Developing A Decolonial Approach to the Interreligious Studies Classroom: A Response to Jones and Meyer[1]

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Abstract: In conversation with the ways my classroom has shifted over the past five years, this brief response to "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment" by Jones and Meyer reflects on how developing a decolonial approach to teaching interreligious studies illuminates and extends several of the prescient pedagogical issues they identify. I propose that a decolonial approach to teaching interreligious studies requires addressing the inseparability of religious and racial difference, centering reflexivity as the basis for relational responsibility, and focusing on stories over identities.

Keywords: decolonial, religious diversity, World Religions, religiosity, pedagogy

The description in "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment" of my own teaching practices from five years ago when Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer came to visit my *World Religions* classroom feels so distant to me today. That was the last semester that I taught *World Religions* before it was replaced in our curriculum by *Navigating Religious Diversity;* most of the other courses that I teach in interreligious studies were not yet in the course catalog. These five years have marked, not only a shift in the courses that I teach but, more fundamentally, a shift in my approach to teaching interreligious studies that was only beginning to take root back then. I was just coming to see interreligious studies as bearing a potential to cultivate a decolonial approach to the study of religion and beginning to feel out what it might mean to create a decolonial interreligious studies classroom.[2] The construction and study of religious difference have been shaped by the colonial orientation of modernity in ways that abstract and distort religion from lived forms of religiosity and privilege White, western forms of Christianity in the defining of religion.[3] Cultivating a decolonial approach to the interreligious studies classroom requires simultaneously transforming both pedagogical practices and the study of religion by moving through the self-reflective critique of the construction of religious difference in order to get to the work of creating equity.[4] I have sought to design interreligious studies classrooms that facilitate students engaging religious difference in place as lived forms of religiosity. Moreover, I now explicitly teach students to understand and respond to the ways in which the construction of religious difference has been inseparable from white supremacy and Christian normativity. In

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[1] This essay is part of a series of responses to the article by Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer, "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment," in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, no. 36 (May 2022): 9-34. To view the entire issue, visit http://irstudies.org.

[2] For an analysis of why it is essential to address the colonial legacy inherited by interreligious studies and analysis of the capacity of interreligious studies to decolonize the study of religion, see respectively, Paul Hedges, "Decolonizing Interreligious Studies," and Kevin Minister, "Decolonizing the Study of Religion," in *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from an Emerging Field*, ed., Hans Gustafson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020). Since writing that article, I have shifted from the language of "decolonizing" the field or the classroom to "a decolonial approach" to the field or the classroom because I want to indicate that my objective is not to purify the field or classroom from colonial influences, nor can my objectives be limited to the field or classroom. A decolonial approach to the interreligious studies classroom entails broader engagements with the history and ongoing effects of colonialism in order to generate collaborative efforts towards equity with attention to place.

[3] Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 20.

[4] Here I am following K. Wayne Yang's articulation of the third university as a decolonizing machine. la paperson, *A Third University Is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 43–46.

conversation with the ways my classroom has shifted over the past five years, this brief response to Jones's and Meyer's study reflects on how developing a decolonial approach to teaching interreligious studies illuminates and extends several of the prescient pedagogical issues they identify. I propose that a decolonial approach to teaching interreligious studies requires addressing the inseparability of religious and racial difference, centering reflexivity as the basis for relational responsibility, and focusing on stories over identities.

In the wake of the interreligious pedagogies workshop, my classroom practices shifted from focusing primarily on engagement across religious difference to prioritizing the construction of religious difference and its inseparability from the construction of racial difference.[5] Jones and Meyer reflect the minimal engagement with race in their classroom observations and the contentious acknowledgement of the elision of race in the field at the pedagogies workshop in their inclusion of a final section to their study, asking "to what extent do (or should) questions of interfaith engagement intersect with questions about race?"[6] While, previously, I had included units about the intersection of race and religion in my interreligious studies courses, the workshop challenged me to attend to the construction of religious difference as a foundation for attending to the power dynamics built into engagement across religious difference. This shift made teaching interreligious studies inseparable from teaching about white supremacy and antiracism. In one of the texts that I have used to help students identify the interconnection of the construction of racial and religious difference, Khyati Joshi asserts, "Religion cannot be understood apart from its growth within a racialized political and social world. Religion and race do not just come into contact with each other; each actually produces the meaning of the other through intersections in individuals, institutions, and ideologies."[7] Previously, the course centered engagement across religious difference and made race only one of several issues negotiated in interreligious contexts; in this way, race theoretically remained an issue that could be skipped if there was not space in the course. This makes interreligious studies much less threatening, both pedagogically and institutionally, because it grounds interreligious studies in self-professed identities that are implicitly accepted and affirmed at face value and only secondarily negotiated across to create mutual understanding and address shared social concerns. Focusing on the construction of religious difference destabilizes and contextualizes religious identities. When we examine how religious difference emerges, we see the ways in which the construction of religious identities is built on the back of the construction of racial difference and serves to normalize racial difference and justify racial hierarchies. Practically, this means that critical race theory has become a key theoretical framework for all of my interreligious studies courses in order to perceive the role of white supremacy in the construction of religious difference and the vital role of antiracism in the practice of interreligious engagement. This takes different forms in my different interreligious studies course but has allowed for greater interdisciplinary collaboration with other programs at the university, including creating a university town hall program focused on understanding racial inequality in relation to multiple disciplinary lenses and developing collaborative responses to pursue equity.

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[5] To a significant extent, this shift was prompted by the insights, challenges, and graciousness of Rahuldeep Singh Gill. In this way, he made me a better teacher at the same time he inspired joy by teaching me to always celebrate the little things. Rest in power and peace.

[6] Katherine Janiec Jones and Cassie Meyer, "Interfaith and Interreligious Pedagogies: An Assessment," in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, no. 36 (May 2022), 32.

[7] Khyati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 120.

Teaching students to perceive the *construction* of religious difference before negotiating engagement across *religious difference* has led me to center reflexivity in the learning process as the basis for social and relational responsibility. In this, I join the rest of the instructors observed by Jones and Meyer, who acknowledge the importance of "students' surfacing their own social/structural positionality and intersectionality, as well as their own feelings about religion."[8] In response to Jones' and Meyer's inquiries about how such a commitment to students' self-critiques and ethical development relates to the longstanding tension in the field between approaching the religious studies classroom as a place of self-discovery versus a place of academic rigor,[9] I suggest that centering reflexivity as a basis for responsibility in interreligious studies classrooms moves beyond this colonial binary. *Explorations* of religious others as a means of self-discovery or self-actualization echoes colonial encounters. Likewise, the expectation of academic objectivity as the mark of rigorous study reflects the colonial administration of knowledge, in which the learning subject gains intellectual mastery of the distant, historic, or exoticized religious others without being affected by or impacting the object of study. Both of these approaches presume that the learning subject can be freed from their own physical, social, and cultural locations to extract knowledge, resources, and value from other lands, peoples, and cultures. In Jones's and Meyer's study, I see colleagues who are charting a new course that cultivates reflexivity in the learner as the basis for responsibly attending to the power dynamics at play in encounters of learning across religious difference. Cressler, for example, cultivates this sort of self-awareness in his students by helping them to see how their relative judgments of the authenticity of two Hindu leaders were shaped by their own cultural contexts and sense of "real" religiosity.[10] This self-awareness creates the possibility for the emergence of: 1) a responsibility to understand other people and traditions on their own terms and in their own contexts, even across radical differences and disagreements, 2) a responsibility to attend to the relevance of what is learned for our shared life together, and 3) a commitment to cultivating equity in our shared life together.

Cultivating reflexivity about the construction of religious difference requires greater attention to religious difference within my classrooms. Responding to the frequent concern that I have heard from colleagues that their classrooms are not very diverse, Jones and Meyer assert that "creating encounters with religious diversity often required engagement with peoples and places beyond the students",[11] such as the contested practice of site visits. Like most of the classrooms that Jones and Meyer visited in their study, the majority of my students present as white and grew up in Christian affiliated families. My sense is that most of the students enter the classroom expecting to learn about someone else's religion that comes from somewhere else, reflecting the broader, colonial cultural assumptions about religious difference. Colonial approaches to religion have treated whiteness and Americanness as a proxy for Christian identity and perceived religious difference primarily through racialized categories that presume religious difference comes from elsewhere, outside of "us". As a result, one of my first objectives is to challenge a presumed sense of religious sameness among the students in the classroom by creating self-reflective dialogues or collaborative storytelling projects that require students to

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[8] Jones and Meyer, 30.
[9] Jones and Meyer, 15-17.
[10] Jones and Meyer, 16.
[11] Jones and Meyer, 15.

share about their own distinct histories and orientations to religion and spirituality. It does not take long to discover that, even though most of them grew up in Christian affiliated families, the plurality no longer identifies with a religious tradition and those that continue to identify with a religious tradition don't want to be generically lumped in with everyone in the tradition because they feel like they have a distinctive orientation to the tradition. Beginning courses in this way allows student to begin to see their own role in the production of religious difference rather than imagining religious difference as something that emerges from somewhere else, from someone who appears "other." This practice simultaneously creates connections between students in the classroom based on having felt seen and welcomed as their unique selves rather than on a presumed sense of similarity. This establishes a foundation for a self-reflective learning community that needs all the stories and experiences present in the classroom, an awareness of how the experiences of the people present will shape the learning process, and a shared responsibility for taking account of the diversity of stories and experiences present within the community. While my classrooms are not reflective of global religious diversity, beginning by cultivating an awareness of the religious differences that exist within the classroom prepares the class to perceive the presence of religious difference in other places and amongst other people where they might have only seen sameness. Practices like site visits can play a role in a decolonial approach to interreligious studies if these encounters are grounded in the self-reflective work necessary to avoid essentializing and exoticizing religious difference. Prior to the pandemic, I included site visits to religious communities in some of my courses near the end of the semester, approaching these as an extension of the encounters across religious difference experienced within the classroom. Approaching the classroom as a space of religious difference serves as a way to practice the skills for going beyond first appearances of sameness/otherness in order to learn about the stories and experiences that give people from different religious communities' various meanings in their practices. Based on that, I require students to collaborate in teaching each other about the different communities they visited in a way that the community would find fair. This enables students to take social and relational responsibility for working toward equity across religious difference grounded in what they learned from the religious community and how that community shared with them.

The possibility of perceiving this sort of nuanced religious difference in the classroom requires focusing on the stories that narrate identity over identity labels. In the study of narrative identity by psychologists, "Life stories are thought to constitute one's identity, and it is only in knowing someone's life story that one truly knows another person."[12] Drawing on this narrative psychology, sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman notes, "We do not think primarily in concepts or causal chains but in stories that carry those ideas and imply the causes."[13] People put together memories from their life experiences into stories as a way of conveying "to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future."[14] By focusing on stories over identity labels, interreligious studies becomes grounded in lived experiences rather than in the exchange of abstract categories reminiscent of colonial taxonomies. Attempts to be more intentional about how I engage students who do not

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[12] Kate C. McLean, "The Emergence of Narrative Identity," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2, no. 4 (2008): 1693.

[13] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

[14] Dan P McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative Identity," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, No. 3 (June 2013): 233.

identify with a religious tradition exposed the limits of grounding the study of religious difference in religious identities. As Thiessen and Wilkins-LaFlamme point out in their study of non-religious identity, "For the 'none' phenomenon to become possible, there needs to be a context where religion is understood as distinct from other aspects of life (e.g., the economic, the political, the domestic), with distinct memberships, beliefs, and practices—a context where individuals can thus conceive of being without a religion."[15]

The very creation of the category of nones was developed to compensate for the separation of religion from other aspects of life that emerged as a central facet of the invention of world religions in colonial practices of the study of religion.[16] The nones are included in the conversation about religious difference grounded in identity categories precisely through their exclusion. The category of nones is an inherently negative category, meaning it tells us what individuals in this category do not do rather than what they do, what they value, or where they belong. Unsurprisingly and reflecting my own experience with students, Thiessen and Wilkins-LaFlamme found in their interviews that nonreligious identity is not important to nones.[17] But when students begin to share and hear the experiences that have shaped how they relate to religion through stories, it quickly becomes apparent that students who do not affiliate with a religious tradition have beliefs, practices, and spaces of belonging that orient how they live and that they care about a great many things about which students who identify as religious also care. Stories about the experiences that shape how people live present an integrated perspective in which religiosity cannot be separated from other aspects of life or identity. Ammerman has shown how "[b]y looking for religion in practices and narratives, we gain a new perspective that allows us to see how spiritual resources are generated, nurtured, and deployed across the many religious and secular contexts in which people live their lives."[18]

There is no doubt that religious identity is important to many of my students and that religious identity categories name something important about them and their communities. But understanding how identity labels function for individual students requires the context of the lived experiences that have led them to take up and deploy the identity labels that they use because identity labels always obscure as much as they reveal about people. Henderson is an exemplar of how to use narrative as a way for students to learn about religious difference through lived experience, which Jones and Meyer point out also "empowers students to begin both naming and claiming their own narratives."[19] This emphasis on storytelling in which people have such different relationships to religious identities is an important antidote to the impossibility of providing enough basic facts or information about a tradition. Focusing on stories over identities has created a place for "nones" in my interreligious studies classroom while simultaneously allowing students who identify as religious to offer a more nuanced and complicated perspective on their way of life. Stories and storytelling as pedagogies subvert the colonial distinction that separates religion from all other aspects of life.

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[15] Joel Thiessen and Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme, *None of the Above: Nonreligious Identity in the US and Canada* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 2.

[16] Masuzawa, 20.

[17] Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme, 66.

[18] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 7.

[19] Jones and Meyer, 29.

Over the past five years, I have found two practices particularly useful as I shifted my classroom to focus on stories over identities. The first is using Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) to invite the diversity of students' stories into the classroom in connection with the course content.[20] While I use formal dialogue practices to hold conversations among students at least a few times in each course, I use components of the full formal practice of RSD, such as dialogic questions, in every course session. Dialogic questions help students connect to the course content through reflecting on the experiences in their own lives that have shaped their perspectives on the subject and connect with one another's distinct perspectives by sharing these experiences in the form of personal stories. For me, receiving training in RSD prepared me to have the kind of robust dialogues across religious difference in my classrooms that Jones and Meyer observe many faculty desiring. I cannot recommend this training highly enough to other instructors who might still be seeking training on using dialogue across difference in the classroom.[21] Nancy Klancher, Deanna Ferree Womack, and Wakoh Shannon Hickey each exemplify other ways of using dialogue with varying purposes, including problem-solving, mutual understanding, and one-on-one conversations with attention and reflectiveness about the roles taken on in dialogue, the skills employed in dialogue, and the practical application of these skills.[22] A significant portion of my course preparation now focuses on designing dialogic questions that get at the major purpose of that class session in a way that is relevant to students' lives and invites the sharing of complex stories that depict the nuances of the diversity of students' experiences without separating religion from other dimensions of life or reducing perspectives to binary positions or simplistic identity labels. RSD cultivates the skills and confidence in students to conduct difficult conversations with attention to difference and empowers students to go beyond identity labels to share lived experiences that have shaped who they have become, what they do and believe, and where they feel like they belong.

The second way that I have sought to help students see that their own lived experiences are already intertwined with others is through a collaborative story telling exercise, built in the model of "Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity," a production of Ping Chong and Company in partnership with Steven Hitt at LaGuardia Community College.[23] "Beyond Sacred" is a theatrical storytelling performance scripted out of the lived experiences of five young Muslims living in New York City and, even though they are not trained actors, these same five individuals perform as themselves, in their own words. The performance weaves together each of the five individuals' distinct stories as a way of sharing a variety of experiences of being Muslim in New York City, highlighting the ways in which these individuals' lived experience connect and diverge. After watching a documentary about "Beyond Sacred",[24] students work in small groups

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[20] Reflective Structured Dialogue was developed by the organization now called Essential Partners in Cambridge, MA. I am grateful to Jill DeTemple for introducing me to RSD as well as for her extensive training and mentoring. For more on the practice of RSD in religious studies classrooms, see Jill DeTemple with John Sarrouf, "Disruption, Dialog, and Swerve: Reflective Structured Dialog in Religious Studies Classrooms," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 20, no. 3 (July 2017): 282–91), and for more on the impact of using RSD in the classroom, see Jill DeTemple, "The Spaces We Make: Dialogic Classrooms and Social Transformation," *Ohio State Journal on Dispute Resolution* 35, no. 5 (2020): 753–79).

[21] Training in RSD can be coordinated through Essential Partners at whatisessential.org.

[22] Jones and Meyer, 12-14.

[23] My collaborative storytelling assignment is an adaptation for the interreligious studies classroom of an assignment shared with me by Jill DeTemple and a workshop session she led based on the work of Steven Hitt.

[24] "Beyond Sacred Documentary", a Whistle Hill Films Production published December 11, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XktjcpGnacM.

to create a script in which they interweave multiple personal stories from each group member to tell a collaborative story that depicts the convergences and divergences in the problems they care about, the ways that they have been inspired to see that things could be different, how they aspire to be part of making a difference, and how they live now in light of how they aspire to be part of making a difference. By learning to tell their stories together, students experience how their histories and ways of life shape up in relation to others as well as feel out how the manner in which they tell their stories and live into those stories impacts others. Stories and storytelling take shape at the intersection of the personal and the public and, as Ammerman points out, "We live inside a range of socially constructed stories that are not always of our own making or even fully conscious to us."[25] Focusing on stories allows students to attend to how our identities, values, and ways of life emerge in relationship to others and how the sharing of those stories makes claims on our shared life that impacts others (the "inter" of stories).

As I create space for the diversity of stories present in the classroom, I have begun sharing my own stories that give insight into my religiosity, with attention to the power dynamics in the classroom. As Jones and Meyer note in their study, when they visited my classroom in Spring of 2017, I was reluctant to self-disclose my religiosity in my teaching.[26] This was a practice that I came to in graduate school in my movement away from insider approaches to the study of religion, partly as an attempt to eschew a felt sense that students were looking for authorization of or opposition to their own religious commitments, and partly because of insecurity in my own shifting religiosity. While my primary role in the classroom has become a facilitator of engagement across difference, I cannot expect students to bring their own stories that help others understand their history with religiosity when I am not willing to meet them in the space with an equitable vulnerability. I now attempt to avoid the sense of objectivity and intellectual distance from the study of religion that colonialism relied upon to normalize white, Christian religiosity and exoticize other forms of religiosity. My self-disclosure as an instructor aims to model how sharing specific stories provides more nuanced insights into religious difference, while shifting assumptions that as the instructor I will either be supportive of students because I use the same religious identity label or oppositional because I do not.

Feeling out pedagogies for a decolonial interreligious studies classroom over these past five years has shifted much about how I approach the classroom, what I ask of students, and how I think about my sub rosa learning objectives. My classroom feels more grounded in place with a greater self-awareness of what all of us in the learning community are bringing to the space and the differences present within those experiences. A stronger sense of responsibility to each other, to communities we engage with and learn about, and to our social situation has emerged. Professional preparedness remains integral to my interreligious studies courses but locating professional preparedness within a decolonial approach to interreligious studies shifts the focus *from* marketing our institutional value *to* empowering students to survive in an inequitable world with the resources to perceive and respond to systemic inequity. In this way, I hope that my interreligious studies classrooms create self-reflective spaces for perceiving the construction of religious difference and empower students to collaborate in decolonizing efforts to work toward equity.

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[25] Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 8.
[26] Jones and Meyer, 17-19.

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