellow human beings. Underlying this is a belief that interfaith engagement is really the key solution to many of the world's problems.

One of the reasons that Stedman sees both the promise of interfaith engagement and a real sense that interfaith engagement needs atheism just as atheism needs interfaith engagement is the current climate. As he writes, “In a culture

that increasingly asks us to check our religious and nonreligious identities at the door—to silence the values and stories we hold most dear—the ‘New Atheist’ brand of secularism isn’t helping” (Stedman 2012, 13). Interfaith engagements suggest that each individual needs to own their identity—racial, ethnic, religious, nonreligious—in order to be affirmed as an individual with integrity and value, but also as an avenue towards open conversation. When interfaith engagement excludes the nonreligious, it is silencing voices and limiting the conversation. Though we might not all be actively religious, we all have religious perspectives, histories, and identities that shape our prejudices, assumptions, and religious literacy.

I see this in my classes. With a largely nonreligious population, were I to poll my students, very few would see themselves as firmly affiliating with one religious tradition or another. Most are a combination of identities, spiritual but not religious, or only culturally connected to the religion of their birth. However, they have complex and multifaceted religious identities if we consider not their affiliation but the ways in which they relate to religion and have seen it inform their childhoods, development, and identity. They have attended religious schools, been raised by devoutly religious grandparents, grown up in multifaith households, and have had their identities supported and rejected by religious communities with whom they may have only marginal association. These experiences shape perspective even when the individual in question abstains from direct affiliation.

This fundamentally means that no one is completely objective on this subject, regardless of affiliation. In academia, this presents a particular challenge as we are trained to view human phenomena as detached, objective observers. And yet, we do not check our identities at the door when we enter the hallowed halls of academia. We may nuance and complicate those identities and learn enough additional knowledge to speak on subjects without bringing in our personal perspectives and experiences, but those remain the lenses through which we see and experience all things. However, we still hold on to that guise of objectivity. As Chris Stedman writes of his academic experience, “it became easy to disconnect myself from the corporeal body of religion and understand it as merely a problematic concept” (2012, 102). We see the violence caused, the textual contradictions, and historical contexts, and yet, without attention to the messiness and beauty of lived experience—of our subjects and even ourselves—that knowledge and understanding is only so deep. In my classroom, I began to notice just such a tendency, especially among the unaffiliated. Nonreligious students, those “nones” profiled in the Pew Research Center’s report (2012) as unaffiliated with religious institutions but sometimes with religious convictions and spiritual lives, assumed a kind of objectivity they did not see in their religious classmates. However, I also recognized, as a teacher, the ways in which past experiences, past prejudices, and positive and negative associations and emotions deeply affect how generous or judgmental students might be about a text, a historical figure, a religious movement, or even a classmate with a different worldview.

As a result, I began to integrate activities that led students through an exercise in acknowledging their own position in relation to the subject of study. Through the writing of religious or spiritual autobiographies in my Introduction to World Religions class, students recognized that even if they did not affiliate with a certain religion today or even positively affirm any type of religious or spiritual belief, their lives were shaped by the religion of their grandparents, parents, friends, events in the news, affiliations of their schools, experiences of joy and loss and all the rest. Without compromising student confidentiality, we were able to survey the breadth of their backgrounds using tools such as word clouds or culled lists, and through these recognize a richness and complexity the students did not expect in the class or in themselves. I integrated a version of this activity into my Religions of Baltimore class by asking students to reflect not only on religious autobiography but also on how immigration had shaped their family’s history. Whether they were international students or sixth-generation American, this personalized the material and showcased a variety of diversities within the class.

These engagements with personal stories led to discussion of how we might safely, truthfully, and productively address these identities in the classroom. Students first wrote on and then shared in small groups the anxieties they felt in contemplating the discussion of religion in a religiously diverse classroom. These small groups then developed class guidelines for discussion to help students openly discuss the class material and feel safe bringing their own experiences and perspectives to the conversation if appropriate and if they so desired. As a class, we reconvened to share those anxieties and then find strategies and guidelines that might allay those concerns and address the inevitable offenses, ignorance, and conflict that would arise.

With this groundwork in place, we were able to move into the meat of the course with a framework for our discussion, a sense of self-awareness, and a very straightforward and honest approach to the fact that this material is not objective and to assume that it requires a kind of charade on the part of the nonreligious or not-clearly-identified student or faculty. To name that position allows the student, the scholar, the professor, to manage the influence of that positionality honestly and clearly, and be attuned to the ways in which it might create blind spots, presumptions, or judgments.

Religion as Always Contextualized

Discussion of personal identity and collaborative efforts to spell out guidelines for discussion give students a stable framework from which to explore; they also set the stage for a particular approach to religion that is unique to this new course. Whereas many Introduction to World Religions courses approach religions as essentialized belief systems, disembodied from particular geographic, historical, or socioeconomic contexts, I consciously designed Religions of Baltimore to always present religion in context. When students begin the study of religion with a keen awareness of their own histories and potentialities, they are ready to learn about religions in a similar kind of embeddedness in the lives of individuals and the particularities of geographic locations. In Religions of Baltimore, students encounter five of the major world religions in the context of their arrival and development in the Baltimore area, and through the lens of immigration (forced and voluntary) and the ways in which power exercised through politics, economy, housing, and access to other resources have shaped the geographical, numerical, demographic, and socioeconomic reality of these religions today.

In the course, students read general overviews of the history, development, belief, and practice of these religions, but the majority of our class discussion is about how that belief and practice finds expression in a particular context. Students read about the history of redlining in Baltimore, the role of immigration in shaping the city, and explore the webpages and publications of religiously-affiliated organizations in the city working on the frontlines to advocate for and support immigrants and refugees. Class discussions focus on drawing connections between the basics of a religion's beliefs and practice and the lived expressions of that religion in Baltimore's history and present moment. For example, students use their knowledge of Jewish theology to understand why concern for immigrants is so prominent. Students use their understanding of Muslim practice to help explain why masjids are located in particular areas of the city and use their understanding of the rise of Islamophobia to explain why such communities are not as visible as the many Christian churches lining the most prominent streets in the city.

Contextualization happened outside of the classroom as well, through field trips, a student-organized campus event, and an interactive map installation. Students visited local religious communities and were asked to notice locations, visibility, size and make up of congregations. They met practitioners and asked informed questions about immigrant populations within the congregation as well as activism and community engagement. Students worked together to plan and execute two on-campus events including an interfaith panel discussion amongst three leaders of religious organizations on the frontline of support for immigrants and refugees in the city. Discussions about finding balance in perspective, designing questions for the panel, and framing of the event for effective publicity all deepened students' awareness of how the topics from within our class manifested in the broader campus and city community. Students designed and installed a world map in the lobby of our main campus dining hall, labeled it "*E Pluribus Unum*," and encouraged students to mark their geographical places of connection with a pin, to underscore the diversity of our own community.

While this course is a work in progress and will evolve in future iterations (most notably by replacing the panel with sustained community-based learning with a Baltimore organization working directly with immigrant and refugee populations), the purpose of these activities will remain the same—to give students opportunities for personal encounter with practitioners of these religions and for personal experience in the discomfort and joy that can come from being welcomed as an outsider in the sacred space of another. Such experiences combine with carefully curated readings to encourage a view of religion as always contextualized by the geographic, historical, and cultural particularities in which it lives.

Frank and Informed Dialogue about Social Justice

By situating religion as always contextualized by geography, culture, history, economics, and power dynamics, questions of social justice inevitably arise. In *Religions of Baltimore*, our examination of the world religions as shaped by immigration (forced and voluntary) allowed us to dive into discussions of redlining, discrimination, and power. Indeed, the course fulfills one component of the college's Race, Power, and Perspective requirement by centralizing these themes in the study of religions in the Baltimore area. With the careful work on dialogue and identity at the beginning of the course, students from Baltimore or other cities with similar dynamics spoke frankly about their own experiences and called each other out for assumptions and stereotypes. Students hopefully left the class with an awareness that alignments of power have histories that are often shaped by inequities justified by race, religion, ethnicity, and class.

Conversations on such topics—especially when students have been encouraged to bring their own identities to the table—are not easy and can end badly if not carefully moderated by faculty and, assuming prior discussions of community guidelines, by the students themselves. To speak of religions abstractly does allow everyone a level of separation and objectivity from the material though it also limits the depth of learning, leaving contextualization and application of this knowledge to the student. How to make a variety of students comfortable in our classrooms such that they push and stretch their boundaries while also feeling safe to express their perspectives and live into their identities is a concern on all contemporary liberal arts college campuses and indeed on all college and university campuses. The question is how to balance that commitment to openness with protection of our students through trigger warnings and limitations on the types of speech allowed and the ways in which students can express publicly particularly deeply religious and or conservative viewpoints.⁵

Opening space to all viewpoints became particularly tricky for many faculty in the political climate leading up to and following the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. As questions about religious tests for American citizenship, travel bans, a “war on Christmas,” and other concerns rose to the political fore, faculty, staff, and administrators have been forced to weigh the question of what is ideological and what is political, what is a reflection of the basic philosophy of the college and what is a liberal agenda of the faculty as a whole. The lines are unclear and faculty are negotiating these challenges on a daily basis as they set course objectives, and balance their deep historical and cultural knowledge with students' ideological perspectives in a way that maintains the integrity of the curriculum and class but also leaves space open for students to express themselves and to engage across difference in meaningful ways.

My students know from the beginning that a major learning objective for my course is to not only improve religious literacy but to encourage empathy, understanding, and dialogue across difference. In this day and time, that is a political stance in a way it might not have otherwise been. Discussing immigration legislation, in particular, was difficult to balance. Students recognized the tendency of those religious institutions engaging this issue to be liberal, in other words, to be organizing to support immigrants and refugees rather than increase restrictions. I encouraged students to find examples of other political viewpoints and though they found written statements, they did not find mobilized activist groups. We engaged in important discussions about why that might be and what it might mean about the multiplicity of arguments at work in, for example, Christian lawmakers supporting immigration restrictions. This opened up generative discussion about American identity and the role of religion and race in that paradigm.

The stakes are particularly high in a time when boards of trustees and senior administration deal with the bottom line of student retention, admissions yields, and the quest for the full-paying student (who is, by the numbers, often from a more socially and politically conservative family), as well as a desire to maintain institutional goals such as exposure to diverse perspectives and a commitment to social justice, and a desire to maintain the rigor and integrity of the academic division. And yet, individual courses are places in which such balances can be explored and in which such difficult conversations take place.

5 An example of this perspective can be seen in the book *Living with Difference*, which argues that the move towards trigger warnings and the erasure of certain types of identity from many college campuses is destructive to attempts at interreligious, interpolitical or interhuman understanding (Seligman, Wasserfall, and Montgomery 2015). The authors point to schools like Bowdoin and Vanderbilt where a “liberal agenda” has been used to erase religious identification (2015, 112). Not only does this move preference no religion over religion, it also creates new problems. In their words, “removing competing claims to the Good really does more to displace the problem than to solve it” (2015, 142).

To return to the question of an interfaith theology that collapses differences for the sake of connection, there is a middle ground. In her self-reflective essay, Jennifer Howe Peace (2015) writes of coming to the realization that the differences are real and important, and that interfaith engagement should not be based on trying to find the common denominator or massaging away difference. Rather, for her, it is based on the idea that “God is greater than my experience. God is greater than any of our experience” (Peace 2015, 29). Such a sentiment lies at the center of a variety of new popular press books increasingly used in the college classroom such as Stephen Prothero’s *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World* (2010).

Few would dispute the power of religion in the modern world to unite and divide and students will undoubtedly encounter religious difference not only in their dorm room and classroom but also in their workplace upon graduation. The questions that follow are many: What responsibility does a college have to encourage or celebrate those differences and provide students with opportunities to learn and practice skills for engagement across that difference? If colleges do have such a responsibility, does this fall with student affairs staff or with academic faculty? If the latter, how does such skill building fit within the traditional study of religion at the college level? Can such integration happen without weakening or fundamentally altering the nature of religious studies? While some colleges have preemptively addressed and answered these questions through interfaith studies programs or interfaith initiatives directed by religious and spiritual life staff, most other institutions are fumbling their way forward, addressing student and global need while grappling with limited budgets, understaffing, and undertraining. Though limited in resources and small in scope, religious studies at small liberal arts colleges might be uniquely positioned to provide a pragmatic solution to these timely and consequential concerns.

Conclusion

In the months since first drafting this article, Goucher College has welcomed a new president, new provost, and the faculty continue to work to stabilize and rebuild after the process of program prioritization. The work described here in relation to this single course has rippled outward in collaboration with other colleagues doing work, broadly speaking, at the intersection of religion and social justice. Out of these intersections, my colleague in philosophy, Dr. Martin Shuster and I have launched a new religion and justice minor ([Goucher College 2021c](#)) that is entirely interdisciplinary and made up of courses across the college in disciplines ranging from anthropology to psychology, from political science to philosophy. The courses in this minor examine religion in context, and our signature introductory and capstone courses allow students to knit these experiences together to understand religion as a driver of justice and injustice through history and in the contemporary world. This minor is completely different in tone and content from the religion minor that was discontinued several years ago, in that it focuses on religion in context, explicitly integrates interfaith pedagogy, and addresses the ways in which students reckon with their own identities and engage across difference in their own work for justice.

This new growth at Goucher fits the particular mission and pedagogical character of the institution. Certainly, not all institutions are the same and not all teachers of religious studies approach the field or their pedagogy the same way. Nor should there be uniformity in this. The variety of methods and variety of context within which students can learn about the broad spectrum of religions, religious experiences, and religious communities speaks to the breadth and interdisciplinarity of the field and the wide array of educational opportunities available to students today. The biggest contextual difference will be between the large research university with a religious studies faculty of thirty and small programs of one or two people in small liberal arts colleges. Those curricula cannot be the same and different outcomes are to be expected from those different contexts. What is recommended for the academy as a whole and what is particularly for those teaching in small liberal arts college programs?

For the field as a whole, we must meet students where they are even as we stretch them beyond borders they do not yet know exist. Whether that is through in-depth discussion of medieval Christian mystics or the ubiquitous Introduction to World Religions course, there are ways of asking our students to be self-reflective as a means of recognizing their own subjectivity in the study of religion and the ways in which their own beliefs as well as their past experiences shape their approach to religious difference—whether that difference is historical, theological, geographical, or otherwise. We can also bring to the fore the ways in which our classes prepare students for the world they must encounter in their chosen

vocation. They will encounter individuals in business, in the classroom, and in everyday activities that come from different worldviews and reflect a variety perspectives. They need to recognize the ways in which they can work together with these individuals, not just despite difference, but even because of difference.

In small liberal arts college religion programs, faculty have the opportunity to dramatically rethink our work as scholars and teachers in religious studies. Admittedly, as in my case, this is often forced upon us by institutional change. But the motivation for the change need not undercut its importance or validity. We cannot offer the breadth of courses that a large research institution might offer. Our majors will never be as broad or offer as many possible avenues for students to pursue. Yet, there are some distinctive things we can offer. We have small classes, smaller advising loads, and the opportunity to develop close working relationships with our students—whether they are in one class or are religion majors. We can not only push students to be self-reflective but work with them over the course of a semester or a college career to continue that reflectiveness and turn it into action. We can take students off campus, do close readings with them, hear their voices, and foster situations where they engage with each other across religious difference.

As higher education changes in response to the needs of the market, the meaning and purpose of higher education must adjust as well. Though the content of our courses continues to be important as we maintain the integrity of our disciplines and fields of study, students increasingly need particular skills as they learn how to learn, how to think creatively, and how to engage with others different from themselves. These skills are no longer just reading, writing, and arithmetic. They are not even just critical thinking, writing, and oral expression. These skills involve moderating and balancing one's own identity with more objective fields of knowledge and understanding. They involve active listening and the willingness to have one's own assumptions questioned and unsettled. And these are skills our students need now more than ever.

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