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Fostering Ethical Engagement Across Religious Difference in the Context of Rhetorical Education

Michael-John DePalma

Abstract: *At a moment in which religious diversity is ever-increasing in the United States and more than three-quarters of the world's population identifies with a religious tradition, it is important for writing teachers to consider how to best cultivate writers who are equipped to build identifications across religious difference. This essay traces my efforts to engage this exigence in my advanced undergraduate writing course at Baylor University entitled Religious Rhetorics and Spiritual Writing (RRSW). In what follows, I outline my pedagogical goals, course design, and approach to teaching RRSW. I then share the results of a qualitative pilot study that used teacher-research methodology to develop an understanding of what students learned about engaging across religious difference in RRSW. Results of this study show that students learned the value of approaching rhetorical engagement across religious difference with dispositions of hospitality, curiosity, and humility. Specifically, they came to see 1) the importance of using language that is grounded in writers' personal histories and accessible to (religiously) diverse audiences; 2) the value of approaching religious and spiritual writing as a process of inquiry; and 3) the significance of holding capacious notions of religious and spiritual rhetorics. After discussing the implications of students' learning in RRSW, I conclude the essay by articulating ways that more intentional engagement with scholarship in interfaith studies can assist teachers of writing in our efforts to enrich writers' capacities to engage with religious difference in productive ways.*

"Our sacred traditions should help us live more thoughtfully, generously, and hopefully with the tensions of our age. But to grasp that, we must look anew at the very nature of faith, and at what it might really mean to take religion seriously in human life and in the world."

—Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters—and How to Talk about It*

"We must treat one another with empathy, attentiveness, and trust; we must take the time to invent and continually reinvent our ideas in the light of informed disagreement; we must care enough about our own views to try to persuade others of them, but not so much that we are unwilling to change them; we must listen with care to people who tell us we are wrong; we must behave with grace when other views prevail; we must argue with passion but without rancor, with commitment but without intransigence."

—Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political Theory, and Composition Classes*

Scholars in rhetoric and writing studies have long been committed to discovering how we might best equip rhetors to engage across difference in ways that promote understanding, connection, and empathy while also allowing space for dissonance and disagreement (see, for example, Baca, et al.; Bizzell and Herzberg; Blankenship; Canagarajah; Hum and Lyon; Pratt; Ratcliffe; Trimbur). Conceptions of rhetoric that have for decades remained vital to the work of the field reflect enduring concerns about how to productively negotiate difference. Wayne Booth, for example, offers his notion of “rhetorology” as a form of “listening rhetoric” that seeks to “reduc[e] misunderstanding by paying full attention to opposing views” (10). Rhetorology, Booth hopes, “teaches that learning to listen, and encouraging our opponents to listen, can *sometimes* yield moments of sheer illumination: a trustful pursuit of truth replacing what had appeared to be a hopeless battle” (172). Kenneth Burke conceptualizes rhetoric as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation among interlocutors who are “both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (21). Efforts to traverse our divisions and achieve consubstantiality, he argues, necessitate identification. Sonja J. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, too, theorize invitational rhetoric as “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination.” In the midst of our ongoing encounters with a diversity of perspectives, invitational rhetoric is offered as a framework for interaction that seeks for rhetors and audiences to gain “understanding that engenders appreciation, value, and a sense of equity” (5).

Exigent questions concerning how best to foster the kinds of writing knowledge, abilities, and dispositions that are essential for thoughtful engagement across difference in our twenty-first century context have likewise influenced current approaches to rhetorical education in generative ways (see, for instance, Clifton; Duffy; Glenn et al.; Roberts-Miller). Scholarship in this vein offers valuable pedagogical insights concerning ways to prepare writers to engage in ethical deliberation. A dimension of difference that we have yet to adequately account for in our discussions of twenty-first century rhetorical education, however, is engagement across religious difference.

Religious diversity is a major facet of our contemporary context in the United States and around the world. Sociologists of religion widely assert that the United States is more religiously diverse in our present moment than in any other previous era in recorded history (Jones and Cox 10). On a global scale, there are equally dramatic shifts in religious affiliation underway that are altering the world’s religious landscape. Not only is this ever-increasing diversity of the world’s religious composition significant to the more than 84 percent of the world’s population who identify as religiously affiliated (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Global” 9) or the more than 75 percent of Americans who claim religious affiliation (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Religious”), but these shifting dynamics pertain to all who are concerned with how to promote peaceful, respectful, and ethical forms of engagement across difference in our present moment. Readers are all too familiar with the long record of tragedies in which clashes over religious difference have fueled wars, genocide, oppression, demagoguery, violent hate crimes, harassment, and other such ills. These religious conflicts erode human dignity, sever bonds, undermine deliberation, and threaten the very foundations of democracy. Such outcomes, however, are in no way a given and indeed may be subject to intervention through rhetorical education.

Interfaith scholars and activists have shown that it is possible to proactively engage with religious difference in ways that foster mutual respect, collaboration, and a shared commitment to promoting peace (see, for example, Patel, *Interfaith*). Constructive engagement across religious difference, however, first requires recognition that “the vibrancy of civic life is enhanced by religious participation and ... religious diversity in its broadest sense” (Lewis and Cantor xiii). Relatedly, it demands a commitment to teaching citizens knowledge, skills, and dispositions for engaging religious diversity toward positive ends (e.g., social connectedness, civic cooperation, human flourishing). The decision to pursue such a commitment is highly consequential at this juncture. As Earl Lewis and Nancy Cantor rightly note in *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and The American Promise*, “there is every reason to wonder whether the American democratic project, built on a promise of religious diversity and freedom amid a reality of expectations of assimilation, can stretch and evolve sufficiently to reap the benefits of the insights and talents of new communities of faith in our midst” (xiv). As a discipline that is committed to educating communicators for thoughtful public deliberation in our twenty-first century context, rhetoric and writing studies is well-equipped to contribute in important ways to the pursuit of this American democratic project. Our ability to do so, however, requires that we give increased attention to preparing writers to engage with the plurality of religious orientations in productive ways. Specifically, we must consider how best to foster the kinds of knowledge, abilities, and dispositions that writers need to build identifications across religious difference in the context of rhetorical education.

This essay traces my efforts to engage this exigence in my advanced undergraduate writing course at Baylor University entitled Religious Rhetorics and Spiritual Writing (RRSW). In what follows, I outline my pedagogical goals, course design, and approach to teaching RRSW. I then share the results of a qualitative pilot study that used teacher-research methodology to develop an understanding of what students learned about engaging across religious difference in RRSW. Results of this study show that students in RRSW learned the rhetorical value of approaching religious difference with dispositions of hospitality, curiosity, and humility. Specifically, they came to see 1) the importance of using language that is grounded in writers’ personal histories and accessible to (religiously) diverse audiences; 2) the value of approaching religious and spiritual writing as a process of inquiry; and 3) the significance of holding capacious notions of religious and spiritual rhetorics. After discussing the implications of students’ learning in RRSW, I conclude the essay by articulating ways that more intentional engagement with scholarship in interfaith studies can assist teachers of writing in our efforts to enrich writers’ capacities to engage with religious difference in constructive ways.

Teaching Religious Rhetorics and Spiritual Writing: Context, Motives, and Pedagogy

Religious Rhetorics and Spiritual Writing (RRSW) is a course I designed and teach regularly. Baylor is the largest private, Baptist university in the world with a total of 18,033 undergraduate and graduate students as of Spring 2020. Baylor students come from all 50 states and 91 foreign countries (“Profile”). In Fall 2019, nearly 90 percent of Baylor undergraduates identified with some denomination of Christianity (“Profile”). Of the 36

different Christian affiliations reported, the largest number of students identified as Baptist (24.7 percent), Christian, no affiliation (19.6 percent), Catholic (16.9 percent), and non-denominational (8.2 percent). Among the 10 percent of Baylor undergraduates who did not identify as Christian, students reported religious affiliations with Buddhism (.5 percent), Hinduism (1.1 percent), Judaism (.1 percent), and Islam (.8 percent). Among that 10 percent of students were also undergraduates who claimed no religious affiliation (4.8 percent) and students who identified as atheists (.5 percent). Although Baylor is historically Baptist, students who attend Baylor do not sign a statement of faith as is the case at some other religiously affiliated colleges and universities. It is true that there are many students for whom the university's religious identity is a draw, but this is not true for all. It is also important to note that even though a majority of students at Baylor identify with some form of Christianity, there is a diverse spectrum of intra-religious differences, identities, and ways of being represented within that overarching category.

The mission of Baylor University is to "educate men and women for worldwide leadership and service by integrating academic excellence and Christian commitment in a caring community" ("Mission Statement"). Given the diversity of the global religious landscape, I have come to see the cultivation of writers who are prepared to engage positively with religious diversity as an essential dimension of fulfilling this mission. Educating students for worldwide leadership and service demands a rhetorical education that trains all students—whether they are devoted religious followers, "culturally religious," or atheists—to engage religious diversity in ethical and productive ways. I believe this to be true not only for Baylor University but for any institution (religiously affiliated or not) that seeks to prepare global leaders to navigate the rhetorical complexities of communicating across interreligious and intrareligious differences as well as agnostic and atheistic perspectives in our religiously pluralistic democracy.

In seeking how to best prepare communicators for generative engagement across religious difference, John Duffy's scholarship on rhetorical virtues and the relational nature of writing proves foundational and indispensable. In "The Good Writer: Virtue Ethics and the Teaching of Writing," Duffy insightfully argues that "writing involves ethical decisions because every time we write ... we propose a relationship with others, our readers" (229). In linking rhetorical practices to ethical choices, Duffy encourages teachers of writing to contemplate how our writing pedagogies might encourage writers to enact the kinds of ethical dispositions and rhetorical virtues that we seek to nurture through rhetorical education. Ethical dispositions, Duffy explains, include writers' "tendencies, habits, and practices, such as fair-mindedness, tolerance, judgment, intellectual courage, that speak to the character of an individual ... and are enacted in the course of reading and composing texts" ("Ethical" 219). Closely linked to ethical dispositions are rhetorical virtues, which Duffy defines as "the discursive practices of virtue, the expression in speech and writing of honesty, accountability, generosity, and other qualities"—qualities that "reflect the traits, attitudes, and dispositions we associate with a good person, speaking or writing well" ("Ethical" 235). The notion that writing necessarily requires writers to make ethical choices that have significant consequences, both in terms of writers' ethical formation and in terms of their relationships with readers, profoundly shaped the ways writers in RRSW were invited to engage with religious differences. Specifically, it meant framing all of the writing that students would take up in RRSW as relational

work. In doing so, I aimed to encourage habits of mind that would enable writers to engage productively and ethically with intra-, inter-, and non-religious difference.

Scholarship in the fields of religion and interfaith studies on the value of narrative and nonfiction storytelling also significantly animated the design of the writing projects that students took up in RRSW. In *The One and the Many: America's Struggle for the Common Good*, Martin E. Marty, world-renowned religion scholar, argues "The narratives and myths of each group ... must be allowed to be told and heard across boundaries and in all sectors. Only then can the virtues and values that people claim for these stories be tested. Only thus can they flow in various directions within the separate groups and between any of them and the society at large" (10). Narratives crafted, shared, and contemplated across intra/interreligious perspectives, Marty asserts, offer possibilities for engagement across difference that might otherwise be unavailable in a discursive climate characterized by turbulent, hostile, and toxic discourse. In *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*, interfaith scholar and activist Eboo Patel likewise attests to the power of crafting narratives that allow writers to articulate the shifting dynamics of their identities and forge connections with readers who orient differently around religion. The critical role of narrative as a rhetorical resource for negotiating religious difference undergirded all of the major writing projects that writers completed in RRSW. In particular, each project offered an opportunity for writers to create narratives that would allow them to come to terms with their motives, values, and beliefs. The awareness gained by making these tacit dimensions of their thinking explicit created a basis upon which writers could then begin to consider how they might build identification across difference. In naming, unraveling, and challenging their motives, values, and beliefs through their narratives, writers were offered occasions to reflect on, reimagine, or remake relationships.

Recent work on religion and the teaching of writing was also particularly helpful in imagining how best to prepare writers to navigate our religiously pluralistic twenty-first century context. Based on conversations with colleagues at a range of institutions, I surmise that there is a strong and growing interest in rhetorical education centered on engagement with religious rhetorics. I am aware of a number of excellent courses being taught across the United States, and I am sure that there are more still undiscovered. However, there remains a dearth of published scholarship that engages with religious rhetorics in the context of rhetorical education. I am grateful, though, for the notable exceptions that have informed my pedagogy in formative ways. These include courses taught by Chris S. Earle at the University of Nevada, Reno (see Earle), undergraduate courses taught by TJ Geiger at Syracuse University (see Geiger), and graduate and undergraduate courses taught by Jeff Ringer at the University of Tennessee (see Ringer, "Dogma"). A central focus of this scholarship concerns possibilities for teaching writers to engage religious diversity in thoughtful and productive ways (see also DePalma, "Reimagining"; Ringer, *Vernacular*; Williams). These writing specialists view the ability to engage rhetorically across religious difference as an essential civic capacity, and several of these scholars suggest that teaching writers to construct narratives centered on (religious) values (Ringer, *Vernacular*), identities (Geiger), beliefs (DePalma, "Re-envisioning"), and literacies (Williams) in relation to writers' human contexts can serve as a vital basis for rhetorical engagement across religious difference. It is these lines of thinking that led me to design RRSW.

RRSW is centered on producing narratives to enable thoughtful and ethical engagement with differing religious perspectives. In this course, students compose a variety of work—spiritual autobiographies, religious literacy essays, histories of belief, epideictic discourses, and other related genres—to gain expertise writing from experience and critically analyzing the perspectives they encounter. Through these genres, writers explore spiritual questions, religious issues, and rhetorical concerns in order to articulate, reflect on, and reconsider their beliefs and values in relation to other students and authors. For my students, opportunities to engage through writing with religious beliefs and values are rare in academic settings and in their (religious) communities. Thus, in creating a space where writers can craft such nonfiction narratives, I aim to facilitate moments of discovery, dissonance, and dialogue that will better enable writers to respectfully and ethically engage with a diversity of beliefs and values in and beyond the course. With these aims in mind, writers in RRSW take up three major writing projects, craft several weekly writing assignments, and deliver three formal presentations.

The three major writing projects are “This I Believe Audio Essay,” “Epideictic Essay and Speech,” and “Multimodal Spiritual Autobiography.” For the “This I Believe” project, students articulate a sacred belief in relation to a particular moment, event, or experience that has been essential in shaping, testing, or illuminating that belief. The goal is for students to craft a compelling narrative that conveys a belief they live by in a manner that is accessible to an audience who does not share the belief. Students are instructed to convey not only what they believe but how they reached their beliefs. They are also encouraged to take their beliefs out of the ether and ground them in the events of their lives through a story that embodies the essence of the belief. This guidance is essential for helping writers develop awareness about how they might best convey their beliefs to audiences who may not share them. The texts students read in preparing to compose their “This I Believe Audio Essay” are drawn primarily from the collections *This I Believe I* and *This I Believe II* (Allison and Gediman). They also read essays by writers such as Langston Hughes, Jo Ann Beard, and Annie Dillard and listen to several audio essays.

In the “Epideictic” assignment, students make manifest an unnoticed or invisible virtue of a person they know, have known, or know about by commemorating an admirable quality or virtuous action of that individual. Here students attempt to invent language that makes visible the extraordinary in human experience and to write narrative profiles of figures who exemplify the virtue articulated. Students are instructed that their primary goal is to encourage audience acknowledgment or appreciation, especially among those members of the audience who may not value what is praised. In writing a tribute that attempts to bind the speaker and the audience together as members of a community, writers are encouraged to use words and images that make the person and his or her qualities present to the audience. Students are instructed to use concrete, precise, and clear language so the audience can imagine the person’s qualities through specific actions, words, or ideas. To prepare for the project, students read Lawrence Prelli’s *Rhetorics of Display* and Sharon Crowley and Deborah Hawhee’s *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, profiles from *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*, and excerpts from David Brooks’s *The Road to Character*. They also view and analyze a range of TED talks to discern conventions of effective delivery for their tributes.

For the “Spiritual Autobiography” project, students compose a narrative that examines the sacred mysteries, broader truths, or spiritual experiences that have shaped their engagement with ultimate questions. The purpose of this project is to provide writers the opportunity to explore a sacred dimension of their life experience in a way that is accessible, significant, and interesting to readers who may not share the writer’s beliefs, values, or experiences. They also try to develop a new perspective on the experience and their beliefs and values. Students are reminded to resist the inclination to work from a pre-determined thesis and instead allow the process of composing to reveal insight into the writer’s questions as the essay unfolds. They are also assured at the outset and throughout the project that their spiritual autobiographies will not likely follow a straight narrative line but will proceed more intuitively, meandering from point to point in a way that actually forms a path toward insight in retrospect. By asking students to engage with their lived experience in this way, I invite them to see the complexity of sacred beliefs, values, and experiences—insights which can lead to greater sensitivity, empathy, and respect when engaging with their own or others’, especially dissimilar, beliefs and values. In order to provide writers with a range of effective approaches in this expansive and diverse genre, we read several essays from *The Best Spiritual Writing* series, Amy Mandelker and Elizabeth Powers’ *Pilgrim Souls: A Collection of Spiritual Autobiographies*, and Elizabeth J. Andrews’ *Writing the Sacred Journey: The Art and Practice of Spiritual Memoir*. Some of the writers we read in this unit include Andre Dubus, Scott Russell Sanders, David James Duncan, Pico Iyer, and Brenda Miller. Finally, writers view and analyze several digital stories in preparation for their own multimodal spiritual autobiographies.

Taken together, the primary objective of all three projects is to help students develop the narrative resources needed to articulate their guiding (religious) beliefs and values in relation to their human context and lived experiences in ways that are accessible to (religiously) diverse audiences. A key assumption animating these projects is that it is essential for writers to reflect on and explain their own deeply held motives, values, and beliefs in order to build identification with readers whose motives, values, and beliefs differ from their own. In learning to more thoughtfully share their beliefs and values through nonfiction narratives with audiences of different perspectives, students can develop renewed understanding of their own traditions and communities and learn to appreciate other traditions as well. Since students are required to present their three major writing projects to audiences beyond our immediate class (e.g., members of the local community, members of the wider university community, National Public Radio listeners), they are very conscious of working to craft their pieces for diverse audiences.

Initial Research Findings

During the sixteen-week semester that I first taught RRSW, I conducted a qualitative pilot study that used teacher-research methodology, a fitting approach to understand students’ learning as they wrote narratives engaged with religious perspectives. This IRB-approved study was guided by the following question: What are the learning outcomes of writing instruction that positions writers to use narrative as a means of articulating their (religious) values and beliefs to (religiously) diverse audiences? The data collected for this study included (a) course documents, including the course syllabus,

project assignment sheets, assessment rubrics, project guidelines, and course objectives; (b) students' written essays, presentation materials (i.e., audio essays, visual tributes, and multimodal spiritual autobiographies), and written reflections; (c) individual, hour-long, transcribed interviews with all eight members of the class, focused on students' experiences writing from and critically analyzing faith-based and interfaith perspectives; (d) and an hour-long focus group interview with seven of the eight members of the class. Grounded theory guided my approach to data analysis. I began by transcribing the eight digitally recorded interviews and the focus group interview. I then read the interview transcripts alongside students' written projects, presentation materials, and reflection essays to code themes across sources. As a result, a number of themes and sub-themes emerged. As new themes materialized, the codes were continually expanded.

All eight students who were enrolled in my RRSW course participated in this qualitative pilot study.¹ Seven of the students were female, and one was male. Seven of the participants were professional writing and rhetoric majors, and one was an interdisciplinary studies major. Three of the participants were seniors, four were juniors, and one was a sophomore. One participant identified as Asian-American, one as biracial (white and African American), one as Latinx, and the other five as white. One of the participants identified as "Christian, protestant, evangelical," another as Reformed Baptist, another as "spiritual but not religious," and the other five participants as "nondenominational Christian."

Results of this study show that students learned the value of approaching rhetorical engagement across religious difference with dispositions of hospitality, curiosity, and humility. Specifically, they came to see 1) the importance of using language that is grounded in writers' personal histories and accessible to (religiously) diverse audiences; 2) the value of approaching religious and spiritual writing as a process of inquiry; and 3) the significance of holding capacious notions of religious and spiritual rhetorics.

While the formation of dispositions, knowledge, and capacities needed to navigate the complexities of communication across religious difference require years to take shape, instruction geared toward engagement with religious rhetorics can open possibilities for their initial development. Given that only one class of students participated in this pilot study over a single semester, the findings presented below are offered as preliminary and with the understanding that further research is needed.

Extending Hospitality by Crafting Accessible Narratives of Lived Experience

A key learning outcome for writers in RRSW is that they recognized the value of approaching religious difference through a disposition of hospitality. Extending hospitality meant seeing writing as a relational practice and making intentional changes to routine ways of using language to allow readers to dwell in conversation with them. Writers achieved this posture of intentional hospitality through accessible and concrete writing, grounded in their personal histories. In speaking to the value of accessible nar-

1. All students who participated in this IRB-approved study signed written permission forms and were given pseudonyms.

ratives of lived experience, several students emphasized that rhetorical hospitality makes possible identification with readers, many of whom are likely to be unfamiliar with the language of the writer's particular religious tradition. Cecilia, for example, indicated: "We have a lot of lofty terms that we use to describe things that we think are really key to our faith, but they tend to fall flat." In order to avoid this pitfall, Cecilia altered her language practices by "getting away from Christian clichés" and being "more intentional with words." Elaborating on the ways studying and using religious rhetorics has influenced her rhetorical practice, Cecilia remarked,

I learned this semester that you have to be very careful with words even if you mean them. ... You need to be aware of all of the different things that inform the words and their connotations. And if there is a way [a word] can be interpreted differently, you need to either address that or define it in your own way in the text itself, so that your reader knows what you're talking about.

Cecilia's remarks here indicate an awareness about the consequences of language use and the potential for misunderstanding when engaging across religious difference. She is cognizant that the meanings of terminologies are not static or transparent. She understands that interpretations in these contexts, like all forms of symbolic action, are fluid and negotiated by writers and readers.

This awareness led Cecilia to use "spiritual language that is embodied" when conveying her beliefs to both those who share her faith commitments and those who do not. When asked what she meant by "embodied," she explained that she was referring to language that is grounded in writers' personal experiences and anchored in writers' particular contexts. Cecilia views the use of embodied religious rhetorics as a way of extending hospitality by inviting readers into writers' histories, experiences, and logics. She explains that such language practices help readers understand the ways writers come to their religious beliefs. Language of this kind provides a history and a context for the belief that can foster empathy in the reader. In reflecting on the importance of embodied rhetorics when addressing those who do not share a writer's religious commitments, she states:

It's kind of amazing to me to think about how there can be so many different ways of approaching spirituality.... So maybe that's why I keep coming back to the term "embodied writing," because you can say like "salvation" to someone and we would all kind of have different memories of books we read or images we've seen attached to that word. We can all believe the same kind of general thing about it, but it would be manifest in very different ways.

An example of the ways Cecilia's insights translated into her work as a writer is a study that she initiated in RRSW and then continued over a two-year period following the course. The project maps historical, literary, theological, biblical, and cultural representations of dance as an embodied sacred art across religions, cultures, and centuries. The study skillfully weaves together Cecilia's rigorous analysis of historical, spiritual, and literary texts with pieces of memoir and literary journalism in order to invite readers into the contours of this conversation.

Students also came to value extending hospitality through the use of accessible language when engaging across religious difference because they recognized its potential for complicating readers' negative perceptions of people who identify as religiously committed. Daniel, for example, explained, "I think in terms of spiritual writing, the more subtle someone can get ... would really benefit their ability to reach a broader audience." He sees the subtlety of such language as a way to "bridge a gap" because it might enable the reader and writer to find points of intersection that are obscured by explicitly religious terminologies and theologically loaded arguments. It is not that the writer is attempting to hide his or her religious identity and commitments but is rather attempting to invent artistic and nuanced ways of conveying his or her beliefs to induce others to hear and consider them. To illustrate what this might look like in practice, Daniel discussed examples of creative strategies that he saw as effective from our course reading: "There were writers who like in *This I Believe* would list a Scripture verse or something, and it was like, 'That's a Christian verse from the Bible,' but the rest of the piece they're not saying anything about God, so it's like you know this person's a Christian, but they don't actually ever say like, 'I believe in Jesus or something.'" Another strategy he mentioned is when writers quote something Jesus said without attributing the statement to him. Other invention strategies he noted were including dream and vision sequences, using biblical imagery and metaphors, and allowing voices other than the essayist's own voice to express particular beliefs. Rhetorical practices of this kind are effective, he explained, because though there are "Christian undertones," such language "is not preachy. It's more subtle. It's not expressly stated." Daniel concluded by stating, "Anyone who wants to affect someone seriously, especially on a spiritual level, has to put serious consideration into the ways they rhetorically frame things." Daniel himself enacted these strategies skillfully in a *This I Believe* essay entitled "I Believe in Microscopes" and a lyric essay entitled "Ichthyology"—two pieces in which he used allegory, poetry, vivid imagery, and personal anecdotes to provoke meditation on intersections of spiritual and scientific inquiry.

Rhetorical hospitality has the potential to facilitate connections among communicators who orient differently around religion. Rather than relying primarily on theological terms or doctrinal statements to communicate their beliefs—rhetorical approaches that build community cohesion but often function as barriers to engagement *across* religious difference—Cecilia and Daniel tried to employ language rooted in their personal experiences and backgrounds. Cecilia, Daniel, and several other students came to see that means readily used to express religious commitments (e.g., planting verses from sacred texts, using religious terminology, outlining doctrinal or theological tenets explicitly) have the potential to alienate especially those readers outside of their own belief systems. Through their assignments, students learned that when writing is steeped in abstract language from a particular religious tradition, there is little chance for constructing meaningful relationships with readers who are not a part of that discourse community (e.g., audiences who are affiliated with another denomination, religion, or no religion at all). They discovered that the nuances and depth of their beliefs are lost on readers when writers rely heavily on stock religious terminology from the writer's own religious tradition. Students thus learned that a hospitable approach requires creating entry points for readers that allow them to consider sacred beliefs or traditions not their own.

Curiosity as a Starting Point for Engaging Religious Rhetorics

A second outcome was understanding the value of approaching religious rhetorics—their own and others—with a disposition of curiosity. While many students initially associated religious rhetorics and spiritual writing with texts that supply answers or argue for particular conclusions, all writers in RRSW came to see the purpose of such language practices as also useful for exploring mysteries, examining ultimate questions, and challenging commonplace ideas. Rather than viewing the purpose of composing religious rhetorics primarily as an effort to convey moral imperatives or persuade readers to adopt a particular set of religious truths—as was the case for several writers when they entered the course—students gained an appreciation for taking up spiritual writing as a means of opening up paths of inquiry about their own religious beliefs and traditions and those of others. For students who were accustomed to religious discourses focused on imparting particular doctrines or values of a tradition, the move to approach such topics from a place of curiosity and as a process of inquiry required a significant shift. This was especially true in cases where students had an understanding of their religious tradition as divinely revealed truth. However, as writers began to engage their deeply held beliefs, values, and commitments in a spirit of genuine curiosity and with a sense of wonder, they came to see the value in exploring concerns they may have taken for granted. They also became more comfortable with the notion that cultivating a disposition of curiosity entails developing patience for uncertainty and ambiguity—qualities which position writers to engage with their own religious traditions and the traditions of others in productive ways.

In reflecting on her gradual movement toward adopting a disposition of curiosity, Cecilia, for example, offers the following:

There aren't solid answers for a lot of things, and so when you're writing about [religious ideas], I've had to be okay with learning to leave my writing without a lot of real solid conclusions. A lot of the texts that we read ... don't end in a satisfying way, so they seem really raw. ... That is an important aspect of spiritual writing, because no one has all the answers. I think sometimes I have been more influenced by the texts that didn't give me an answer at the end than I would have if they had ended with some imperative about how you should apply this to your life.

Gayle similarly came to see religious rhetorics as guided in large part by questions that do not have concrete or absolute answers: "I think spiritual writing is searching for answers that you know you might not even get. It's just like the questioning. ... Religious writing would be an even more refined version of spiritual writing. Spiritual writing is finding a place among all of it. Religious writing would be finding a place specifically within your own religion or within a specific religion."

Grace also remarked that her writing allowed her to become more comfortable with a disposition of curiosity and using religious rhetorics as a tool for exploring the unknown. She reflected, "I think being comfortable with writing about ideas that I don't understand totally or haven't fully explored and learning to take risks as far as topics and places you go in writing has been valuable. . . . It was the first time I had to think about

writing in this way . . . approaching things such as the invisible or the ineffable that are very hard to put words to.” Grace described the shift this way: “Instead of trying to go through like you have a question and an answer, it’s more like, ‘Here’s the question. Now let’s get deeper into this question and think about the question. Even if we don’t come to a conclusive answer, that’s okay.’” Using writing in these ways, she explained, “is a unique thing to the classes I’ve taken . . . because a lot of it is about coming to a conclusion.” In reflecting on her thoughts regarding the value of using writing as a means of exploring religious beliefs and traditions, Grace commented: “It seems like, if it’s something you can’t express, why are you trying to put words to it? But it is in the process of putting words to it that, even if you can’t totally grasp it, there’s . . . a way of dealing with [these big questions that we all ask] or understanding them better, and that is what spiritual writing can allow you to do.”

Cecilia’s and Grace’s reflections reveal an appreciation for contemplation of enduring and complex questions for which there are no definite answers. While Cecilia and Grace entered RRSW with the assumption that religious rhetorics are forms of communication that aim to impart settled-upon moral truths and life lessons, they eventually came to see the generative power of religious rhetorics and spiritual writing that provoke audiences to meditate on living questions without absolute answers—an understanding that can better position them to engage ethically across religious difference. This disposition of curiosity manifested both in the way writers were willing to challenge themselves to engage with complex open questions and in their conclusions that regularly took the form of invitations for further contemplation rather than summaries of a moral, lesson, or conclusive argument.

Exercising Humility, Expanding Conceptions of Religious Rhetorics, Valuing Spiritual Writing

In addition to fostering hospitality and curiosity, writers also developed a disposition of humility by expanding their notions of religious rhetorics and valuing diverse forms of spiritual writing. At the start of the course, many writers viewed religious rhetorics and spiritual writing as primarily situated within forms of Christianity. The discourses that circulate widely within students’ religious communities, the sacred texts they read, and the religious practices they enact all were important influences in shaping their conceptions of “religious rhetorics” or “spiritual writing,” giving shape, texture, and grounding to what would otherwise be vague abstractions. The writing students were invited to take up in RRSW, however, enabled them to expand their frames of reference to include religious discourses, texts, and traditions beyond their own. This expansion in their associations with these terminologies led students to recognize that writing can be “spiritual” even if it has no ties to a religious tradition. Such recognition also allowed students to value such writing on its own terms rather than in relation to a particular denomination of Christianity or another form of organized religion—a shift in perspective that not only *required* humility but also led students to see that humility is vital when engaging across religious difference.

Cecilia’s reflections illustrate this shift in perspective well. Cecilia initially thought of spiritual writing as “having a very obvious connection to a specific religion.” She also

tended to think of spiritual writing as being “more evangelistic.” The writing she did in RRSW, however, broadened her notions. She explained,

This class has taught me to think of things as far as spiritual texts from a perspective that wasn't necessarily so deeply tied to Christianity.... The things that we read were very much, I don't want to say in opposition to, but were very different from what you'd find on the shelves of a Christian bookstore. There are a lot of good books that are like that, but I think this class is kind of radical in a way because you see that there is so much writing out there that has the power to actually change people without actually being under the label of Christian nonfiction or something.

Sofia's definitions of religious and spiritual writing were also complicated through our reading and writing. “When I came to the class,” she explained, “I was expecting us to read biblical stuff, like people talking about the Bible specifically, and not necessarily their own experiences.” After the course, however, Sofia came to believe that “spiritual writing isn't necessarily religious writing. It is about the whole human experience.” While she views texts in which “authors talk about God and their spiritual experiences” as spiritual writing, she has come to understand that it “doesn't necessarily need to be connected to religion. It can be about anything, any experience.” With regard to the latter, she explained, “I wouldn't have considered that spiritual writing before I came into the class.”

Elizabeth discussed a similar shift in her perspective. She explained that prior to taking RRSW, she wouldn't have considered many of the texts we read to be spiritual or religious “because they didn't have anything to do with Christianity.” According to her “original definition,” her judgments were informed by the following gauge: “It doesn't mention God or Jesus or the Bible so it's not religious or spiritual.” As a result of the writing she did in RRSW, however, Elizabeth indicated that she learned to see “how things in everyday life can be spiritual” and “how everyday things can mean something that strongly.”

Gayle, too, expressed a shift in her thinking regarding the relationship between religious and spiritual writing: “In the beginning of the semester, I thought of religious writing as the big umbrella and spiritual writing as the little umbrella under it. And so everything spiritual is inversely religious. ... Now, I kind of see spiritual writing as a big umbrella over here and religious writing as a big umbrella kind of a little bit lower, but their edges kind of tip a little bit like a Venn diagram and there is a big area that overlaps, but [spiritual writing] can exist outside by itself.” While Gayle initially believed that all spiritual writing is linked to religion in some form or that “there would have to be a certain amount of religious language in spiritual writing,” she later came to view spirituality and spiritual writing more broadly. Rather than being necessarily tied to religious thought, she came to see spiritual writing as discourses that explore ontological, existential, epistemological, and metaphysical questions.

Rethinking her ideas about spiritual and religious writing was also an important learning outcome for Grace in RRSW. She indicated that the relationship between religious and spiritual writing “is something [she] thought a lot about throughout the course of the semester.” As a result, she came to see spiritual writing as “probing the

invisible and putting words to the ineffable.” “Spiritual writing,” she explained, “isn’t necessarily grounded in a certain number of core beliefs or a community of people who believe like you. It is a lot more individualized.” It is also concerned with “asking about the significance of things that touch us emotionally or move us.” Grace remarked, “You can write about music in a spiritual way and you can write about books in a spiritual way. There are not certain topics that are excluded from spiritual writing. It is the way you’re thinking about it. . . . There a lot of unanswered questions. Like, ‘Here is what I’m wrestling with, and I haven’t come to a conclusion yet. Here are my thoughts. Let me give you a peek into what I’m thinking.’”

Cecilia, Sophia, Elizabeth, Gayle, and Grace all came to hold more capacious notions of religious rhetorics and spiritual writing as a result of their writing, conversations, and reading in RRSW. Their conceptions of what constitutes a “religious” or “spiritual” text are not only more expansive, they are also less hierarchical. By experiencing the impact and power of spiritual writing, sacred texts, and religious rhetorics that were not situated within their own religious traditions, students learned to value them on their own terms and, in many respects, on equal footing. Recognizing their value as “religious,” “sacred,” or “spiritual” texts—categories which previously would have only been extended to their most cherished and holy texts within Christian tradition—students exercised a disposition of humility. In doing so, they were able to engage in relational thinking that troubled the reductive binary between notions of “religious” and “spiritual” and begin to reimagine the relationships among varieties of religious and spiritual experience within and across religious traditions and practices. An example of the way students’ expanding notions of spiritual and religious writing emerged in their writing practices is the broad range of subjects that students took up in their efforts to explore their ultimate questions and concerns. For example, students wrote about scars, literacy, food, pens, dance, ghosts, dreams, writing, literature, and a host of other subjects as central to their religious and spiritual formation. As a result of such learning, the writers in RRSW are apt to be better prepared to engage across religious difference.

Potential Implications

In studying and composing religious rhetorics in RRSW, students came to recognize the value of approaching rhetorical engagement across religious difference with dispositions of hospitality, curiosity, and humility. More specifically, students reported that as a result of the writing projects they carried out, they acquired an awareness of the importance of using accessible language that is rooted in their personal experiences and histories when conveying belief across (religious) difference, they started to see religious rhetorics as starting points for inquiry, and they began to think in more expansive ways about the nature and value of religious and spiritual writing. Acquiring these forms of rhetorical awareness is significant in that such awareness can function as a basis for forging common ground and building mutual respect. Students’ emerging rhetorical awareness in this regard can encourage them to mobilize the wisdom of their particular traditions to increase appreciation about religious traditions generally. Moreover, the rhetorical awareness that was initiated for writers in RRSW can position them to cultivate connections among citizens and communities who orient differently around

religion. Finally, the rhetorical awareness students gained has the potential to serve as a foundation from which these writers can strengthen the cohesion of our religiously diverse democracy and contribute to the making of a more just world.

While additional longitudinal research is required to determine how the rhetorical awareness that students gained will influence them over the long haul, the preliminary findings suggest that writing courses focused on religious rhetorics can function as sites for cultivating writers who have the dispositions, rhetorical knowledge, and capacities to engage religious diversity toward positive ends. The promising indications of these initial findings suggest that it is worthwhile for rhetorical educators to further consider how we might best marshal our expertise in our classrooms to position writers to engage with diverse religious beliefs and values in productive and thoughtful ways.

Extending the Conversation: Cultivating Interfaith Rhetorical Engagement in Twenty-First Century Writing Courses

Throughout this essay, I have argued that attention to religious rhetorics and engagement across religious difference ought to be a primary concern for rhetorical educators who aim to foster dispositions, knowledge, and abilities essential to thoughtful civic engagement in the twenty-first century. My goal in this article has been to initiate a conversation about this exigent line of inquiry, but much future work on rhetorical education and religious rhetorics is required by scholar-teachers in our field to determine how rhetorical educators might best cultivate the kinds of rhetorical awareness, knowledge, and abilities needed to navigate the complexities of our religiously pluralistic democracy. A promising path that researchers in rhetoric and writing studies can pursue is to become better acquainted with the perspectives of scholars in interfaith studies and to utilize their insights in our pedagogies. Thus, in closing my essay, I turn to the insights of Eboo Patel, a compelling voice at the center of the conversation around interfaith engagement, activism, and leadership. Patel is the founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), a nonprofit organization that partners with colleges and universities for the purpose of promoting generative engagement with religious diversity. I believe Patel's ideas concerning interfaith leadership can contribute much to the work of teacher-scholars in rhetoric and writing studies as we seek to prepare writers to engage ethically with religious diversity.

In "Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies," Patel defines an interfaith leader as a citizen "who has the framework, knowledge base, and skill set needed to help individuals and communities who orient around religion differently in civil society and politics build mutual respect, positive relationships, and a commitment to the common good" (40). In *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*, Patel articulates five potential civic goods of interfaith leadership. They include: 1) enriching understanding of diverse identities and correcting prejudices rooted in the misunderstanding of identities; 2) promoting social cohesion through the inclusion and accommodation of the broadest possible range of citizens; 3) addressing social concerns by drawing together the diversity of knowledge and expertise across (religious) communities and traditions; 4) deepening understanding of identities within religious communities and fostering connections among diverse

communities; and 5) crafting narratives that enable identification among diverse citizens who identify with different (religious) traditions and communities (98-99).

In order to equip citizens to enact these civic goods, they need to develop the knowledge and skill set particular to interfaith leadership work. The knowledge base of an interfaith leader, according to Patel, involves developing appreciative knowledge of various religious traditions, a familiarity with theologies of interfaith cooperation, historical awareness of interfaith cooperation during different periods and in a range of contexts, and a sense of shared values that can be used to build cooperative relationships across religious traditions and communities. Relatedly, Patel asserts that the skill set of an interfaith leader entails registering patterns of religious diversity in immediate and wider social contexts and paying attention to the implications of those differences in civic spaces. It also involves learning to mobilize the wisdom and expertise of religiously diverse citizens and communities to address shared problems and initiating community activities that bring together citizens who orient around religion differently. Finally, it enables coordinating conversations about interfaith questions with diverse groups of citizens and inventing public narratives that enable identification across religious difference.

In considering how our expertise in the field of rhetoric and writing studies might contribute to the knowledge base and competencies required for productive interfaith engagement, there are no doubt multiple possibilities. Given the space constraints of this article, however, I will limit my remarks to the final capacity listed above—namely, inventing narratives that enable identification across religious difference. In *Interfaith Leadership*, Patel names three kinds of narratives that are useful for interfaith activists to write: public narratives of interfaith cooperation, binding narratives in religiously diverse communities, and identity narratives that connect personal stories to interfaith work. He also recommends crafting narratives of interactions across religious difference that capture moments of enrichment, connection, conflict, action, and recognition of difference. Drawing from Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity, which links the formation of our identities to the narratives we construct about ourselves, Patel suggests that such interfaith narratives are critical ways through which communicators write themselves into the identity of an interfaith leader and activist (*Interfaith* 28-29). In narrating moments of enrichment, connection, conflict, cooperation, and difference with people or ideas from other (religious) traditions, writers and audiences are given opportunities to reflect on and reposition themselves in relation to other people, communities, and lines of thinking.

In the context of the writing classroom, rhetorical work of this kind could be highly valuable for extending the pedagogical approach I took in RRSW and for cultivating what Elizabeth Vander Lei calls an "attitude of renovation"—a disposition that "valu[es] what is present and seek[s] to improve it, over deciding to demolish it and build anew" (90). The value of such a disposition, Vander Lei suggests, is that "we might find ourselves and our students challenged to be willing to change our arguments as a result of encountering new people and ideas, to accept and even value heterogeneity and specificity in our discourse communities, and to evaluate proposed arguments in light of community standards" (92). Related to this, Vander Lei states, "If we help students, all students, recognize that their own stories are nested in larger stories, students may better apprehend the powerful rhetorical effect of those larger stories on their own. As a result,

they may interrogate these larger stories and their effects more carefully” (97). Rhetorical work of this sort could no doubt go a long way toward promoting identification, connection, and relationship among writers of varied religious orientations.

As Patricia Roberts-Miller rightly asserts in *Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political Theory, and Composition Classes*, “Deliberative democracy makes high demands of citizens.” The demands are so high in fact that deliberative democratic engagement among diverse citizens seems nearly impossible at moments. As Roberts-Miller states, “The question is not whether it will go wrong, but whether or not it will go at all” (187). When religious diversity is acknowledged as a significant dimension of this universe of discourse, these demands are heightened. It is certainly possible that the increase of religious diversity in our contemporary moment has the potential to create new fractures and widen divisions among citizens. Our pluralistic religious landscape, however, also offers opportunities for engaging resources, wisdom, and approaches of traditions and communities that might enable citizens to cooperatively (and more effectively) address the complexities of our current moment. I am hopeful that teacher-scholars in our field will have a central role in preparing writers to seize the generative possibilities of the latter.

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