Civility, Religious Pluralism, and Education

Edited by
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11 From World Religions to Lived Religion
Towards a Pedagogy of Civic Engagement in Secondary School Religious Studies Curricula

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(with Matthew Weiner)

Nearly fifty years after the Supreme Court's decision in Abington v. Schempp, which banned devotional Bible reading in American public schools while encouraging the secular, academic study of religion, there is a broad consensus among scholars, educators, policy makers, and religious leaders that the study of religion should be a significant component of American secondary education. Of course, not all Americans are aware of this consensus—a June 2010 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 64% of us mistakenly believe it is unconstitutional for public schools to offer comparative religion courses. And one could hardly say that the academic study of religion is thriving in our public, private, or parochial schools. Nevertheless, most educators agree that an adequate education must include some understanding of religion and religious diversity. And many, like the authors collected in this volume, have advocated the academic study of religion as a way to bridge the divides among American religious communities, as well as the sometimes deeper divide between religious and secular Americans. The study of religious diversity, we all argue, is essential to the functioning of a multicultural democracy.

Yet despite this invaluable—and hard-won—consensus, a number of thorny questions remain: What, exactly, do students need to know about religion, and how is it best taught? What theoretical and pedagogic models most effectively realize the promise of religious diversity education? Although there is a wide range of approaches to the academic study of religion, most secondary school religious studies curricula are structured by the "world religions" model of conceptualizing religious diversity that was dominant in the academy in the mid-twentieth century. And unfortunately, I would argue, this pedagogic model has often lent itself to a superficial form of religious literacy. World religions curricula generally introduce students to the essential facts, dates, and doctrines of major religious traditions—teaching
them the answers to straightforward factual questions about, say, the life of Muhammad, the texts of the Gospels, or the Four Noble Truths—but they generally do not prepare students for active participation in the civic life of their religiously diverse society. A basic knowledge of a number of religious traditions is a valuable foundation for such participation, of course, but as the late Warren Nord has argued:

[Even] if students acquire a basic religious literacy as a result of their courses in history and literature, they are unlikely to develop any significant religious understanding. It is one thing to collect a few facts, to locate a religion within a secular historical or literary narrative, to look at a religion from the outside using the secular categories of academic study. It is another thing to use the categories of a religious tradition to make sense of the world from inside that tradition. This kind of inside understanding requires that religion be studied in some depth, using primary sources that enable students to get inside the hearts and minds of people within a religious tradition.4

This sort of empathic understanding is an essential prerequisite to civic engagement, and civil dialogue, among Americans of diverse religious and secular backgrounds. But how is such an understanding achieved?

Nord often answers this question in philosophically or theological terms. He argues, for example, that secondary school teachers might foster a deeper appreciation of religion by helping their students wrestle with the “Big Questions” of morality and meaning addressed by all religious traditions.5 He often ties the academic study of religion to spiritually grounded—although never tradition-specific—forms of character education, arguing that “the primary value of religious studies . . . lies in its ability to enable students to think in an informed and critical way about the moral, existential, spiritual, and religious dimensions of life.” And he even suggests, at one point, that the study of religion “only comes alive when one encounters God in the practice of religion.” Nord acknowledges, of course, that a religious studies pedagogy premised on “encounter[ing] God” would be unconstitutional in American public schools, but I'm afraid many of his other proposals would similarly blur the boundaries between the academic and devotional study of religion. There are, I am certain, a great many teachers who want to offer their students more than facts, dates, and doctrines, but do not feel it is their place to lead discussions of “the moral, existential, spiritual, and religious dimensions of life.”

With those teachers in mind, this chapter will suggest a rather different approach to enriching the familiar world religions curriculum—a different set of strategies for getting secondary school students “inside the hearts and minds” of their diverse neighbors. I will argue that teachers might foster an “inside understanding” of religious diversity through discussions of contemporary lived religion—that is, through the social analysis of everyday religious life; the study of religious discourse, practice, and politics, in all their prosaic details and kaleidoscopic complexity. In place of, or at least in addition to, the study of world religions, I will advocate for the study of lived religion in secondary schools. Moreover, I will argue that teachers and students might best approach the study of lived religion through ethnographic, community-based religious diversity education programs, including site visits to local houses of worship and conversations with local religious leaders. In the final section of the chapter, I will illustrate these arguments by examining two community-based education programs that my colleagues and I developed at the Interfaith Center of New York.

The lived religion pedagogy we've developed builds on Nord's central argument that students must learn to understand diverse religious traditions as "live options for making sense of the world," but departs from his philosophical or theological view of this process. As Bruce Grell has argued, in a sympathetic critique of Nord:

By focusing on living religious communities—not only their beliefs, customs, ceremonies, holidays, styles of dress, artistic expressions, patterns of family life, and so on, but also their perspectives on contemporary environmental, social, ethical, and political issues—it is possible to make the subject matter come alive for students, not so much in the context of developing their own religious or spiritual identities but in the context of developing their identities as citizens of a pluralistic democracy.10

I will therefore follow Grell and others in calling for a pedagogy of civic engagement in secondary school religious studies curricula—an approach to the study of religious diversity grounded in the everyday life of our pluralistic society.

**WORLD RELIGIONS AND LIVED RELIGION**

This section will frame my broader argument through a critique of the familiar, and too often simply taken-for-granted, world religions model of religious diversity education. As I have argued, this pedagogic model tends to promote a superficial form of religious literacy, rather than a serious engagement with religious difference—substituting a decontextualized knowledge of dates and doctrines for an empathic understanding of one's neighbors' lives. At its worst, I will suggest, the study of world religions may even divide Americans on religious lines, by popularizing a false portrait of clearly bounded, homogenous religious communities and static, unchanging religious traditions. As we will see, a dramatically different portrait of religious diversity has emerged in contemporary scholarship on lived religion.
The world religions model tends to describe religious diversity in terms of a fixed set of six or eight major religious traditions, each of which is defined—and distinguished from other traditions—by a fixed set of four or five characteristics:

- its core doctrines or beliefs (a number of more or less explicit propositions about the cosmic and social order, ostensibly shared by all adherents);
- the life history of its founder or founders, if any (a creation narrative thought to reflect the enduring nature of the tradition);
- its geographic origin and diffusion (generally imagined in terms of discrete, bounded territories);
- its sacred texts, if any (generally read for ostensibly self-evident meanings, rather than situated within local interpretive traditions);
- and in some cases, its holidays or ritual practices (generally described as timeless rituals, irrespective of social context).

Islam, for example, may be taught fairly easily through a discussion of its Five Pillars, an account of the life of Muhammad and rapid growth of his movement, a map and timeline to illustrate its global expansion from the Arabian Peninsula, a few brief selections from the Qur'an, and perhaps a discussion of the customs surrounding the fast of Ramadan. Similarly, Buddhism can be encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths and Eight-Fold Path, the life story of Siddhartha Gautama, the diffusion of his teachings throughout East Asia, excerpts from a sutra or two, and perhaps a discussion of meditation. And so on for a number of other traditions, each of which is assumed to fit—or remade to fit—the conceptual template of a “world religion.”

We may trace the limitations of this model in the brief “World Religions” section of Glencoe’s World History textbook, by Jackson Spielvogel.11 This widely used high school text includes fairly substantial discussions of well-known religions in the historical contexts of their ancient origins, but also presents a comparative survey of religious life today. After an introductory discussion of the concept of religion in general, the text provides a map of the “official or principal religion[s] practiced” in different parts of the world, each distinguished from its neighboring faiths with the clarity of primary (or at least tertiary) colors. This familiar map—a staple of secondary school religious studies pedagogy since the geography texts of the mid-nineteenth century—ef faces the complex relationships among diverse traditions that define the religious life of every society. To take just one fairly obvious example, the patch of red marking the prevalence of Judaism in a small area of the eastern Mediterranean obscures the social ties and tensions among Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze, Baha’is, and others in the contemporary State of Israel. The intricate patterns and textures of global religious diversity are supplanted by a spatial grid that lends itself, in David Chidester’s terms, to “the ideological work of asserting conceptual control over the entire world.”12

The text then offers a one-page survey of the “Local Religions” of Australia, Africa, Japan, and native North America. These are the religions formerly known as “primitive,” “traditional,” “tribal,” or “primal,” but whatever the term they are clearly distinguished from what the text describes as “Major Religions.” These majors are then surveyed over the next four pages, with very brief (70 to 100 word) discussions of the “History and Beliefs” then “Worship and Celebrations” of Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism (listed in politically neutral alphabetical order), accompanied by lovely but clichéd images of a symbol and a ritual from each tradition—a Torah cover embroidered with Stars of David, a crowd of pilgrims bathing in the Ganges, and so on. Students may read, for example, that “Muslims follow the practices and teachings of the Quran, which the prophet Muhammad said was revealed to him by Allah beginning in A.D. 610,” while “Christians believe that faith in Jesus saves believers from God’s penalty for sin, and bestows eternal life.” They learn that lay Buddhists “pursue enlightenment by making offerings and performing rituals such as walking clockwise around sacred domes, called stupas,” and “observant Jews follow many strict laws that guide their daily lives and the ways in which they worship.”

All of these statements are true, more or less, and all touch upon important aspects of contemporary religious life. If they are to be truly educated, engaged citizens of a multicultural democracy, American high school students need to understand Islamic views of revelation, Christian beliefs about salvation, the role of ritual offerings in Buddhism, and the centrality of religious law in Judaism. By placing these diverse social facts in a unified conceptual framework, the world religions model conveys important information about religious diversity. But as a growing number of scholars have recognized in recent years, the model has quite a few serious flaws.13

Perhaps above all, it defines each religion in terms of a single, static body of doctrine, ritual, and text, with little or no attention to more flexible and internally diverse forms of popular belief, everyday practice, and interpretation. In Glencoe’s World History, for example, the “strict laws” observed by highly orthodox Jews stand in for the broad spectrum of contemporary Jewish practice, to the exclusion of Reform Jews who tend to repudiate religious law, Conservative Jews who work to renegotiate it, social activists more likely to live their Jewishness at a protest march than at a synagogue, secular Yiddishists likely to live it at a klezmer concert or a bookstore, and countless other reimaginings of an eternally fluid Jewish tradition. Strictly observant orthodox Jews make up a relatively small minority of the global Jewish population,14 but their adherence to an ostensibly timeless Torah fits the conceptual framework of a “world religion,” so they are overrepresented in secondary school curricula.
Although it is intended to honor religious traditions, this focus on canonical text and timeless ritual supports the common secularist critique of religion as inherently rigid, unchanging, and therefore irrelevant—forever fixed in a past “we” secular moderns have outgrown, rather than engaged with pressing social issues. Students reading Glencoe’s World History may imagine, for example, that most contemporary Buddhists experience their tradition simply by circling the same stupas their predecessors have circled for two thousand years, rather than, say, volunteering for the Tzu Chi Foundation—a global humanitarian relief organization, whose millions of supporters enact the Buddhist principles of “compassion and relief” through service to others. This is not to discount the importance of ritual, or historical continuity, in many contemporary religious communities. But the unquestioned centrality of fixed, ostensibly timeless, traditional practices in secondary school world religions curricula resonates with popular stereotypes of premodern religiosity, and thus risks reinforcing the divide between religious and secular Americans.

At the same time, I’m afraid, world religions curricula may reinforce the divides among religious communities themselves, by painting an oversimplified portrait of these communities as internally homogenous and clearly bounded—wholly unified by their doctrinal commitments and hermetically sealed by their doctrinal differences. For example, our Glencoe textbook is not wrong when it states that “Christians believe that faith in Jesus saves believers from God’s penalty for sin,” but this broad assertion belies a history of debate about the nature of salvation both within and among the Christian tradition—faith vs. works in the Protestant Reformation; free will vs. predestination in ongoing debates around Calvinism; pre- vs. post-millennial perfection in the shifting history of American evangelicalism; universal reconciliation vs. divine retribution in liberal Christian critiques of the tradition’s exclusivism. These are just a few of the issues that have divided Christians, and at times united them with members of other traditions. By glossing over such internal conflicts and conversations, the study of world religions tends to reify the boundaries of religious traditions, giving the false impression that all Christians, or Hindus, or Muslims, or Buddhists present a united front vis-a-vis other traditions.

Of course these critiques are not entirely fair, or at least it’s not fair to level them at the “Worlds Religions” section of Glencoe’s World History. I doubt I could do any better if asked to summarize the world’s major religions in a few short paragraphs (although I could surely suggest better ways to use a half-dozen textbook pages devoted to religious diversity). And in fact the text does do somewhat better in its stand-alone sections on different religions. Full-length world religions textbooks for secondary school students generally do better still, though they too tend to overemphasize canonical doctrine, ritual, and text. And of course, these textbooks are—or at least ought to be—nothing more than jumping off points for the work of talented classroom teachers, who can help their students recognize an overgeneralization when they see one. I am not, therefore, arguing that religion teachers must abandon the textbooks currently available to them. I am, however, arguing that students need something more.

What they need, I think, is an introduction to what scholars in the humanities and the social sciences have taken to calling “lived religion.” They need to study popular beliefs and practices, in addition to canonical doctrines and rituals. They need to explore the process of interpretation—tracing how sacred texts may shape, and be shaped by, the practical concerns of contemporary communities. They need to question the boundaries of established religions, and the definition of “religion” as such. And they need to pay very close attention to the diversity within religious traditions and communities, by tracking the doctrinal debates that divide every community, as well as the relationships between religion and other forms of identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Of course our students still need to learn about the central doctrines of major religious traditions, but much more than that they need to learn about the religious lives of their diverse neighbors. They need a rigorous, academically grounded, engagement with the social realities of contemporary religious communities. They need to know how their experiences of American society may be radically different—and not so different at all—from the experiences of their peers living in different religious worlds. This is the model of religious diversity education that is most appropriate for our secondary schools. The next two sections will flesh out this lived religion pedagogy by examining programs for teachers and students developed by the Interfaith Center of New York.

TOWARDS A PEDAGOGY OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

(This Section co-Author: Matthew Weiner)

There are any number of ways to incorporate discussion of lived religion into secondary school religious studies curricula. Teachers might, for example, use novels, memoirs, or films to paint portraits of everyday religious life. They might explore religious themes in living history museums, examine religious life online, or have their students conduct research on the religious diversity of their own school community. There’s no one right way to move beyond the conventional world religions curriculum.

At the Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY), we have done so by developing programs for teachers and students structured around panel discussions with local religious leaders and site visits to local religious communities. These programs are built upon a pedagogy of civic engagement—introducing New Yorkers and others to American religious diversity by introducing them to their diverse neighbors. Community-based programs like these are not universally embraced by advocates for the study of religion
in secondary schools, so I will discuss them here in some detail. In the final section of this chapter, I will offer an ethnographic sketch of two such programs, but first my colleague Matthew Weiner and I will trace the history of ICNY's education programs, highlighting how a focus on lived religion emerged from our fundamental goal of building relationships among members of local religious communities.

ICNY first developed its approach to religious diversity education through a series of programs designed by Timur Yuskaev and Matthew Weiner, beginning in the spring of 2000, to teach grassroots religious leaders—including clergy, lay-leaders, and faith-based social activists—about each other's religious traditions. The organization was not theoretically committed to “lived religion,” or to any other pedagogic model, but we learned from our conversations with New York’s religious leaders that the best way to teach them about their Hindu neighbors, for example, was by giving them an opportunity to hear from Hindu leaders themselves. Religious leaders, we’ve found, are a practical bunch. With some exceptions, of course, most are not particularly interested in learning about other religious traditions as an end in itself, but most are extremely eager to develop a working knowledge of their diverse neighbors. They want to understand the religious lives of their own communities—the particular Buddhism, for example, of the Chinese temple down the block; the social ethics of the priest or imam with whom they’ve been thinking of opening a soup kitchen. In other words, to paraphrase one of Robert Orsi’s programmatic statements about the importance of studying lived religion, most religious leaders want “a thoroughly local [understanding of religious diversity], immersed in and responsive to local conditions and circumstances”; a knowledge of other religious traditions “situated amid the ordinary concerns of life, at the junctures of self and culture, family and social world.” They don’t have time for decontextualized knowledge of dates and doctrines. ICNY’s efforts to build relationships among New York City’s religious leaders therefore led us to teach them about lived religion.

As we offered our series of educational programs for religious leaders, we found ourselves fielding a growing number of requests from both teachers and social workers who wished to attend. Some of these representatives of secular civic institutions had participated in other ICNY programs designed to educate religious leaders about social issues, and came to appreciate the central role of religion in the lives of the students and communities they serve. Their interest in our educational programs eventually led us to develop courses on New York’s religious diversity for secular professional audiences. Our week-long course for teachers met nearly every summer from 2002 to 2010, and in 2012 we offered a three week summer institute for teachers called Religious Worlds of New York: Teaching the Everyday Life of American Religious Diversity (a program cosponsored by Union Theological Seminary, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities). Our summer institute introduces teachers from throughout the country to both religious diversity and religious studies pedagogy, through a combination of academic lectures and seminars, panel discussions with local religious leaders, site visits to local houses of worship, and original field research in a religiously diverse neighborhood. The academic framing of the institute is essential to its success, but the heart of the program lies in the space it creates for civic engagement—in the conversations it allows a group of teachers to have with their fellow Americans from diverse religious communities.

Finally, our work with teachers has also led us to create a number of programs for students in the New York area. In 2009, for example, a teacher at a Catholic high school in Brooklyn asked ICNY to help her teach her students about their Jewish and Muslim neighbors. Most of her students were Caribbean immigrants from Crown Heights—a Brooklyn neighborhood with a history of conflict between Hasidic Jews and their Black neighbors—but they knew very little about the diversity of the community, and she sometimes heard them making derogatory remarks about both Jews and Muslims. In response to this teacher’s educational and civic concerns, ICNY assembled a panel of local Jewish and Muslim leaders, and asked them to talk to her students about growing up in Brooklyn—using personal stories of their lives and communities to illustrate the commonalities and differences that cross-cut Crown Heights. And at the same time, we made sure that the teacher had a chance to meet personally with each panelist, adding them to her contact list of local community leaders.

ICNY’s education programs have thus shifted, over the years, from an initial concern with religious leaders themselves to a focus on social workers, teachers, and students. These are, of course, very different audiences with very different needs, but in each case we’ve found most people want to learn about the lives of local religious communities, not just their doctrines or beliefs. People want knowledge that facilitates civic engagement—knowledge that helps them to build relationships—rather than knowledge of religion for its own sake. The civic instincts of New Yorkers have thus led the Interfaith Center to develop an innovative lived religion pedagogy. In the final section of this chapter, I will explore the implications of this pedagogy through ethnographic sketches of two education programs for secondary school students—tracing the brief encounters among diverse New Yorkers at a mosque in Queens and a middle school in Manhattan.

ENCOUNTERING EVERYDAY MUSLIM LIVES

In October of 2010, I joined about fifty tenth graders from a predominantly Black, Latino, and Christian public high school in the South Bronx, on a field trip to explore New York’s religious diversity. With their teachers, I brought them to visit the city’s oldest and largest Hindu temple, a mid-sized mosque serving a South Asian community, and a storefront Chinese
Buddhist temple—all located a few blocks from each other in Flushing, Queens. At each site we spoke with a community leader, who answered students’ questions about their house of worship and their religious lives.

The students had prepared for the trip (and for the “Beliefs Systems” component of the standardized global history exam they were required to take at the end of the year) by spending a few days studying world religions. Their teachers gave them a set of handouts to complete in class, by filling in basic information about the history and beliefs of different religious traditions. The handout on Islam, for example, required students to note that the tradition was founded in the Middle East by a man named Muhammad, then required them to complete a table summarizing the Five Pillars of Islam, and ended with a few multiple choice questions. The students learned, for example, that “The word salat means prayer, something Muslims are commanded to do five times a day.” This decontextualized statement of doctrine encountered the realities of everyday religious life when we left the classroom and went to Queens.

When we arrived at the mosque, the students all took off their shoes, and the girls covered their hair, as we filed upstairs to the sparsely decorated prayer space. We spoke with the president of the mosque, while at the same time a dozen or so middle school boys from the mosque’s Islamic school pursued their regular study of the Qur’an. The room was filled with the lilting sounds of Quranic recitation, as the boys knelted on the floor, rocking back and forth, chanting passages from the well-worn texts lying before them. Our students were duly impressed when the president of the mosque explained that these boys were attempting to memorize the Qur’an—to learn over 6,000 verses of scripture by heart, in a language they don’t speak on a daily basis. It was a powerful image of religious devotion, but I’m afraid it blinded some of our students to the realities of these young boys’ lives.

At one point in the conversation, a group of students asked the president of the mosque a series of questions about the daily prayers. They seemed to be quite concerned about—or even shocked by—these prayers, and I wasn’t sure why. It gradually became clear that some of our students imagined Muslims attending five long prayer services every single day, like the church services most were more familiar with. They were understandably concerned about the implications of this demanding prayer schedule for everyday Muslim life. One student jumped right from these questions about the daily prayers to a blunt question about the boys we had seen studying the Qur’an: “Do they have a social life?” she wanted to know. The president of the mosque had enlisted one of these boys to help answer our questions, but at this point he jumped in and responded: “What do you think, we just keep praying the whole day? How would you make your life?” He reassured our students that the daily prayers take just a few minutes each, and that young Muslims still have plenty of time to play basketball and video games. Yes, he said, they do have a social life. “Do they eat lunch?” one of our students asked, and the president responded: “Now I know you’re joking!” But I’m not so sure.

For some of our students, I’m afraid, a decontextualized knowledge of Islamic doctrine had reinforced the all-too-popular image of Islamic extremism to paint a portrait of Muslims simply “praying the whole day”—and of Muslim teens entirely divorced from the social world these young people share. Of course, their teachers could have avoided this misunderstanding with a simple clarification about the nature of Muslim prayer. But our students’ confusion nevertheless illustrates the danger of learning about diverse religious traditions as though they were bodies of doctrine, ritual, and text, rather than the stuff of everyday social life.

The next day in class many students said meeting the boys at the mosque was their favorite part of the entire trip. They were especially pleased by another moment of conversation when one of the boys talked back to the president of the mosque, yelling “You can do it!” when he was asked to translate a verse of the Qur’an. These fleeting glimpses of community life seemed to humanize Muslims in our students’ eyes. When I asked them why the boys made such a big impression, one girl said simply: “Those kids was cool—they my homies now.” And when their teacher asked them, in a written assignment, to name two things they had learned on the trip, one student wrote: “That Buddhists have to shave their hair,” which is a story for another day, “and that Muslims have normal lives.”

This profound realization seems to have occurred both thanks to and in spite of the rudimentary knowledge of Islamic doctrine one may gain from a world religions curriculum. Learning about the Five Pillars of Islam may have allowed these students to ask the right questions, but it did not provide them with adequate answers. In order to understand the religious lives of their neighbors—and the landscape of American religious diversity—our students need a deeper engagement with contemporary lived religion. They need to get out of the classroom and meet their neighbors. And they need a religious studies pedagogy that places the five daily prayers and Quranic recitation in a social context that also includes basketball, video games, and lunch.

Sometimes, however, our students can stay in their classrooms, and their diverse neighbors will meet them there. In May of 2011, I facilitated a panel discussion of Muslim life in New York City at a predominantly White and largely secular independent school on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. It was an open-ended, wide-ranging conversation between about forty sixth graders, their teachers, and three very different Muslim New Yorkers. Over the course of about ninety minutes, we explored the histories of local Muslim communities, diverse women’s perspectives on veiling, the impact of 9/11 on Muslim life in the city, the panelists’ views of Osama bin Laden (who had been killed by U.S. forces just a few days before), and a number of other topics.
As at the mosque in Queens the previous fall, many of the students were curious about the five daily prayers and their impact on everyday Muslim life. But this time, the question was posed quite differently—in a way that opened the conversation to a wide range of Muslim practices and experiences. One student asked the panels' answer the strangest place you've ever prayed to accommodate the schedule of the daily prayers, and the panels' answers highlighted the diversity within American Muslim communities.

The first panelist to answer was an Egyptian-American college student from Brooklyn, and she described an occasion a few years before when she and a group of friends—three or four teenage Muslim girls, some veiled as she was, and some not—were shopping at an H&M clothing store in Manhattan, when they realized they were late for the afternoon prayer. She said they took a quick look around, agreed the carpet was clean enough, and decided to perform their prayers right where they were. In the charged context of New York after 9/11, I was anxious to hear how her story would end—how would the other customers respond to a group of teenage girls prostrating themselves on the floor of a fashionable clothing store? But it turned out everyone took it in stride. The panelist told the students that she and her friends got some quizzical looks, and then a few people came over to ask, politely, what they were doing. She told me later by email: "Seeing the curiosity in their eyes we simply explained to them that we were performing one of our daily prayers, and tried to make sure we could catch it on time. As long as the setting is pure and clean Islam allowed us to pray anywhere we were. Basically Islam is considerate of our lifetime and situations." And her narrative, too, provided the students with an understanding of Islam in the context of their own "lifetime and situations."

The next panelist to answer was an Indian-American woman with a master's degree in international political economy, who has worked for a number of nonprofit organizations combating stereotypes of Islam and American Muslims. Throughout the panel discussion, she articulated a flexible, theologically liberal interpretation of Islam, and she was quick to point out that she does not consider the daily prayers an absolute requirement for Muslim life. She said she enjoys prayer a great deal—she compared the prostrations to her yoga practice, and said the rhythm of the daily prayers helps keep her "centered" as a busy working parent—but said she does not usually pray five times a day, and doesn’t think this detracts from her relationship with Allah. Nevertheless, she spoke movingly about the time she prayed at a rest stop off the New Jersey Turnpike, because her more traditionally devout friends were worried about missing one of the daily prayers. It was 2002, and they were travelling together from New York City to Washington, D.C., to join a march against the war in Afghanistan. In this context, she said, her prayer by the turnpike—a prayer offered in a public space, in an oddly American landscape, while en route to the capital to make her voice heard on a pressing political issue—felt like a statement of Muslim membership in American society.

The last panelist to speak on this issue was a Senegalese-American man who is the founder of a K-8 Muslim school in the Bronx, and very active in local community politics. He tended to articulate a more rigid, traditionalist view of Islam, and unfortunately he never got around to sharing the most unusual place he’d ever prayed, because he first took it upon himself to “correct” the previous panelist’s “misunderstanding” of her faith. “Rules are rules,” he said, and Allah demands five prayers a day from every single Muslim. You can make them up later if you miss one, he clarified, but if you neglect them entirely you’ll surely pay for this sin in the final judgment. With a broad smile on his face, and his tongue ever-so-slightly in cheek, he said that his own mother-in-law often skips some of her prayers, and he recently told her she would go to hell for it. He then cracked himself up with self-effacing laughter as he related his mother-in-law’s reply: “See you there, too!”

Judging from their written responses to the panel discussion, many of the students were taken aback by this man’s thinly veiled suggestion that a fellow panelist was going to hell for what he considered her misinterpretation of the five daily prayers. This may not be the kind of civil dialogue we are working to foster in our nation’s classrooms, but witnessing such pointed debate among diverse Muslims was clearly a valuable learning experience for many of these relatively secular sixth graders. One student wrote, for example:

I was surprised in how they all thought about their religion. By this, I mean that they had very different ways of thinking. They all had different opinions of daily life and practices. I feel like they had many disagreements, which made more information flow out. They each had their own way of thinking, which I thought was quite interesting.

Another student expressed a similar sentiment:

I was surprised to find that these three Muslims all had different views of their religion. I think this experience was a lot better than learning from books because you got to hear what people actually think, not just what they are supposed to think.

It should not be so surprising, I suppose, that there is a wide range of religious belief and practice among the 600,000 to 800,000 Muslims living in New York City (not to mention the nearly 1.6 billion in the rest of the world). But this is precisely the sort of misunderstanding that has been popularized by the study of “world religions.”

When religious traditions are imagined as static, homogenous objects clearly defined and bounded by doctrine, by “what they are supposed to
think” rather than “what people actually think”—it may be difficult to recognize the common humanity of our religiously diverse neighbors. These sixth graders were, in fact, about to complete a remarkably subtle, year-long religious studies curriculum, but when our public conversation about religious diversity is defined by reductive generalizations like “salat means prayer, something Muslims are commanded to do five times a day,” our students can easily lose track of the fact that individual Muslims “have [their] own way[s] of thinking,” just like everyone else.

The primary goal of the community-based religious diversity education programs I’ve described in this section—and of lived religion pedagogies more broadly—is to help our students encounter their neighbors in their full humanity and historical complexity. This encounter may take place in a visit to a house of worship or a conversation with community leaders, in the pages or frames of a novel or film, in a student-centered research project or a carefully crafted classroom lecture. But wherever it happens, this encounter with difference is an essential prerequisite to informed participation in the civic life of a religiously diverse society.

NOTES
3. For a critical analysis of the current state of religious studies in American schools (including discussions of widely used textbooks, national curricular standards, and underlying assumptions about religion) see Nord, Does God Make a Difference, 41–99. One need not accept Nord’s far-reaching critique of the secularization of American education to recognize the dispiriting picture he paints of religious diversity education in our secondary schools.
4. Nord, Does God Make a Difference, 82–83, original emphasis.
5. Nord, Does God Make a Difference, 133–136, 224–225. For a discussion of Nord’s largely theological approach to religious studies see Bruce Grellle,
12 Religious Diversity and Public Education

The Example of American Muslims

Amir Hussain

Before discussing education, religious diversity, and American Muslims, I need to begin with thanks. In the Qur’an, the word for unbelief, kufr, is often contrasted with the word for thanks, shukr. The implication is clear: the person who does not believe is the person who is not thankful to God. My thanks to everyone at Fresno State who worked so hard on the Ethics, Religion, and Civil Discourse conference from which this volume emerged. In particular, I would like to thank Professors Vincent Biondo and Andrew Fiala for inviting me to be a part of this volume.

I am from a quiet, sleepy little town, El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los ángeles Del Río de Porthuínucula (or for those of you, like me, who don’t speak Spanish, the Town of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels, on the River Porthuínucula). This town is sometimes also known as Los Angeles. Today, it is at once the largest Catholic archdiocese in the U.S., and the most religiously diverse city in the world. For over fifteen years, it has informed my thinking about comparative religion and religious diversity.

As I stated, I am from Los Angeles, so let me write a little more about, well, me! I do this not to be self-indulgent. I am from Los Angeles, and people from Los Angeles tend toward self-indulgence. I do this because I think my example is illustrative of how a number of non-Christian students come almost by accident to the study of religion and theology. Some of you may be wondering how a working-class Muslim boy from Toronto (the most cosmopolitan city in the world, according to the United Nations) ends up a professor of theology at a Catholic university in Los Angeles.

In 1983, I began my first undergraduate year at the University of Toronto. At that time, I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up, I just knew that I didn’t want to work in the same factories that my parents did. I spent summers with my father building trucks for Ford, and picking up my mother at the end of her shifts from the plant she worked in making fans. Those were the glory days of production, when, as the poet laureate of the assembly line, Bob Seger, sang, “The big line moved one mile an hour / So loud it really hurt.” Working on the assembly line made me want to pursue any other line of work. However, if you had told me then that I