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Religious Studies or Theology? Epoché as a Pedagogical Key Term

Elliott Bazzano, *Le Moyne College*

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My most recent post for “Teaching Islam” deals with some of the stakes in teaching and studying religion at a Catholic college. My colleagues Shabana Mir and Sherali Tareen have also provocatively and sharply addressed related topics of “confessional” and “secular” curricular methodologies, so I’d like to continue the thread by focusing on student experience in the great debate on distinctions between religious studies and theology. I touch on the fluid boundaries of allegedly dispassionate approaches to the study of religion in my article “Normative Readings of the Qur’an,” in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* as part of a roundtable, “Normativity in Islamic Studies.” This roundtable focuses on scholarship; I would like to focus on teaching in this essay.

Distinctions Aren’t Always Clear

Notably, my own Department of Religious Studies at my Jesuit Catholic institution, Le Moyne College, offers courses in religious studies as well as theology. According to institutional parameters, theology courses differ from religious studies courses insofar as the former must give significant attention to Catholicism, either on its own or in relation to other traditions. Among the professors who teach theology courses at Le Moyne, some are Catholic and some aren’t. So what does it mean to engage (in) Catholic theology when it’s not limited to Catholics? I think this is at once a relevant field-wide query and also departmentally specific. However one answers the question, though, if a Catholic school is paying non-Catholics to

teach Catholic theology—and my Catholic institution isn't the only one doing this—in a religious studies department, then at the very least the distinctions between religious studies and theology aren't black and white.

As for student engagement with such matters, I find that students aren't so interested in abstract theoretical distinctions between religious studies and theology, but are quite interested in making sense of such contours on the ground. In my first couple of years of full-time teaching, I attempted to formally introduce students to distinctions between religious studies and theology in the first days of class, but as the years go by, I find a better approach is to largely leave the debate in the background and to teach through examples instead, e.g., encouraging reflection on field trips to mosques or on challenges of teaching religion at a public high school full of disgruntled parents who think Islam is a devil religion.

Teaching Students New Vocabulary

As an undergraduate religious studies major myself, I was excited to learn about epoché (suspension, bracketing), both as a concept and as a disciplinary key term. Thanks to my colleague Darryl Caterine's suggestion, I have begun making sure that students know the word epoché in the first week of classes, and without doubt, students find this helpful. What's more, introducing students to the term gives them implicit permission to decide which approaches to studying religion ignite their interests most. To this extent, in a student-centered classroom—which in my case involves a lot of in-class discussion, often led by students themselves—it's counterproductive to police the boundaries of conversation too much. If students want to talk about what a "true Christian" is, for example—based on their subjective, even myopic view of Christianity—that's fine. Although the students shouldn't expect me to chime in with my own partisan position, or corroborate theirs for that matter.

Experimenting with Theological Inquiry

One of my favorite writing assignments in recent years was in my course "Islamic Mysticism." I posed in a prompt: Are Islam and mysticism inherently connected or could one reasonably separate the two? This prompt takes place in a context where we read, for example, William James' categories of mysticism, while also giving attention to Muhammad's role as a medium for divine Revelation, in addition to a variety of films, texts, and art that point toward the significance of first-hand numinous experiences. The prompt invites synthesis and reflection on course material, but is it an academic question or a theological question? I think it's both.

It's academic because it requires students to synthesize evidence based on a careful examination of course material. But it's theological, too, I think, because there is no single correct answer to the question and the stakes are significant in terms of how one's answer might provide commentary on course material. How might student responses to the question incite them to go beyond epoché and perform their own creative process, or poesis, with course material? In many ways students answer the question depending on personal sensibilities toward categories they understand as "Islam" and "mysticism." The essay prompt, moreover, produced some really thoughtful essays, many of which included disclosures on how

the students struggled with the question and changed their minds as they wrote; some students even referenced the question weeks later in the course. My sense is that giving students formal opportunities to personalize course material, while engaging in relatively free reflection, helps them perform better on a variety of levels.

Conclusions: How Much Should Students Care?

When speaking with colleagues across the country—with a particular Facebook thread in mind, I will admit—I sometimes get the impression that some of us don't always want students to indulge their deepest interests in religion, at least not in our religious studies courses. This is understandable to the extent that many of us, including me, don't want to put ourselves in positions of evaluating the veracity of a theological claim or spiritual experience. But I think one can largely assuage this concern by relying on low stakes assignments (e.g., short writing assignments, journal entries, in-class activities) that allow students to mine their own theological, spiritual, or metaphysical curiosities. Without this freedom, I think we risk signaling to students that they can't learn as holistic beings. Ironically, many institutions require religious studies courses precisely so that students learn about the world beyond their classes in engineering, biology, business, or what have you. Perhaps as instructors we would do well to more carefully bracket our own disciplinary dogmas when they might impede the creativity, imagination, and even effort from our students.

How do you navigate the boundaries between religious studies and theology in your pedagogical practices?

<https://wabash.center/2017/08/religious-studies-theology-epoche-pedagogical-key-term/>