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Teaching Religion in the Deep South

William L. Smith
Georgia Southern University

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William L. Smith, Georgia Southern University

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to generate discussion about the teaching and learning sociology and religious studies using the "study in depth" method. In addition, the author shares with readers how one course, and a specific set of readings contributed to a department's overall plan for study in depth in sociology. Study in depth is defined as the comprehension of "a complex structure of knowledge" (Association of American Colleges). It uses a multidisciplinary approach that is vital to teaching and learning sociology, religious studies, and other subjects. Sociology of Religion at this university is an upper-division elective for sociology majors and minors, religious studies minors (there is no religious studies major), and general studies majors (concentration in culture and society; and in religious studies). Introduction to Sociology is a prerequisite for Sociology of Religion. Since this course is not required, the majority of students who enroll in it do so because they have a genuine interest in it. Monographs can be incorporated into a variety of social science and religious studies courses to facilitate study in depth. The use of research monographs can foster deep learning and enable students to become highly informed learners who are capable of critical thinking.

Keywords: Teaching; Religion; Deep South

Introduction

This is not a theoretical or a methodological piece instead its purpose is to generate discussion on an important issue in the teaching and learning of sociology and religious studies and to share with readers how one course and a specific set of readings contributes to a department's overall plan for study in depth in sociology. Study in depth is clearly a multidisciplinary concern and it is a vital tool for teaching and learning. Sociology of Religion at my institution is an elective for sociology majors/minors, religious studies minors (there is no religious studies major), and general studies majors (concentration in culture and society; concentration in religious studies). Introduction to Sociology is a prerequisite for Sociology of Religion. Since this course is not required, the majority of students who enroll in it do so because they have a genuine interest in the topic.

While students might have a genuine interest in religion, they often come with predispositions such as prejudice against religious groups other than their own and a lack of understanding of even the most basic tenets of their own tradition (see Brock, 1998; Kearns, 1998; Richey, 2008; Hamilton & Gilbert, 2005). One way to deal with these predispositions is to immerse students in the scholarly literature. They soon realize that "The familiar now seems not quite so familiar any more" (Berger, 1963, p. 22). Since I teach at a state university in the Deep South, I have selected readings about fundamentalists and evangelicals (groups students believe they are well informed about but in actuality are not well informed about) as well as material about groups underrepresented and often misunderstood in this region of the country such as Catholics, Jews, and New Religious Movements (Hare Krishna).

For the last ten years, I have required students to read four research monographs during the semester-long course. Before I adopted this format, I used earlier editions of a textbook (see McGuire, 2002) in combination with research monographs and other books (see Roof & McKinney, 1987; Dawson, 1998).

Study in Depth

Wagenaar (1993, p. 358) lamented that students, no matter their major, experienced little study in depth. The

American Sociological Association (ASA) recommends that departments implement practices that foster study in depth (Schwartz, 1990; Sherohman, 1997; Roberts, 2002; Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2003; Berheide, 2005; McKinney et al., 2004). The ASA Task Force on the undergraduate major defined study in depth as, "the development of a coherent and mature conception of sociology as a scholarly endeavor that involves the interplay of empirical and theoretical analysis of a wide range of topics" (McKinney et al., 2004, p. 2). The Association of American Colleges (1985, p. 28) described study in depth as, "not so much an additional component of the curriculum as it is recognition of the degree of complexity and sophistication with which the various components are interrelated and understood." Study in depth is enhanced by various forms of course sequencing.

The ASA Task Force identified sixteen recommendations that incorporated the best practices for achieving study in depth (McKinney et al., 2004). Included within the third recommendation was the point that "pulling the disparate pieces of the sociology major together" was an essential ingredient of a study in depth plan (McKinney et al., 2004, p. 7). Research monographs facilitate study in depth because of their overall design and attention to methodological, theoretical, and substantive issues. In essence, monographs usually discuss the issues that are interwoven into the courses students take within the major. They also facilitate study in depth by emphasizing the key elements of the sociological perspective. By reading and studying monographs, students can see: (1) the role of social structures and social processes, (2) how individual experiences are linked with larger social forces, and (3) the importance of empirical research for understanding everyday life. Monographs provide a window onto the social world by highlighting the key features of what Snow (1999, p. 17) metaphorically called the sociological eye: (1) relational connections, (2) contextual embeddedness, (3) social problems, and (4) an ironic perspective (things are not what they appear to be). Monographs contribute to study in depth and a significant learning experience by fostering the development of cognitive skills such as knowledge (content), comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Fink, 2003; Bloom, 1956). Students see how researchers progress logically from creating research questions through the following stages of the research process: gathering data, interpretation, analysis, and theory construction.

Research Monographs

The Association of American Colleges (1985, p. 29) stated, "Study in depth should lead students to some understanding of the discipline's characteristic questions and arguments, as well as the questions it cannot answer and the arguments it does not make." Monographs, particularly the more comprehensive ones, attempt to answer some of sociology's major questions and assist students in the development of a sociological imagination. The monographs and the professor facilitate what Goldsmid and Wilson (1980, p. 84) called "benign disruption." Benign disruption "prods students to take a fresh look at a world that they thought they understood. It goads them to step outside of their current world-view, to look at the familiar, and to examine their assumptions with new perspectives" (Roberts, 2002, p. 14). The result of benign disruption is cognitive dissonance which Roberts (2002, p. 7) acknowledged, "creates teachable moments."

For more than twenty years, I have used various monographs (Ammerman, 1987; Rochford, 1985; Rochford, 2007; Shinn, 1987; Heilman & Cohen, 1989; D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Meyer, 2001; Smith, 2000; Ellingson, 2007), in the sociology of religion course with great success and I found them to be valuable teaching tools. Instead of being exposed to material in a piecemeal manner (oftentimes a problem with textbooks), students are able to immerse themselves into monographs and see how sociological research is conducted from start to finish. In addition, monographs expose the interconnectedness of social institutions and social life. The various intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, stratification, and other key sociological concepts occur in most monographs. This is something students often do not see when they are exposed only to bits and pieces of a particular topic discussed in a short passage within a textbook or an article. Monographs facilitate study in depth by integrating the various concerns of the sociological perspective and the sociological eye.

The following brief synopses of the previously mentioned monographs are not meant to be definitive or exhaustive. I have selected only a few points from each book to highlight the role monographs play as benign disrupters and their contributions to sociology's ironic perspective. Since most of my students are southerners and many if not most, would identify themselves as either fundamentalists or evangelicals, I have used at various times Nancy Ammerman's, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* and Christian Smith's, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* during the first month of the course. Ammerman (1987) and Smith (2000) clearly articulate the differences between fundamentalists and evangelicals. While fundamentalists and evangelicals are conservative Protestants, their beliefs and strategies are often different. For example, fundamentalists retreat/withdraw from the world and evangelicals engage it. The church is the most important institution in the lives of fundamentalists and they believe that liberal Protestants and Catholics are not saved. Evangelicals are a diverse and ambivalent group and they are much different from the negative stereotypes imposed on them as right-wing zealots, intolerant of diversity, and exclusivist. In class discussions, students often admit they used the terms fundamentalists and evangelicals incorrectly to identify themselves and others prior to reading and discussing these monographs.

I chose Stephen Ellingson's, *The Megachurch and the Mainline: Remaking Religious Tradition in the Twenty-First Century* primarily because it is a study of Lutheran congregations. There are not many Lutherans in the Deep South (most of the students at my institution identify themselves as Baptists or Methodists) and the premise of Ellingson's (2007) book is that mainline churches are transforming themselves as a result of evangelicalism and nondenominationalism. My students are not well informed about denominationalism and Ellingson (2007) does a superb job introducing them to denominational life and religious change. Students are also introduced to the traditions of pietism and confessionalism (often for the very first time), the role of the religious culture of consumption, choice, and pragmatism, and the influence that constructed crises of membership and meaning have in the process of religious change. Students are made aware that the various Christian groups do not always interpret and understand reality in the same manner.

It is common in the American south to hear the following statement, "Catholics are not Christians." Not a year goes by that

at least one student in the sociology of religion class makes this statement thus providing me and the class with a teachable moment. Although Chester Gillis's, *Roman Catholicism in America* (Columbia Contemporary American Religion Series) is not technically a research monograph, it is one of the best books I have found that seamlessly blends history, sociology, and theology into a well-written scholarly introduction to Roman Catholics. Among other issues, Gillis (1999) adroitly explains the conflicts that often arise among Catholics in how they integrate Catholic beliefs, spirituality, and religious practice. Likewise in *American Catholics: Gender, Generation, and Commitment* William V. D'Antonio, James D. Davidson, Dean R. Hoge, and Katherine Meyer (2001) discuss that more and more Catholics especially young adults have a strong Catholic identity but do not have much of a commitment to the institutional church and her moral teachings. Many students are surprised to learn that some Catholics use contraception and support a woman's right to abortion.

While there are few Catholics in the Deep South outside of cities like New Orleans, Savannah, Atlanta, Mobile, and Charleston there are even fewer Jews, especially Orthodox Jews. Samuel C. Heilman's and Steven M. Cohen's, *Cosmopolitans and Parochials: Modern Orthodox Jews in America* is a study of three groups of Orthodox Jews: traditionalists, centrists, and nominals. The following key quotation reveals much of what this book is about: "the data makes clear that at least at one level of analysis, Jewish orthodoxy is as much a matter of sociology as of theology. While what they believe is surely important, people display and express their Orthodoxy through their decisions of social belonging and communal ties" (Heilman & Cohen, 1989, p. 150). Centrists are the largest group within Orthodoxy and they are more likely to compartmentalize their lives into a traditional/private or parochial sphere and a modern/public or cosmopolitan sphere. Another important quotation creates a vivid picture of Orthodoxy in America, "You know the Jews are the worst when it comes to tolerating my Orthodoxy. They always say 'You observe that? You don't really have to; I don't.' Gentiles are often more tolerant. They never claim to know more than me about what Jews can and can't do" (Heilman & Cohen, 1989, p. 129). This book emphasizes the ritualistic nature of life for religious Jews and the great variation that is present regarding the levels of religiosity among Jews. A discussion of Orthodox Jews provides a launching point to learn more about Conservative Jews, Reform Jews, Ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jews, and secular or ethnic Jews.

The Hare Krishnas have intrigued Americans since their founding in the 1960s. Larry D. Shinn's, *The Dark Lord: Cult Images and the Hare Krishnas in America*, E. Burke Rochford's, *Hare Krishna in America*, and *Hare Krishna Transformed* have done much to destroy the negative stereotypes (such as brainwashing) about new religious movements and to inform the public about bhakti yoga and devotional Hinduism. The Hare Krishnas have evolved from a communal movement that discouraged family life and neglected women and children to one that supports the nuclear family. Individual households rather than temples have become the center of Krishna consciousness. In order to survive as a religious movement the Hare Krishna formed alliances with Indian Hindus whose financial contributions are essential for the maintenance of the group but who are less committed to the community's purposes and goals. For Indian Hindus in the United States Hinduism is often considered an ethnic religion. The Hare Krishnas appear

to be a blossoming denomination rather than a new religious movement (Rochford, 2007).

If students walk away with only one piece of information after reading these books it is that the American religious landscape is complex, rich in diversity, and changing. While students are often intimidated by the fact that they have to read four monographs (although repeatedly they tell me the monographs are a welcome change from college textbooks) most soon realize that they actually know very little about religion and that this is an opportunity to broaden their worldviews.

Discussion

Monographs facilitate a significant learning experience for students and a deep learning experience (culminating in understanding) by focusing on the human dimension. Deep approaches to learning emphasize higher-order, integrative, and reflective skills (Nelson Laird et al., 2008, p. 480). Students learn about others and in the process they learn about themselves. This is what study in depth is attempting to accomplish. Monographs facilitate the process of "deep reading" (reading for meaning). "Deep reading is enhanced whenever readers come to see connections to their own lives, their emotions, or their future ambitions" (Roberts and Roberts, 2008, p. 130). Study in depth assists students in becoming reflexive thinkers who rely on a variety of knowledge bases and cognitive skills to navigate everyday life. Essentially, this is what it means to be liberally educated.

The context of a course is important "in shaping students' approaches to learning" and "whether a student will gravitate toward a surface or deep approach" (Nelson Laird et al., 2008, p. 471). Along with requiring my students to read monographs (one every four weeks), we spend three-four classes discussing each book. These class discussions allow me the opportunity to pose questions to the class and act as a benign disrupter and for the class to pose questions or make comments. Throughout the discussions, I make connections with the sociological and religious studies literature and I encourage the class to do likewise. This fosters active and deep learning as do the essay exams and quizzes which are administered during the course. The classes in between the periods set aside for discussing the monographs are devoted to other pertinent topics in the sociology of religion.

Integrating reading materials into a class is an effective way of fostering active and deep learning (Meyers & Jones, 1993, p. 123). The questions I ask students about the monographs are designed to get them thinking about the material and relating it to their own experiences and things they are familiar with or in some circumstances things they are not familiar with (McKeachie, 1978, p. 104). Normally I begin the first day of discussion on a monograph with the following question, "What did you find interesting about this book?" The second question is, "Why?" I use their answers to segue us into a much deeper discussion of the meaning of the book. I want students to seek a "thorough understanding of the author's message" rather than "learning just pieces of information" for a quiz or exam (Entwistle, 2001, p. 10).

Pedagogically, I am most comfortable with the Socratic approach. I am well aware that some students are not comfortable with this approach and they would rather have a power point lecture so they can reproduce the lecture notes off the screen onto their next exam or quiz. The Socratic approach is riskier but usually students find the give and take of such an enterprise much more rewarding

(particularly if they have read the book and reflected on it prior to our discussions). Students learn through reading, questioning, and reflection. Our class discussions highlight what is significant and important in each of the books, clarify misunderstandings, and often stimulate other questions that need further research and reflection.

One possible negative outcome of study in depth is that courses and programs might have depth but not enough breadth. Should we attempt to cover everything or ask a selected group of probing questions? This is an issue faculty deal with regularly when they design courses and programs. Cloutier (2009, p. 354-355) answered this question by stating that it depends on the learning goals for the course, are the goals "aimed primarily at content mastery" or "at critical thought." Most faculty, I assume, try to strike a balance between content mastery and critical thought, although some might lean one way or the other depending on the level of the course, the caliber of their students, department expectations, and their own inclinations.

The issue of depth vs. breadth is a potential concern for faculty who use textbooks whether in lower or upper-division courses. While I am advocating the use of research monographs to achieve study in depth in a particular upper-division course, Cloutier (2009, p. 354-355) presented a persuasive argument for using "argument-structured texts" rather than "encyclopedia-like texts" in lower-division courses.

Achieving study in depth as an educational goal may be easier said than done (McKinney et al., 2004, p. 29). It takes a great degree of effort, planning, and coordination on the part of faculty to achieve study in depth. Sociology and religious studies programs are often housed in departments that contain other disciplines and depending on how these departments or academic units are organized study in depth may or may not be more difficult to achieve. For study in depth to be achieved, sociology and religious studies programs in joint departments and multidisciplinary divisions must maintain disciplinary integrity and the sequencing of core courses. This task may be further impeded if these programs (most likely sociology) have non-liberal arts tracks or concentrations of an applied nature that must meet specific accreditation requirements.

Additional challenges to achieving study in depth may include issues such as policies affecting transfer students, an institution's mission and characteristics, a department's mission and characteristics, fewer full-time faculty members, and faculty resistant to specific course goals and department guidelines. Programs with large numbers of transfer students may encounter problems with course sequencing and course equivalency concerns with primarily upper-division core courses. Flagship and research universities may not be willing to devote the time, energy, and resources needed to achieve study in depth at the undergraduate level and conflicts between an institution's mission and a department's mission may negatively impact study in depth. Programs with few majors may not be able to offer the number of upper-division courses needed for the major, while programs with many majors might not be able to provide enough sections of capstone courses where students have a true seminar experience. The trend toward fewer full-time faculty means more courses are taught by part-time instructors. This may or may not negatively impact practices related to study in depth. Only faculty with expertise and advanced degrees in their specific discipline should teach their discipline's courses. Departments with clearly articulated course goals and a coherent curriculum will be better equipped

to deal with this trend. Some faculty might object to certain practices of study in depth as an intrusion on their right to develop their courses as they see fit. While faculty should not be required to relinquish control of their courses, they should be amenable to collaborating with others in the department to fulfill program and course goals.

Some students often have strong opinions about religion and they are frequently unwilling to listen to and reflect on other points of view. If students are very rigid and close-minded it hinders the process of learning in depth. The second day of class (the first day I spend discussing the syllabus) I purposely share with the class what the sociology of religion is *not* about (e.g., the truth or falsity of religion or religious ideas; an attack on religion; the correctness of one set of religious ideas; and whether or not religion is a good thing). Some of them think the class is a theology course or they believe it will be treated as a bible study or catechism class. I clearly tell them it is none of these and then I provide them with a sociological definition of religion. In addition, I offer several definitions of theology (e.g., the study of the nature of God and religious truth; faith seeking understanding; discourse about God). Once I make these distinctions the vast majority of students understand how we are going to approach the study of religion. I even go so far as to say it makes no difference to me if they believe or do not believe in God since it is irrelevant for the purposes of our class. I never ask students if they believe in God or not nor do I ask them their religious affiliation if any, although some students freely reveal this information to the class without my prompting. I do not share with the class whether I believe in God or not or if I have a religious preference. I have received many unsolicited comments from former and current students that they appreciate this strategy. Some former students even said that when discussing the class among themselves they would often try to determine if I was a believer or not or if I had a religious preference. I take comments like these as compliments. This strategy works well for me while Weston (1995, p. 159) has found that revealing this information is a "pedagogically powerful activity." We are specifically studying religion as a social institution and a set of ideas. Unfortunately there is usually at least one student who for one reason or another has difficulty controlling his or her biases. The most blatant biases are usually directed against Catholics and Jews. As previously mentioned, this is one reason why I have the class read monographs on these groups. One way to challenge and erase ignorance is to provide the ignorant with accurate information.

Conclusion

Monographs can easily be incorporated into a variety of social science and religious studies courses to enhance study in depth. While this discussion focused on a rationale for a specific discipline, study in depth is definitely a multidisciplinary concern. By discussing methodological, theoretical, and substantive issues (like race, class, gender, and religion) monographs serve as a platform where the various components of the sociology major come together. Capstone courses are supposed to accomplish this task (Wagenaar, 2007). While sociology of religion course is not a capstone course it functions as one in this regard. Some students have their first aha experience or sociological epiphany while reading these monographs. Students become more adept at seeing the ironies of social life and they are accustomed to saying that these ironies are "interesting." They frequently tell me I never thought of this particular group in this way or that I have been seriously misinformed about this

group. They see how all this s*tuff* (their term) that they have been studying in other sociology and religious studies classes comes together! This experience is what Roberts and Roberts (2008, p. 130) identified as a key enticement to "deep reading." Thus, sometimes we can accomplish, as the Association of American Colleges (1985, p. 28) recommended, that the various parts of the curriculum "are interrelated and understood." The use of research monographs is one tool that can contribute to a department's study in depth and they are part of an instructional strategy that fosters deep learning.

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William L. Smith is Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, Georgia