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Teaching Islam at a (Super) Catholic College: What it Means for My Students and Myself

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What's a Catholic College?

I grew up agnostic and converted to Islam when I was eighteen. A lifetime later, I now teach at a Catholic, Jesuit, liberal arts college. Like many religious studies educators, I continue to mull over questions about the intersections of identity, metaphysics, and socio-politics. So, when I began working at Le Moyne College, I wondered what kinds of encounters with religion my new position would have in store. I was especially curious because before coming to Le Moyne, I had taught only at state institutions (in California and Tennessee).

Since joining the faculty at Le Moyne, I have engaged in a number of on- and off-campus mission-related programs, and these programs have raised a number of questions for me about what it means to teach where I teach: What is Catholic education? What is Jesuit education? To what extent can non-adherents of a tradition teach or study within an institutional context that espouses a particular tradition? My experience has shown me that by deepening my engagement with the Jesuit mission of the college I am better able to serve my students, and even better understand my own location in the pluralistic landscape of higher education.

As Amir Hussain (Loyola University, Marymount), former editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (*JAAR*) and current faculty member at a Jesuit institution writes in his

"Editor's Note" for the *JAAR* in 2011: "I wonder what the members of the National Association of Bible Instructors (the forerunner of the AAR) would have thought of their journal one day being edited by a Canadian Muslim scholar of Islam teaching at a Catholic university." I appreciate Hussain's playful gesture here because it underscores how intermingled religious studies pedagogy can be. That his self-conscious reflection on the context of religious and national pluralism makes its way into the flagship journal of the field is a positive sign for me, especially in a world of growing Islamophobia.

As someone who studies and teaches about a particular religious tradition (Islam), I acknowledge the value of assigning categories, but this has its limitations and one's religious identity is frequently a poor indicator of what people actually believe. (I write more on this in "Muslim in the Classroom: Pedagogical Reflections on Disclosing Religious Identity," published in *Teaching Theology and Religion* [2016].) To illustrate this, I often invite my students to dig deep by asking ten Catholics to describe what their traditions mean to them, or to describe Who or What God is. Will they find ten different answers? I think so. As I've tried to figure out what Catholic education means to people, I too have encountered a range of voices.

Engaging the Jesuit Mission

Because my undergraduate and Ph.D. programs were both at state schools, I didn't know to what extent I might engage Jesuit-related professional development opportunities at Le Moyne; I had no context to compare. Fortunately, I've been encouraged by the impact of mission-related workshops, conferences, and study groups on my intellectual development as a teacher, scholar, and citizen. In the broadest sense, teaching as a Muslim at a Catholic college reminds me of the importance of interreligious encounters and helps me, I hope, model and live the kinds of interreligious encounters that I encourage for my students.

Conferences like "Collegium"—an annual weeklong colloquy on Catholic higher education—and "Islam at Jesuit Colleges and Universities," at the University of San Francisco in 2015, have offered me a window into live questions and challenges that diverse educators at Catholic institutions face. I have the opportunity to reflect further on the topic at an upcoming conference at Seattle University, where I'll participate in a panel entitled "Islam at Jesuit Institutions: Inter-religious Dialogue, Social Justice, and Campus Life."

Despite my own positive experiences encountering and engaging Jesuit education on and off campus, challenges of language and stereotypes still pervade the minds of students as well as faculty; think, for example, about the debates on the relationship of religious studies to theology. My department offers religious studies as well as theology courses, so my attention to these debates has heightened in many ways. To illustrate the disparities in thinking about religiously affiliated institutions, let me conclude this blog post with two brief anecdotes—one about faculty and one about students.

Confusing Categories

Faculty story: A job candidate for a position at Le Moyne once expressed to me that the school

attracted her because it was “faith-based.” As I learned more about what she meant, it became clear that the candidate did not fully understand the context of Jesuit education or the particular institution at which she sought employment. It would be untrue to say that Jesuit education didn’t have a “faith-based” component, but looking around the United States, for example, what this component means to Jesuit schools and their faculty, broadly speaking, is quite different than what it means for, say, Liberty University or any number of “faith-based” institutions. Regarding my argument about religious identity as a poor indicator of, well, a lot of things, I think this becomes straightforward when one examines the range of “faith-based” institutions across the country. (She didn’t get the job.)

Student story: A linguistic trope that I often press my students to explain is when they refer to someone as “super-Catholic.” Many of my students, apparently, have a “super-Catholic” member of their family. “Is what you mean,” I try to gently provoke them, “that your uncle is kind of obnoxious and not too interested in learning about diverse opinions?” Although students may not have this blunt characterization in mind when explaining their family member, they often agree with my interpretation. I’ll follow up: “Well, what about your Jesuit professors at Le Moyne—who spent over a decade training to enter the order? Do you consider them super-Catholic?” (If anyone connected to the Le Moyne community is super-Catholic, I should think it would be the Jesuits.) At this point, I suspect I succeed in slightly confusing students and problematizing the imprecision of “super-Catholic” code language. Indeed the institutional context aids me here in guiding students through a teachable moment about word choice and the assumptions we hold about various traditions.

Making Context work for Students

To help students understand the mission of their institution, I incorporate Le Moyne’s mission statement into some course assignments to invite student reflection on the *raison d’etre* of their liberal arts experience. Unsurprisingly, I encounter a range of responses. Some students, for example, don’t know that Jesuit means Catholic. At the other end of awareness, a Catholic religious studies major once shared something very perceptive with me: It’s easy to be a student at Le Moyne and pretty much ignore its Catholic-ness, but at the same time it’s also easy to engage with that part of the school if you choose to go that route.

To further help my students reflect on institutional context and best appreciate the purpose behind their required courses (all Le Moyne students must take any religious studies class as part of the core curriculum), I briefly share at the beginning of the semester that I’m a convert, but that our course will ask us—professor included—to approach material from a position of epoche (suspension or bracketing of personal convictions). I find that flagging my positionality (while leaving its particulars undefined) as well as our methodological approach signals to my students that no one is out to convert them. (Although if I were out to convert them, wouldn’t it be odd that a Catholic hired someone to convert its students to Islam? What would that even mean—theologically, logistically?) Although I rarely make reference to my own Muslim identity after the first week of class, my courses on Islam focus on issues of race and privilege, so I know my students cannot escape the fact that their teacher is a white convert. As one student

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recently wrote in an anonymous feedback activity, “When I tell my sisters I have a White professor for this class, they are mind blown.”

In conclusion, I consistently find that my typical 18-22-year-olds students appreciate the vibe of the institution, but they’re not necessarily convinced it’s because of its Jesuit Catholic heritage—even if I’m convinced that the institution’s affiliation affects students more than they might suspect. I also find that students tend to appreciate that a Catholic institution would offer classes about all sorts of different religions (as Le Moyne does). For many reasons, including a curriculum that values courses on Islam, I—and I think most of my students as well—consider Le Moyne a super Catholic college. Perhaps even a super-Catholic college.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/06/teaching-islam-super-catholic-college-means-students/

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