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## Service Learning and Religious Studies: Propaganda or Pedagogy

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### Introduction

No question, service learning is gaining popularity as a pedagogical tool along side the more traditional course requirements such as papers, tests, journals, and class participation in higher education. Even *U.S. News & World Report*, in its recent edition ranking colleges and universities, included an article that called "combining community work with class work ... a hot trend on college campuses these days" (96). More faculty are incorporating it into their courses and more research points to its pedagogical effectiveness to achieve learning objectives.

Our own discipline has not been immune to the growing interest in service learning. A session at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion brought together experienced practitioners and interested participants to critically examine service learning as a pedagogical strategy in religious studies courses. Interest from the session led to a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion for the 1999 national conference, "The Future of Service: Service Learning in Theology and Religious Studies." Over sixty-five participants came to consider the effect of service learning on our institutions, our discipline, our students, our community partners, and ultimately on ourselves. Continuing interest in the pedagogy within the discipline has led to a pre-conference to the 2000 AAR/SBL Annual Meeting entitled, "Learning with/in Communities: A Workshop on Best Practices in Experiential Learning."

In addition, the American Academy of Higher Education has agreed to extend their book series, "Service Learning in the Disciplines" to include a volume on Religious Studies. With a publication date planned for 2001, the volume will serve as a much needed resource for those within the discipline who have struggled to integrate service learning in new or existing courses and those who have not done so but are interested in trying. Articles will include global reflections on issues related to service learning as well as examples of courses in representative sub-disciplines that have used service learning to advance learning goals. The editors hope that the volume will bring more voices into critical and sustained conversation about service learning in the discipline.

Service learning presents unique challenges and questions to Theology and Religious Studies Departments. For example, disagreement rages over the term "service." Some see it as inextricably implicated in the tradition of Christian charity or mission and thus perpetuating a dependent relationship of the served to the server. Such privileging of a colonizing Christian notion of service is clearly unacceptable. Those of us who, even in a context where the term "service" has not been fully deconstructed, choose to use service as a classroom pedagogy must commit ourselves to asking critical questions about the meaning and the activity of service in service learning. What kind of definition of religion does it assume or model, either implicitly or explicitly? Does it diminish the scientific study of religion or reduce religious studies courses to subliminal messages of confessional propaganda? Or is it possible to include community service simply as a pedagogical activity that adds to the body of descriptive data specific to the discipline without reference to normative claims?

Using community service as a classroom requirement opens up this nest of issues related to the very self-definition of the discipline. For this reason, the editors of the upcoming AAHE volume asked Fred Glennon from LeMoyne College to give critical attention to the dilemma of service learning in the discipline of religious studies. What follows is a summary of his reflection.

### Religious Studies: Descriptive or Normative

The use of service learning as a pedagogical tool in Religious Studies concerns some professors who wonder whether or not service learning commits a course or department to a value laden agenda in its pedagogy. By incorporating service learning, does a Religious Studies professor or department run the risk of undermining an academic approach to the study of religion, with its emphasis on tolerance and neutrality, by connecting students with committed practitioners who advocate particular religious perspectives and values?

There is reason to wonder. Service learning, a form of experiential learning, shares the critique of higher education as an allegedly value-neutral enterprise. It has normative goals in its de-

sire to educate students for citizenship and to commitment to the broader social good, education's responsibility for the welfare of the community, and education's role in promoting social change or producing students who are agents of social change. At the very least, service learning is a pedagogical approach that intends to generate changes in the students who participate, to move them out of the narrow confines of self-interest, and to see that they are citizens who must be committed to the good of others as well.

Whether or not this pedagogical approach does undermine an academic approach to religion depends, therefore, on how we understand the nature of religion and the discipline of Religious Studies, on how we view the relationship between epistemology and pedagogy, and on what we think is the purpose of higher education. Is religion simply a phenomenon of human experience or does it seek change in society or in individuals? Is the study of religion an objective and descriptive discipline, and those who study it should approach it in a detached way? Or is the only way to study religion to become involved with it, to embrace it? Is experience valuable or not in learning about religion? How do we know what we know? Is it purely from objective disinterested observation? Or does engagement with the subject in some way critically affect our knowing? Does the answer to this question affect how we should teach the subject matter? What contribution can Religious Studies make to higher education?

The debate about the nature of Religious Studies as an academic discipline has epistemology and pedagogical implications for those who study and teach it. Darlene Juschka notes that the debate has resulted in an identity crisis for the discipline, caught between interpreting data religiously (e.g., theology) and interpreting religious data (e.g., the human and social sciences) (1997). To resolve this identity crisis, many participants in the field have adopted the identity and epistemology of the scientist, and see Religious Studies as scientific, which Donald Wiebe defines as "the attempt only to understand and explain that activity rather than to be involved in it" (1998: 95).

Wiebe suggests that the only way the academic study of religion can be taken seriously as a contributor to human knowledge is through accepting the objective stance of the dispassionate observer that is the norm for scientific knowledge at the university. Those who adopt this identity fear that any religious orientation on the part of the scholar (some use the terms "impassioned participant" or "confessional practitioner") could become a disguised form of indoctrination. Wiebe argues that this could have disastrous results for the discipline and the university. Thus, a study of religion directed toward spiritual liberation of the individual or of the human race as a whole, toward the moral welfare of the human race, or toward any ulterior end than that of knowledge itself, should not find a home in the university; for if allowed in, its sectarian concerns can only contaminate the quest for a scientific knowledge of religions and will eventually undermine the very institution from which it originally sought its legitimization (1998, 97). The only way to eliminate this risk is for scholars in Religious Studies not to invest themselves in the data, but to be neutral observers and to use their interpretive skills to reveal the truth about religious phenomena.

While agreeing with the concerns about indoctrination, many professors in Religious Studies find an objective, scientific approach epistemologically and pedagogically unsatisfactory.

The reason is that they see this approach as a misguided attempt by the scientist to distance the topic of study from the subjects, professors and students, in the name of objectivity and neutrality. For example, Parker Palmer has argued recently that there is an intricate connection between epistemology, pedagogy, and ethics. The relationship of the knower to the known becomes the basis for the relationship of the actor to the world. In the objective, scientific epistemology what is known is kept at arms-length and thus teachers and students are disconnected from what they know. Passion or subjectivity are seen as problematic not virtues. Why? Palmer writes, "When a thing ceases to be an object and becomes a vital, interactive part of our lives, it might get a grip on us, biasing us toward it, thus threatening the purity of our knowledge once again" (1998, 51). Clearly, Wiebe expresses this concern.

Such an approach, many contend, does not do justice to the religious phenomena in question. One of the claims in Religious Studies, especially introductory textbooks, is that religions provide people with a way of generating meaning and order in their lives (see Ring 1998, for example). Religions enable individuals and communities to make sense of their experiences; thus they are a vital part of their lives. By treating religion as an object and not a subject, and by distancing the subject from the subjects looking at the phenomenon, the "scientific" approach to the study of religion does not fully grasp the essence of religions and their vitality.

Nor does the scientific approach do justice to the passion many students and teachers of religion have for knowing the subject. In our postmodern world, there are no neutral observers or universal audiences. What you believe and the audience you address shapes what you have to say (and even how you teach). Many teachers and students of religion seek to bring their previous knowledge and experiences with religion into dialogue with their study of religion. They have a different epistemological starting-point. As Palmer writes, "knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what we know" (1998: 54). Past knowledge and experiences may indeed become what Dewey called "miseducative"; they may arrest or distort future learning and experience (1997, 25). But they do not have to do so. They can also be fruitful starting points for understanding the subject of religion. The concern should not be to exclude these experiences, as the scientist seeks to do, but to enable them to emerge in the discussion of religion in a way that is inclusive, respectful, and leads to new insight and understanding.

Finally, the scientific approach, Palmer contends, may not only distort our relationship with what and how we know, it may even be morally deforming. By setting students at distance from what they know, we keep them from taking responsibility for it or from action in response to it. This runs counter to what many teaching Religious Studies intend. Warren Frisina argues that the purpose of higher education is not only the expansion of knowledge, as Wiebe contends, but also "the enlargement of meaning which is the ultimate object of the educating act" (1997, 30). It is here that the Humanities in general, and Religious Studies in particular, can make significant contributions. Religious Studies is one of the places where teachers and students ask the questions: Who are we? What can we know? What shall we become? Our literatures, philosophies, and histories have always provided a critical ethical edge and engendered transformative

experiences for students. Thus, contra Wiebe, Frisina contends that what we do should contribute significantly "to the intellectual, moral, and yes (though not in the way it is usually understood), spiritual development of our students" and "directly to the overall health and well being of the community" (1997, 33). If we lose these contributions, it is difficult to see how we can continue to gain support from a skeptical public that questions the value of Religious Studies.

### Service Learning and the Dilemma of Religious Studies

Making these contributions may require that we reject the objective, scientific as well as the apologetic, indoctrinating approach to the study of religion, as many teachers of religion have sought to do. Although they use various terms to discuss the alternatives they propose, they all tend to share a common perspective: religion can be understood and taught "as a live option," a phenomenon that has the potential to change lives (see Webb 1999, 149). They seek to study and teach religion in a way that does not distance themselves from religious phenomena or religious experience out of fear that such encounters will taint or bias their knowledge and teaching of it. Rather, they embrace religious phenomena and experience and invite students to do the same conceding that all knowing is relational and, as is the case with all relationships, in knowing religion lies the possibility that we will "have encounters and exchanges that will inevitably alter us" (Palmer 1998, 54).

It is this framework that most professors who use service learning in the Religious Studies classroom share. The responses of over thirty professors to a survey I distributed indicate that, on the one hand, they see service learning as a way to engage students more fully with the subject and subjects of religion. Ninety-three percent of respondents believed that service would enhance student understanding/knowledge of the subject, and 72% felt it would improve critical thinking. On the other hand, they saw service learning as a way to connect student knowledge and action with critical social issues, either to develop student perspectives on social issues (72%), to promote change in student values (55%), to encourage citizenship (66%), and/or to promote social change (62%).

What do these results suggest? Most respondents incorporate service because they feel that this experiential way of exploring the subject and subjects of religion is crucial for student learning and for understanding the essence of religion. In the words of one respondent, "religion is a natural discipline for service learning." Moreover, the results suggest that respondents use service as a means to get students to live an integrated life, to connect their knowledge with the critical issues that affect their lives, and to respond in appropriate ways to the challenges and issues they discover. This is part of the contribution Religious Studies can make to higher education.

Should professors in Religious Studies use the pedagogy of service learning? Palmer contends that the choice of pedagogical technique should flow from the identity and integrity of the teacher. His point is that teachers do not simply teach what they know, but who they are. To teach well the teacher should have

some sense of who she is and of the nature of her discipline and that technique should flow from that sense of identity, from the "heart" of the teacher (1998, 23-25). If, as a teacher of religion, you feel that a scientific approach to Religious Studies is the only valid approach, and that the purpose of higher education is fundamentally to generate and transmit knowledge, it is difficult to see how you would use service learning. As a pedagogical tool, service learning does not simply aid the intellectual development of students; it also contributes to their moral development and to the well being of the community. Moreover, it is a form of experiential education, suggesting that experience is critical in the educational process, something that many, that adopt an objective epistemology, distrust.

If your approach to the study of religion is relational, and you think that experience can contribute significantly to that study; and if you believe that higher education has normative as well as intellectual goals, then service learning may be an appropriate pedagogy. According to the surveys I conducted, service learning has provided a means for teachers of religion to engage religious phenomena and critical social issues, to enable students to connect their learning with their world. Such engagement requires an experiential approach to the discipline, not only for the teacher, but also for the student. In this way, the subject of religion once again becomes a "live option," a phenomenon that has the potential to change lives. Thus, service learning enables those who share this view of religion to teach with integrity by connecting what they teach with how they teach.

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