

listening. I also select some writings for each course that bring out some contemplative dimension in the material, some way of making explicit that doing theology *well* entails a purgation of desire and the cultivation of receptive awareness. Toward that end, I often assign Martin Laird's *Into the Silent Land*, in whole or in part, as a baseline accompaniment to the course itinerary, including in my grad seminars.²⁷ Confirming the oft-quoted (but not always understood) maxim of Evagrius Ponticus, "If you pray truly, you are a theologian," Laird's short classic offers a practical, accessible, and theologically finessed guide for discovering the ineffable and healing depths of contemplative awareness in everyday life. I also incorporate some version of an e-media retreat for all my undergraduates, usually for the period of twenty-four hours, that asks them to unplug from our media-saturated world while noticing the wider world as it "appears" without the mediation of the omnipresent screen. Short, low-stakes writing assignments allow students to reflect upon the cumulative effect that largely unnoticed habits of attention produce in us.

Whatever the specific practice, or its scope in the classroom, the fact that I undertake all of these practices *with* my students gives them a more palpable sense that I, too, am implicated in this material; I, too, am just as open to being challenged and enriched by theology as they are; I, too, am still learning how to become a theologian; and that above all, the practice of "paying attention to myself" is a deeper way of being attentive to *them*.

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III. The Contemplative Pedagogy Coward

When I was asked about contributing to this roundtable on contemplative pedagogy, I was honored to be included in the mix. Yes, I have experimented in my teaching with contemplative practices for about five years

²⁷ Martin Laird, OSA, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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now, and so I fit the group's focus in that way. And yes, my postdoctoral work focused on university pedagogy, and so it would seem like I would be a natural for this sort of roundtable. But before I go any further, I feel as though I need to out myself for who I truly am—instead of being a contemplative professor, I am a contemplative coward. No doubt, I have been impressed reading about and witnessing other professors' thoughtful uses of contemplative practices in the classroom. And I even dabble in having my world religions students “go through the motions” of religious practices from Buddhism and Islam. But as I spent time thinking through my approach in anticipation of this roundtable, it became clear that my efforts have been nothing short of cowardly, due to the fact that, first, I have questioned my own ability to lead students in contemplative exercises, and second, I have been wary of asking students to engage in the practices of religious others in a serious way.

Briefly to my first point, I myself make no claims to being a contemplative, which as Anita Houck points out, would not be appreciated by the members of Contemplative Pedagogy Network. Borrowing a phrase from a colleague, I am not spiritual, I'm religious²⁸ (and then only occasionally), and so I have wondered about my qualifications to push students toward deep pools of spiritual wisdom when I barely dip my toes in the water. I am also hesitant to blur the lines between academic theological and religious studies and personal spiritual practice, a distinction that was hard-won at my institution. I make it clear to students that I am not invested personally in their religious affiliation or practice. This is meant to be liberating for Catholic students, many of whom are tired after twelve years of religion classes aimed at making them good Catholics, but also for students who are not Catholic and are skeptical of the theology course requirements of our school. I will return to my second point about engaging in the practices of religious others shortly, but allow me to say a bit more about the context in which I teach.

Rockhurst University is a small, Jesuit institution in Kansas City, Missouri, that mainly draws students from within a geographical radius of a four-hour drive. When I inquired about religious diversity at Rockhurst when I was hired

²⁸ Credit for this phrase goes to Noah Silverman, Senior Director of Learning and Partnerships at the Interfaith Youth Core. He used it in the context of a 2015 conversation we had regarding the claims our home religious traditions continue to make on us (and us on them) even if we no longer strongly identify with the tradition in other ways. Silverman has since published his ideas on this theme in the essay “Called by Our Conflicting Allegiances: Vocation as an Interfaith Endeavour/Interfaith Cooperation as a Vocation,” in *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy*, ed. David S. Cunningham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

four years ago, a campus minister told me, “we have a Muslim, a Jew, and a Buddhist,” and no, he was not reciting the beginning of a joke in which they all walk into a bar together. There are in fact a few more students from different religious backgrounds than that campus minister initially let on, and it has been a gift to have those students in class. But historically most of our students have been Catholic.²⁹ They have little experience with religious “others” and they have that innocent egocentricity I find particular to Catholic school alumni who have been raised to see Catholics as the center of the universe (an attitude I once shared). A variety of other Christian communities are also well represented by students at Rockhurst, who again have had relatively little exposure to religious others. It is with these challenges and opportunities before me that I approach the world religions survey I was hired to teach.

In the Introduction to World Religions course, I assign two “experiential” or “embodied” exercises. The first is a Buddhism-inspired meditation assignment I give after having discussed the distinction between Samadhi (or concentration) meditation and Vipassana (or insight) meditation and having introduced Buddhist analyses of how our own mental response to the world impacts the suffering we experience. My students’ task is to meditate at least three times for at least ten minutes each time, and I tell them that I want them to do Samadhi-style meditation, the type of meditation aimed at helping the mind focus and rest. In other words, I am asking them to attempt to calm the monkey mind; I am not asking them to adopt Buddhist beliefs temporarily or probe deeper Buddhist teachings for themselves. But then I fudge this distinction a little bit in the prompt for their reflection paper as the questions escalate from “How did it go?” to “What did you notice about your own thought processes as you meditated?” to, finally, “Do you think that meditation could lead to insight as Buddhist teachers claim?”

The second experiential exercise comes in the unit on Islam and is a mini-Ramadan-like fast that we undertake as a class and about which they have to write a reflection paper. For this project, I ask that they abstain from food and water for at least thirteen hours straight in which most of the time is not spent sleeping. For the ambitious, I lay out the challenge of a real sunup to sundown fast, which I commit to do along with them, and I am always surprised by the number of students who take up this more difficult option.³⁰ The exercise

²⁹ In fact, this was the first year in the university’s history in which Catholic students did not make up the majority of the incoming freshman class.

³⁰ As a side note, the assignment announcement is riddled with pleas that the students approach the fast in ways that are smart for their health and well-being. For students

ends when I bring in basmati rice and bread to share while we discuss our fasting experiences in class.

An even smaller-scale embodied component of the class from the Islam unit is that I walk students through the postures of Muslim prayer. After we look at a handout and watch a video demonstrating the prostrations and prayers, students are surprised when I ask them to stand up, face east, and separate by gender so that we can cycle through the prayer movements together. I tell them that we are “going through the motions, not praying.” There is not a reflection paper associated with this exercise, but we do have a conversation about what it felt like to do the prostrations and how that feeling connects with the ideal of submission in Islam.

The exercises I have described demonstrate why I said previously that I dabble in contemplative-like pedagogy. I ask students to move mentally and physically outside their comfort zones, and I encourage them to reflect on what they took away from those experiences. But in my opinion, these exercises remain in the realm of the timid, in large part because I am skeptical about taking them to the next level and pulling students more deeply into the practices of religious others.

Recognizing that my engagement with contemplative pedagogy has been limited, in my preparations for this roundtable I set out to learn from professors more experienced in the field, and I read up on all the theory and method that I could find. In doing so, I came across a short and challenging passage from an article on contemplative pedagogy, though its import bleeds into all aspects of being a professor. Arthur Zajonc, professor emeritus of physics at Amherst College, writes, “Our teaching is the expression of an ethic. What is the educational ethic that you wish to embody in your teaching? How can your deepest pedagogical ethics be more present, more fully a part of your work with students and colleagues?”³¹

The contributions of Anita Houck and Brian Robinette to this roundtable provide examples of inspiring ethics of teaching. The stories of their efforts in contemplative pedagogy lay down a challenge for me that goes beyond the typical ways in which we all push ourselves to be better teachers by, say, finding better alignment between activities and assignments or knowing

who wish to do an alternative assignment for any reason, I ask them to follow the rhythm of five-times-per-day Muslim prayer for three days. I tell them that they are not expected to pray during this time (though they may if they wish), but they are to download an app that will remind them of the daily prayer times and then take a few minutes for a consistent short practice, such as quiet time, listening to a meaningful song, journaling, or stretching at the prescribed times. They then write a reflection paper as do their classmates who fast.

³¹ Zajonc, “Contemplative Pedagogy,” 93.

how to craft feedback that will promote improvement. Indeed, I think it is the potential power of the contemplative pedagogy approach, and the ethic required to buttress it, that has made me quite guarded in its use. If I could not do it well confidently, and because I have questions about how to do it well, it has seemed best to steer clear.

In hopes of getting past my questions, I first need to move deeply into them, probing why I am skeptical of contemplative pedagogy even as I am simultaneously drawn to it. And this is how I would like to use the remainder of my contribution to this roundtable—raising questions about what is legitimate and appropriate, particularly in the context of teaching almost exclusively Christian students practices from other religious traditions.

It is important to point out that the first courses I taught were in the area of Catholic systematics. Although I still teach courses focused on topics in Christian theology, it has never occurred to me to assign embodied exercises in these courses as I do in my world religions introductory class. I continue to think through why that is, but my suspicion is that my personal double standard comes from the fact that I work hard to move students toward the history, toward the textual analysis, and toward theory in those theology classes. (Clearly, I share Brian Robinette's insecurity about theology not being perceived as a *real* academic discipline.) I worry that incorporating Christian contemplative practices—which presumably I should know something about since Roman Catholicism is my root tradition—would make students brush off the academic rigor of the course that was so hard-won.

With these insights into my teaching history in hand, I return to my questions about contemplative pedagogy involving the practices of religious others. One significant concern involves the danger of cultural appropriation and the threat of shallowness that looms in the background for me. I contextualize the practices within the broader traditions from which they emerge in tandem with presenting the embodied component. In terms of content, I try to go deep. But for the embodied practices, my approach, somewhat counter-intuitively, is to remain surface-level and informal. Through this brief approach to actual practice, I am trying to say to students, "There is a lot more here that we just are not able to tap into." In other words, I am introducing my students to the practices, but I am also making it clear that just because they meditate three times in one week or fast for a day, it does not mean that they really "get" these practices. In deliberately only scratching the surface, my goal is to respect the embeddedness of the practices and not pull them *into* the class so forcefully that they are wholly pulled *out* of their respective traditions.

In addition to wanting to avoid cultural appropriation, my caution in this area stems from the fact that my research interests relate to the question of

ritual efficacy: How do rituals “work”? Out of respect for the efficacy or “realness” of the rituals we experiment with in class, I make it clear that we are mostly play-acting in the embodied exercises. This is very different from an experiential learning exercise detailed by a colleague at a teaching seminar I attended a couple of summers back. Her course on religion and health incorporated a wide variety of alternative healing demonstrations in which students were expected to participate—from reiki to divination to sage smudging. The majority of the practices had been extracted fairly cleanly from their original contexts. For example, the professor as a white American woman performed a shamanic ritual in the classroom—which according to her account was “real” and not just play-acting—even though this was not a tradition she came from or with which she identified. She expressed surprise at the pushback she received from her mostly Baptist students, who did not feel comfortable taking part, regardless of her efforts to convince them that it was okay. Ultimately, she was offended that they were unwilling to give it a try. Listening to her describe her frustration, however, I was struck by how it seemed as though in some ways, the resistant students were actually the ones who seemed *more* respectful of the practices with which the professor was experimenting.

In a limited way, I have faced similar resistance from a few students in response to the Buddhist-style meditation assignment. I find that their reaction typically relates to issues concerning ritual efficacy, though they would not use those words. These students question taking part in the practices of religious others, not because they think they are silly, frivolous, or ineffective—the students who are too cool for school and think that way typically save their loathing of the meditation assignment for the reflection paper in which they detail how little effort they actually gave to the task—but those who resist outright do so because they worry about “realness” and feel it may contradict or pose a challenge to their own home religious tradition. For example, a conservative Catholic student expressed to me one-on-one that she did not feel comfortable undertaking Buddhist-style meditation, and so we discussed what modifications she could make so that we could both be satisfied with her efforts. Lisa Hess, in her article about co-teaching a Christian seminary course on ritual practices with a Jewish scholar, expresses a similar experience with her graduate students: “Most came into the course with the assumption that one has to choose—be a disciple of Jesus or relinquish devotion to him to pursue the goods of pluralism.”³² In these cases, then, the question becomes, What if the challenge in the

³² Lisa Hess, “Being Shaped by the Ritual Practices of Others: A Classroom Reflection,” *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 16, no. 4 (October 2013): 340.

classroom is that students are taking these practices very seriously, not that they are not taking them seriously enough?

An additional question about interreligious contemplative pedagogy regards the fairness of undertaking Buddhist and Muslim (or any other religion's) practices in a space that tellingly bears the marks of my institution's Catholic identity. This concern hit hard when I was leading my students through the Muslim prayer prostrations one fall. As we oriented ourselves toward Mecca in the classroom, we came face-to-face with the Jesuit cross hanging high on the wall, just as it does in every classroom at the university. As a counterpoint to that moment, however, that was also the course section in which I had one of Rockhurst's few Muslim students. A smart, cool, and quiet Egyptian American who was literally named "Islam," he stood little chance of hiding his religious identity had he wanted to. I knew Islam had been raised in a religious home, that he spoke Arabic, and that he was involved in his mosque community, but I had talked to him at the start of the term, saying that I would not single him out in class and that I did not expect (or invite) him to speak for *all* Muslims. Yet I was pleasantly surprised when Islam stepped to the front of the group when it came time to go through the prayer postures, the ease and grace of his motions demonstrating the deep familiarity of the movements to his body. For those few minutes, we—the Christians in the room—entered his territory, even as physically we remained in our own.

I will end with that counterpoint because I hope it captures my ambivalence about incorporating contemplative pedagogy into my classes. I truly enjoy these experiential components of my world religions introduction, and student reflection papers suggest that most students find them meaningful as well. I value going beyond what we read in textbooks and watch in videos to feel for ourselves, a least a little bit, what it is like to think and act and move like the communities we study. Yet I remain hesitant to go much further, particularly in a survey course, for the reasons previously articulated. Call me a coward if you'd like.

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