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## ARTICLE

## Black and Jewish, Female and Clergy: Co-Teachers Practice Self-Disclosure in Religious Studies Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

Presenting ourselves as objective and detached observers is the teaching of a former era. If we want our students to be able to understand themselves in the real world, teachers must model how to analyze the ways in which identities influence how we “read” histories, traditions, texts, and contemporary realities. Two female teachers, Black and White, Jewish and Christian, ordained clergy of their respective traditions with professional lives as academics at a public university, made self-disclosure a mindful practice and an integral part of a class exploring the ways religious narratives could empower and disempower. Using the ways Hagar is figured in varied religious traditions permitted both teachers to model an academic approach to the subject while also acknowledging how their identities affected their reading of the texts. In turn, students learned how to practice identifying the way their multiple identities impact how they read the world around them.

### KEYWORDS

self-disclosure, identities, racism

## Addressing Race and Gender in the Classroom: The Impact of Self-Disclosure

**Julia Robinson Moore**

Today’s students are exposed to a host of social, political, and racial constructions that can deliver extremist views of Muslims, Jews, immigrants, and people of color. What does a contemporary classroom look like when stereotypes of race, class, and gender are reified by social media sites and embedded in our students’ experience? How does race and gender-scripting play out in an academic environment that is dominated by White men? Further, how are these embodiments of “othering” compounded by religion?

We set out to explore these questions in our 2018 co-taught course, *Religion and Power: Subjugation, Liberation, and Social Change in America*. One of us (Barbara Thiede) is a self-identified White Jewish female and rabbi; the other (Julia Robinson Moore) is a self-identified African American female and ordained Presbyterian minister (PCUSA). Given the multiple identities we represented and the content and aims of the course, we made a conscious decision to make self-disclosure an integral part of our pedagogy.

We teach at a public university with high racial diversity. Forty-six percent of the students attending UNC Charlotte are minorities or people of color. Minorities made up the majority of students in our course. We teach courses that cover the history of antisemitism, particularly in Europe, and racism in America. About half of the students in the course had taken classes with us before which did not center self-disclosure.

This paper offers a self-reflective analysis of the impact of racial and gendered dynamics in the classroom and the impact of instructor self-disclosure on those dynamics. As teachers, we remained conscious and aware of the power we wielded over the students both spatially (we stood in the front of the class) and functionally (we held their grades in our hands).

### ***Self-Disclosure***

Students may self-disclose publicly on the first day of class when the attendance roll is called out and they are invited, as they often are in smaller classes, to introduce themselves to one another. Typically, students disclose their place of origin, a favorite hobby, or even some details about their family background. Yet for students of color and for those who are part of the LBGTQ community, a kind of enforced self-disclosure occurs as soon as they enter the classroom.

Many students of color experience a type of projected self-disclosure based on the phenotype of their skin tone. Asians, African Americans, Latinos, and peoples from the Middle East are readily scripted by one other, as well as by the predominant Caucasian culture, based on historical myths that have long been projected upon bodies of color. As a result, students of color are in a constant state of an externally mediated self-disclosure regarding their racial or ethnic makeup, projected upon them by a dominant White society. Walking into the classroom, students of color “self-disclose” in ways that do not offer them agency or choice. Instructors of color experience the same oppressive reality.

What happens in the classroom when the instructor does not accept an “enforced” self-disclosure script handed to them by society, but publicly and deliberately chooses to self-disclose racial, religious, and gender identities on their own terms? And how is this type of self-disclosure—from a power position of leadership in the classroom—then complicated by religion? In both our cases it was certainly possible not to self-disclose about our own religious affiliations or even, to some extent, about our ethnic identities. Doing so with deliberation was a new experience for both of us.

Intentional self-disclosure in terms of race, gender, and religion is a powerful teaching tool when it models for students the ways in which those realities can be negotiated in real time. Careful and deliberate self-disclosure allows the student and the teacher to experience the intersectionality of race, gender, and religious paradigms, which often remains hidden in the curriculum-laden material being taught to students. Presenting course content without personal reference of any kind can obscure the racial and gendered dynamics occurring in a classroom. Materials on gender, race, and religion remain objectified, and often separated from the lived experience of individuals discussing them.

### ***The Course***

As full-time faculty members at a public university, we designed our course, *Religion and Power*, as a conscious examination of ways in which religions, religious leaders, and religious communities create abusive conditions. We wanted to consider how all three could disempower and subjugate, ally with power to oppress, and become part of legal, political, social, and economic systems of control. Our intention was to focus on Christian and Jewish traditions, though we also invited a guest speaker to address our course themes in regard to Islam. We co-taught most of the bi-weekly, seventy-five-minute

class sessions together, responding and reacting to each other's lectures, assignments, and jointly-planned activities throughout. After each class, we reviewed and discussed our own impressions of students' reactions to the course material and to our own lectures. We also made it a regular practice to go over our interactions with one another.

Our decision to use self-disclosure as a teaching tool within the course was guided by the following considerations: (1) How self-disclosure on our parts would affect how our students learned; (2) How self-disclosure would work to reflect realities and challenges in our institutional culture (UNC Charlotte); and (3) How self-disclosure might speak to the (then) historical moment. We decided to start the processes of self-disclosure around race, religion, and gender, beginning with ourselves, on the first day. During the first three sessions of our semester we discovered that issues of race, religion, and gender would permeate our classroom experience—in part because of self-disclosure.

Only one of us could be present on the first day of class. I (Moore) led that first day, self-disclosing my racial and religious background (Black and Christian) to students, but not my colleague's background. This was a curious response on my part as Thiede had given me her express permission to tell the students of her racial and religious background in her absence. My reluctance to disclose Thiede's background was apparent during the class discussion that followed. Students were assigned a small group activity in which they were to pay attention to gathering as a diverse community. The majority of students segregated themselves along a Black-White binary, while Latino and Asian students congregated in another group. First, students were to write down three racial stereotypes that came to mind when they thought of African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Arab Americans, and Whites. Thereafter, each group shared their lists aloud via a team captain.

Again, though I (Moore) had disclosed my racial and religious background to the students, I did not openly list or invite students to address the racial and religious stereotypes of Jewish people. Even as students openly expounded upon a plethora of readily available stereotypes and racially-loaded associations—such as Caucasians as rich and Protestant, Arab Americans as Muslim and terrorists, and Latinos as Mexican and Catholic—neither the students nor the myself discussed issues of anti-Semitism or Judaism during that class. Given that our university—and, in fact, the country as a whole—is dominated by a Christian majority, this is not particularly surprising.

When Thiede and I spoke later, we discovered that each of us had become acutely aware of concerns around speaking for one another or about one another. It was not the last time the work of co-teaching would result in extended after-class conversations about how each of us negotiated and mediated our racial-religious differences, both in and outside of the classroom. We wondered what might have happened had a Jewish and White instructor been the sole teacher, introducing herself as such and then leading a class activity about race and religion in America. Would the typical Black-White binary—a binary many American students and instructors are familiar with—have been disrupted? When no self-disclosure of a given "other" is possible, does that other simply fail to exist? In other words, if there is no Jew in the classroom, does a Jew exist for either students or teachers? Racial and religious diversity can hardly be discussed in terms of personal experience when so few instructors self-disclose such identities openly in their classrooms in the first place. It is worth noting that our student population is—at least at UNCC—more racially diverse than the full-time faculty by far (Whites constitute 75 percent of the teaching population).

We opened the second class meeting (when we were both present) by speaking about our decision to self-disclose—in particular regarding race and religion. We stated that our subject matter for the semester was chosen to reflect and mirror our own multiple and intersecting identities and spoke specifically to the contents of the syllabus. We then described how we identified in terms of gender, race, and religion. I (Moore) noted that I had not described Thiede's background during the first class and had not directed students to include stereotypes of Jews and Judaism. Thiede then articulated ways in which her Jewishness could be hidden. As a White woman, she noted that she could easily have taught the previous class without introducing either Jewishness or Jewish experience into the class discussion. I added that my own light-skinned appearance could affect people's expectations of my "blackness" as a self-identified African American (was she Black or "mixed"?). We then asked our students to identify where they stood in relation to our material and class discussions in terms of race, religion, gender, and class. Thus, our second session became an exercise in modeling—and inviting—self-disclosure.

Gender became a salient category after our third class. We had invited a White male guest speaker to discuss effective reading skills with our students. Both of us noticed that all of our students—both male and female, from all ethnic groups—seemed more attentive to the male teacher than they had been in the first two classes. This was particularly obvious when the male instructor asked students to engage in various activities as part of the class experience. We noted that students listened and responded promptly to every instruction, where we had both experienced having to deliver instructions two or three times in previous sessions because students chatted amongst themselves or had to have instructions repeated for them. During the next class, we shared our perceptions with students. Some responded with an ah-ha moment of shock and surprise while others questioned our observations. A discussion ensued around gender, race, and “perceived” gendered spaces in the classroom. Students discussed their responses to the male teacher’s instructions and acknowledged that we both had had to repeat instructions where the male teacher’s directives were heard and followed immediately.

By our fourth session, we had discussed race, religion, and gender, as well as the effects of all three on the classroom learning experience. Throughout the semester, we spoke openly with students about our experience of class discussion, class language, and class reactions to the difficult topics we were addressing. Outside the class, we wondered if too much self-disclosure could be counterproductive and limit the amount of trust, safety, learning, and empowerment. At the end of the semester we were both convinced that it had not. The evaluations of the course suggest that students had embraced and appreciated our decision to teach with self-disclosure.

We were always aware that we were, in combination, providing nuances that we could not have offered as individual teachers. In every class we taught together, we consciously addressed our multiple identities and how they impacted our own reading of the material we were teaching. If students had come into our class already exposed to racial stereotypes—such as African Americans being ignorant, Jewish people being untrustworthy, and women being incapable of exercising authority—then two female teachers—one African American and the other Jewish, both with doctorates, standing in a course as instructors with power over student grades—represented disruption of racial, religious, and gendered categories. This disruption was possible precisely because we explicitly and repeatedly named our identities and because we were teaching in concert. After all, as we told our students, I (Moore) could have presented to students as some unidentifiable “mix” of races. Had she not revealed her Jewish religion, Thiede could have been assumed to be another representative of the dominant White Christian culture at our university.

One could argue that instructors of color and women who openly self-disclose to students around race, religion, and gender can unsettle and refocus pejorative perceptions held by students. Teachers who choose not to self-disclose around race, gender, and religion may be unintentionally creating learning climates that preserve the unspoken “elephants” of racial, religious, and gender biases in the room. Again, in racialized and gendered societies, there is always some form of automatic and enforced self-disclosure that occurs in the classroom. However, when racial and gendered self-disclosure is modeled as the deliberate intention of the instructor, a disruption of the gendered and racial processes of “othering” occurs. It is a teaching moment for both instructor and the student.

## Complicating Race and Gender with Religion: The Story of Hagar

### Barbara Thiede

One part of our course featured a close look at the story of Hagar. We chose this biblical narrative because it was familiar to our students, all of whom came from a Christian background. Many of our students openly described themselves as practicing Christians. Our choice was also determined by the potential in Hagar’s narrative to speak to multiple issues, including ethnicity, class, and gender. The semester included exploring Hagar’s role as an important figure in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition.

Our class included twenty students, of whom 65 percent (thirteen) were people of color who identified as Asian, Indian, Latino, and Black. Women outnumbered men, constituting 60 percent (twelve) of the class. Two students identified as LGBTQ.

We disclosed our pedagogical intentions for the Hagar unit the week before it began: We would examine the varied interpretations of the Hagar narrative offered by Jewish, Muslim, and Christian traditions, so that students could examine how those three traditions “read” the text and portray Hagar. Here, we clearly employed a standard explanatory model of religion. We would also discuss ways in which our various identities affected our perspectives on the Hagar narrative and asked our students to be willing to do the same.

A guest lecturer offered our students an introduction to Muslim traditions’ reading of Hagar with comparison to Christian readings. Students learned how artistic representation elevated or denigrated Hagar and Ishmael in both Muslim and Christian art and how contemporary Muslim women had employed Hagar’s story to fight oppression.

During the next class, I spoke to Jewish readings of the text. These include both a critical assessment of Sarah’s treatment of Hagar and a vociferous defense of the same. I then asked the students to read together by working through the story, nearly verse by verse. We analyzed how Hagar’s ability to determine her fate was affected by the use of power by Sarah, Abraham, and the Israelite God, Yhwh. Students explored each verse under consideration in terms of race, class, and gender. We worked to “map” the movement of characters in regard to their location and status.

I asked students to imagine that they were telling Hagar’s story in the modern age. Who would the characters be? How would they look? Where would they work? Both African American and Latino students named the ways in which women of color, limited and oppressed, still work as cooks, maids, and nannies for White employers. Some discussed the history of sexual abuse of women of color by White masters. Asian students spoke of family members who had worked in menial jobs for White managers. This discussion elicited almost full participation from students of color and was lively and engaged.

During the next class, I presented material that I expected—and admittedly hoped—would unsettle the trajectory of class conversation. I demonstrated how Christian tradition had used the Hagar story to vilify and condemn Jews and Judaism, primarily using Paul’s reading of Hagar in his Letter to the Galatians. In that text, Paul defines Hagar as the ancestor of the Jews. Her son was born “according to the flesh” to an enslaved mother. Jews, Hagar’s son’s descendants, were thus slaves by lineage and inheritance. For Paul, the enslavement of the Jews was defined in specific terms: they were enslaved to a dead law that had been superseded and made obsolescent by the advent of Jesus Christ. Sarah, a free woman whose son was born of a divine promise, is the ancestress of the Christians, who were, in contrast, freed from this dead law.

I explained how supersessionist Christian tradition had created a taxonomy in which Christianity was represented in opposition to Judaism. Jews became associated with legalism, materialism, carnality, and particularism (among other characteristics) in contradistinction to Christians, who were represented as soulful, spiritual, and universal.

**Figure 1: Binary Oppositions in the Discourse of Christian Europe Regarding Jews**

Christian	Jewish
soulful	legalistic
family, clan	priesthood, hierarchy
universal	particularist
spiritual	material, carnal
chaste	sexual
all-embracing	all-hating

I explained the Christian teaching of contempt that emerged, in part, from Paul’s teachings, and its impact on the development of antisemitism in European history. I put this history in context, describing resurgent antisemitism in America, which relies heavily on the trope of Jews as carnal and materialistic. I presented statistics demonstrating the rise in bullying at elementary and high schools across the U.S. during, and after the 2016 presidential campaign as well as the

rising numbers of hate crimes against Jews. I also mentioned that my own congregation had worried about violence and attacks because I had been singled out by a local right-wing and potentially White supremacist leader after I spoke at a protest after the Charlottesville rally of White supremacists in August of 2017. I mentioned that this was not the first time I had been targeted by such groups. I deliberately made personal connections to the history I described. I was curious about how students might respond to my self-disclosure.

Student comments immediately after my lecture continued to focus on negative tropes around Black and Latino people, essentially avoiding all the implications of my self-disclosure. Instead of staying with the effects of Christian readings of the narrative on Jewish history, students returned to the safer question: How did the Hagar story reflect their own experience? They scripted me largely as a White woman rather than as a Jewish woman. They scripted Hagar as a woman of color rather than—as Paul and significant Christian traditions had done—as a Jew. They appeared to have entirely avoided the discomfort of having to “own” how their own traditions had supported narratives that oppressed Jews.

In the next class, I noted that presenting material on Christian teachings of contempt was particularly challenging in our class. Under normal circumstances, I teach the history of antisemitism either as a course in its own right or as an important part of a semester-long course on Jewish history. In both cases, I have the opportunity to contextualize the material and to present it over multiple class sessions, if not for an entire semester. In this context, I was introducing centuries of complex historical material in a twenty-minute lecture. And, because I had openly self-disclosed as a Jew with direct experience of antisemitism, I faced an entirely different setting. As the only Jew in the room, I explained, it was uncomfortable to tell all other participants that traditions they had grown up with and, in some cases, openly subscribed to, had been directly responsible for the oppression of “my people.” The response was muted; students clearly did not feel able to discuss what I had described. On the face of it, our students got “stuck” in the part of the process that was about themselves. And yet, I suspected that the power I had as their instructor may have caused a measure of uncertainty and hesitation: could students, in the face of that power, address the teacher’s personal, and sometimes painful, history directly? This is dicey territory.

It turned out that students did not remain silent where the topic of my Jewishness and Jewish experience was concerned, however, as the semester progressed. Two events appear to have played a role. We used the class before spring break for a review of our pedagogy. Students were asked to journal privately about the ways in which our decision to use self-disclosure had affected their learning experience. To the extent that students were comfortable doing so, we then conducted an open conversation.

We experienced this conversation as profoundly enlightening; it was a learning experience for us both. First, Latino students noted that much of the material, group work, and discussion seemed to presume a largely bipolar world, one in which conditions of Blackness and Whiteness “drowned out” the experience of Latinos and Asians in the class. Though the next class unit after spring break included material that intentionally focused on various minorities (specifically Asian Americans and Native Americans), it was clear that our course planning had privileged a conversation about race for half a semester that did not afford enough nuance nor room for all our students to feel safe and included. We ourselves represented a Black and White binary; we had composed a syllabus that reflected our own identities as a result.

Second, White students spoke honestly about the challenges of contributing to conversations about race and the fear of giving offense. Black students and White students engaged in a delicate and enlightening conversation that would have been unlikely weeks earlier—eight weeks of engaging discussion about Black history in the U.S. and addressing White privilege had made this possible.

The class discussion elicited an extraordinary openness about the challenges of learning in a way that truly reflected every student in the room. Later, in our own review of this class session, we noted that no one spoke to religious difference. Again, the only non-Christian in the room was one of the teachers; this may have led students to hesitate before addressing issues of religious difference. Much later the students demonstrated that they had been processing the outcomes of exploring the Hagar narrative in ways that surprised both of us.



We invited a local bishop and activist to speak about LGBTQ issues and Christianity. In her opening remarks, the bishop self-disclosed as a gay and Black Christian. The bishop was aware that I was the only Jew in the room and during her lecture, she repeatedly asked me to confirm various data points. She herself insisted that the “Old Testament” was filled with “laws” that legislated all aspects of Jewish life. With dramatic flair, she listed any number of biblical restrictions with a tag line about the supposed consequences of violating such restrictions. “You eat pig, you are going to hell,” she announced. “You mix linen and wool, you are going to hell.” She delivered these statements as facts during her lecture.

The next day I assumed students would want to compare the bishop’s presentation to one I had given earlier in the semester, because although we had used the same biblical texts to discuss the same topic (biblical texts and homosexuality), our presentations had been quite different. Students focused instead on the bishop’s interactions with me. Two Latino students noted that the bishop had presented the class with exactly the images of Jews and Judaism I had described weeks earlier when I had lectured on Christian teachings of contempt that define Judaism as a “carnal,” “legalistic,” and presumably punishing religion. White students noted that the bishop’s use of the term “Old Testament” rather than “Hebrew Bible” was derogatory for Jews—a fact they had learned from me earlier in the semester. Students asked why the bishop had not explored New Testament texts in her lecture as well as texts from the Hebrew Bible, pointing out that there were certainly texts in the New Testament that were frequently used in the public debate about homosexuality. Finally, they noted that she was unable to pronounce my name, which they experienced as disrespectful.<sup>1</sup>

I admitted to the students that I’d been quite concerned about tag lines that were based on Christian traditions and interpretations of Jewish law as harsh and arbitrary. I also noted that her understanding of the texts she was referring to was not as sophisticated as I had hoped: there is no such thing as “hell” in Hebrew Bible, after all. I also acknowledged that the bishop had portrayed Judaism as legalistic and punitive. She also consistently referred to Hebrew Bible texts as “Jewish” and representing “Judaism,” which constituted, for me, a distortion of history; these texts were written for Ancient Israelites and they were not “Jews” as we understand that term. But my reactions to her visit were focused on what I regarded as her ignorance about ancient Israelite and Jewish history. I was frustrated about the inaccuracies that permeated her lecture. But, while I was clearly uncomfortable about the way she had tried to employ me to buttress her arguments, I didn’t expect our students to pick up on that.

It was surely easier for our Christian students to identify another Christian’s treatment of a Jew as problematic. By focusing on the lecturer’s apparent insensitivity or ignorance, they avoided self-examination around their ideas about Jews or ideas they might have been exposed to. There was no clear evidence that my self-disclosure had led to any personal self-evaluation around religious difference on their part. I do suspect that there may have been personal awareness that they did not reveal directly; certainly the reaction to the bishop’s presentation was the most nuanced response to religious differences we experienced during the semester. If there had been no Jew in the room, and if I had not self-disclosed, my students might not have experienced any cognitive dissonance during the guest lecture.

## CONCLUSION

Though, on the face of it, our students seemed primarily to focus on their own concerns and identities in relationship to the material presented, they did sometimes find their way into the experiences of others. This was particularly true in their conversations with one another about the different identities they themselves represented. Moreover, the reaction of a classroom of students who came from Christian backgrounds to what seemed to be Christian stereotyping of a Jew was salient and important for us: it demonstrated that the teachers’ pedagogical intent and conscious self-disclosure did not uniformly result in mere “me first, me too” learning outcomes.

We hope to teach the course again. We would like to create concrete measures around the issues we explored in this trial version of the course. We hope to establish evaluative tools to help us understand what happens in the minds of our

<sup>1</sup> I did not experience disrespect in the bishop’s inability to pronounce my last name correctly. Few people do pronounce it correctly.

students and ourselves. Disclosure can contribute to a classroom environment which promotes trust, safety, learning, empowerment, connection, and community. Self-disclosure can elicit both comfort and discomfort for us and our students. Indeed, it did.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Julia Robinson Moore is an ordained Presbyterian minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) and an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at UNC Charlotte. She teaches courses in African American religion, religions of the African Diaspora, and racial violence in America. Her present research investigates the complexities of black and white race relations in the New South through the context of the Presbyterian Church.

Barbara Thiede teaches Judaic Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, specializing in the history of antisemitism and biblical hegemonic masculinity in the Hebrew Bible. Her most recent work, *Male Friendship, Homosociality, and Women in the Hebrew Bible: Malignant Fraternities*, will be published by Routledge Press in 2021.