A Profound Unknowing

The Challenge of Religion in the Liberal Education of World Citizens

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TO ASK WHAT IT MEANS to be a world citizen is to ask a profound ethical question about how one should live with and for others whose worldviews are (sometimes radically) different from one's own. It is a question that has been asked for many centuries, but perhaps never with such urgency as in our contemporary context, in which grappling with difference, directly or indirectly, has become a part of daily life for a great many people.

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To the surprise of many secular scholars who predicted in the mid-twentieth century that the religious life of human beings was moving swiftly along a trajectory toward privatization, if not elimination, religion has reemerged as one of the most critical and threatening markers of difference, as the rise of religiously motivated conflict globally and the deep entrenchment of the "culture wars" in the U.S. amply attest. Discussions of world citizenship (or even U.S. citizenship) that elide the challenge of grappling with religious worldviews expose a covert intolerance at the very core of secularism, calling into question the "liberality" of liberal education. Indeed, the ethical imperative of engaging with different worldviews not only demands *that* religions be taught, but also raises some trenchant and controversial questions regarding *how* religious worldviews should be taught.

As a secular teacher of religion at a sometimes fervently secular small liberal arts college, I have had occasion to consider such questions and their implications in concrete as well as abstract terms. The traditional approach to the academic study of religion has most frequently entailed approaching religious traditions as static and discrete entities, "isms" that could be studied objectively through a secular-rational lens. The traditional religious studies curriculum is a smorgasbord of these "isms," perhaps with a few thematic courses thrown in for dessert. The "isms" examined are, for the most part, limited to those traditions deemed to be "world religions," and their classroom contours are usually doctrinal, as dictated by the Christocentric model that shaped the field of religious studies. An alternative approach, often combined with the first, grows out of area studies and introduces religious traditions as components of cultural, geographical, and linguistic contexts; students study religions of the Middle East or East Asia—or, far less frequently, religions of Africa or South America.

Students can and do learn about religious traditions through such rubrics, of course, and they might come to comprehend, at least to some extent, the ways in which others view the world differently from themselves. But if we hold the teaching of world citizenship to be a central goal in our courses, the traditional curriculum has some notable weaknesses. First and foremost, the truth claims of religious worldviews are examined, but the truth claims of secular-rationalist worldviews are seldom challenged or even recognized as such. Religious traditions remain "other," as do the people who view the world through various religious perspectives. Secular worldviews are implicitly privileged as truth; religious worldviews

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are implicitly treated as misapprehensions of reality. Such an approach might teach a degree of tolerance, but it does not challenge students or teachers to question their own perceptions and assumptions. And, in our contemporary global context, that questioning lies at the heart of the liberal education of ethical world citizens. The serious dialogue that world citizenship demands is impossible if the citizen enters discussion convinced of the truth—or even just the superiority—of his or her own perspective. That is why religious perspectives were excluded from the secular academy to begin with, after all. When secularism becomes an exclusivist worldview, it ceases to be liberal in the sense that "liberal education" implies. Perhaps it even ceases to be secular.

I am not questioning the validity or the value of a secular worldview; the separation of church and state that underlies the secular orientation of liberal education is both necessary and efficacious in our pluralistic society. Secular rationalism is, moreover, the very foundation of the method of inquiry that I am advocating. Rather, I am questioning those secularists who (implicitly or explicitly) claim to have determined the truth *prior* to inquiry and dialogue—secularists who set their own truth claims against those of religious traditions and thus become precisely what they oppose. Perhaps because secularism is increasingly felt to be under siege from the "religious right," some secularists have dug in their heels, insisting on their privileged claim to truth rather than affirming and enacting the liberal commitment to inquiry and dialogue. The ethical challenge of world citizenship—that is, how we situate ourselves in a world where the overwhelming majority of others view the world through religious lenses—and the fundamental commitments of liberal education demand that religious worldviews be

recognized as having a legitimate voice in the ongoing exchange of ideas.

The disposition of unknowing

Studying religious worldviews can present a provocative and potentially illuminating challenge to secular worldviews—if religions are studied in such a way that students and teachers confront the existence and limitations of their own assumptions. But this kind of teaching is exceedingly difficult; once we question whether secular rationalism does in fact provide the clear lens through which the cloudy lenses of other worldviews can be understood, from what position do we begin? Frankly, I don't know—and it is from that *disposition* that I try to teach.

To illustrate this disposition of uncertainty, let me explain how I teach Understanding Religious Traditions in a Global Context, the introductory course that replaced World Religions in our recent curricular revisions in the religious studies program at Beloit College. The students and I begin by exploring the ethics of studying others in our global context. As a starting point, I draw a simple distinction between "comprehension" and "understanding" that effectively introduces the disposition of questioning oneself as well as others. "Comprehension" implies a comprehensive grasp of the object of study, a complete and totalizing form of knowledge in which the limitations and assumptions of the knower are not acknowledged. By contrast, the etymology of "understanding" suggests a very different disposition in relation to the unknown: one stands beneath what one does not know. The unknown becomes our teacher.

Understanding entails recognizing one's own very limited angle of vision and the ways in which it shapes what and how we come to know. It also entails engaging imaginatively with the perspectives of others, trying on, in a necessarily flawed and incomplete manner, different angles of vision. Understanding is a dialogical process of questioning oneself and the other that is guided by the (endless) search for truth. Understanding requires that we learn *from*, as well as about, the others that we study—others that seek to make sense of their lives and their worlds through the angles of vision they inherit and encounter, just as we ourselves do. At the same time, the ethical disposition of understanding also demands that we recognize both the necessity and the complexity of making ethical judgments and taking ethical action in the world, because it is founded on a responsibility to others that renders an easy "live and let live" form of cultural relativism inadequate.

For most students, the implications of this orientation toward the study of religion do not become evident until we begin to explore particular religious worldviews. Initially, we study the major religious traditions as represented in a "world religions" textbook; since these representations have taken on a life of their own, it is important that students be familiar with them even as we question how they came into being and what effects they have had on the lives of religious people. We start with Christianity so as to understand more deeply how our contemporary conceptions of both secularism and religion are deeply rooted in Christian worldviews, the European Enlightenment, and the legacy of colonialism, then shift to consider in turn Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam.

For each tradition, however, we not only examine the textbook account, but also read a novel or memoir and view a film. It is much more difficult to objectify, essentialize, or dismiss the worldviews of others when one is moved by personal narratives that make vivid the ways in which religious worldviews shape and are shaped by the lives of individuals and their communities. The narratives also present encounters among different worldviews, religious and secular, demonstrating both the possibility and the difficulty of the dialogical model of understanding that we ourselves are trying to cultivate. Finally, examining personal narratives also counteracts the tendencies we might have to fall into extremes of absolutism or relativism (both of which render different worldviews incommensurable and thus effectively shut down dialogue) by fostering some level of identification with the persons whose lives are represented.

Throughout our explorations, I try to resist our desire to come to a conclusion, to teach instead the questions themselves and the act of questioning. As a result of this approach, students frequently find themselves becoming uncertain of their prior assumptions about the world. One first-year student wrote of his experience in the course,

> All of these new ideas and feelings left me not knowing what to think. I had always

felt sorry for religious people. It was almost as if I thought I knew better. Seeing people worship made me feel bad that they still had such primitive ideas in such a scientific world. As we progressed in our studies I saw how very wrong I was. . . . The beauty of many of these religions was astounding to me. For once I felt that I was the one that was left out, that they had something I didn't understand (Robinson 2004).

These words provide a powerful indication of the kind of impoverished perspective that can accompany the belief that one's own worldview—whatever it may be—is correct or superior to the worldviews of others. They also point to the ways in which the study of religious worldviews can enrich our perspectives on life, the world, and relationships with others. According to the same student, "the most important lesson I have learned in this class is how little I know. That seems like a simple statement, but really realizing that you do not know as much as you think you do is incredibly humbling. I have gone from thinking that I have it all figured out, to wanting to try to see how others have figured it out."

Acting without knowing

In light of the ethical question that underlies the notion of world citizenship—how should we live with and for others who hold worldviews different from our own?—this increased propensity for self-doubt and for learning from others would appear to be a positive development. At the same time, world citizenship demands not only reflective thought, but also effective action. One of the undeniable dangers of teaching questions rather than answers is that students will be immobilized by doubt. How does one ground ethical actions in a disposition of unknowing?

Again, my only answer is to teach the question, both through concrete examples and abstract inquiry. We do not simply focus

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on the "beauty" of different traditions in the course; we also grapple with the hatred and oppression that occurs within and among different worldviews. But we do so by inquiring into the circumstances that generated such hatred and oppression, as well as asking questions of ourselves about the assumptions that underlie our own interpretations. For instance, this past fall, when we discussed practices of veiling among some Muslim women, several students asserted that the veil was a symbol of the oppression of women by a patriarchal society. Another student objected: she had built a friendship with an exchange student from Egypt who freely chose to wear the veil as a symbol of her faith and as a means to diminish her sexual objectification by men, and who resented the ethnocentric interpretation of the practice by some Western feminists. How could we discount the voice of that woman? The ensuing conversation did not reach any clear resolution of the issue; rather, we explored some of our own assumptions about what constitutes freedom and oppression, and affirmed the need to examine carefully the particular circumstances under which veiling is practiced before deeming it to be oppressive—the need to *understand* as much as possible prior to making judgments and taking action.

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On a more abstract level, we ask to what extent ethical action needs to be grounded in certain knowledge, and to what extent it stems from our relationship with and responsibility toward others. Again, we resist coming to a conclusion, but we do grapple with our human imperfection—our inability to know all we might need to know about any situation prior to acting, and our inability to feel fully our responsibility to all the others who seem distant from us or different from us. And we affirm the need to act in the midst of the endless process of questioning, of gaining understanding and reducing distance—to act given what we know and feel, with the humble recognition that we might not always be "right."

The liberal propensity for questioning one's own assumptions and hypotheses, while it is *de rigueur* in anthropology (and, indeed, can be said to lie at the heart of scholarly approaches from the scientific method to literary analysis), can be perceived as downright dangerous in the religious studies classroom—and not without reason, if teaching religion involves proselytizing. But there is a drastic and crucial difference between promulgating a particular religious worldview and teaching students to *understand* multiple religious worldviews. It is true that reflecting on the self in light of the worldviews of others can lead students to change the way they think about the world, sometimes dramatically. Such transformations, a mark of student learning and effective teaching in other fields of study, can, in the study of religion, appear to threaten secular rationalism itself. As I have suggested above, however, a position that rejects deep liberal inquiry into religious worldviews simply because they are "religious" is a much greater threat to liberal learning, especially in light of globalization.

There is indeed a danger in the disposition of unknowing that I have outlined here, one that I feel keenly every time I teach—not the danger of calling into question my secular assumptions, but the danger of turning unknowing itself into the "correct" worldview. My greatest challenge as a teacher and a student is to continue to learn from others who do not value questioning in the way that I do, be they secular or religious. And, while it may be impossible for me to enter into a dialogue about "truth" with such people, I might still be able to learn a great deal from them about how I should live, with and for others, as a world citizen. □

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REFERENCE

Robinson, W. 2004. World religion: An ongoing lesson in the extent of my own stupidity. Paper submitted in Religious Studies 101, Understanding Religious Traditions in a Global Context, Beloit College.