

A Performative Approach to the Comparative Study of Religions

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Overview of this project

The overarching purpose of this particular essay is to articulate how a Performance Studies methodology and approach affects the design and pedagogy of a course in the comparative study of religion. Of course, much of the discussion concerning Performance Studies which follows could be applied to the teaching of many different subjects, particularly subjects in the Humanities. However, there are certain natural affinities between the study of performance(s) and the study of religions which makes this particular combination especially engaging. Included among the affinities are the study of rituals and ritual behavior, the study of cultural expressivity, the international and multicultural scope of investigation, etc.

This essay reflects the development of a pedagogy which creates a space and opportunity for students to develop critical, creative and synthetic skills for observing and studying human cultures and religions. But even more than these cognitive and imaginative abilities, I hope to develop further a pedagogy which will help students to become more humane, understanding, tolerant, and, yes, even loving toward other human beings. Naturally, the hopes I have for the development of attitudes of tolerance and openness can neither be required nor programmed into a course. However, what I can do as a teacher is to set a tone in the classroom which allows for the students to bring their questions and cultural differences with them into the classroom and to accept those questions and differences and the students who embody them as well.

That acceptance and tolerance can be extended throughout the course, for example, by not insisting that students acquire a particularly quantifiable set of facts or that they amass or “master” a certain body of knowledge. (Feminist theory and scholarship provides a thorough critique of the idea of “mastery” of knowledge as being an example and practice of the domination of the (male) researcher or student over the subservient material [fr. mater, “mother”] wherein the object of knowledge is “used” or “handled” by the researcher according to a set of criteria or purposes defined by the researcher and not the object of research. More on this later.) Instead, I can focus my attention on the process of the class, and each student’s individual process of learning and personal growth through this class.

Finally, I hope to develop a style of teaching and a class design that will provide a time and space for students to gain access to and further develop their bodily, sensual, emotional, intuitive and feeling-centered sensitivities and awareness in addition to their rational and analytical faculties, as well as create an experiential context for mutual human-to-human meetings with persons from a variety of religious practices and cultures. Rather than view the study of religions and religious cultures in a

strictly rational, dispassionate and detached fashion, I am committed to the presentation of religion as a phenomenon that engages the whole person, and in order to understand religion as a holistic phenomenon, students need to be encouraged and allowed to engage their study of religions and religious cultures as emotionally, physically and rationally constituted and integrated persons. I understand this process of personal integration to be a fundamentally spiritual process, and although I will not advocate for a particular spirituality or religious practice, it is my hope that the design of this course and my teaching style will create the conditions wherein each student has an opportunity to begin or continue their own spiritual process of personal integration.

Conversation about Religion and the Academy

Judith Berling, in her 1991 Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion, in regard to the academic study of religions, speaks of members of our culture engaging in “what might be termed ‘broadening conversations.’” (1) She says that these conversations serve a number of roles:

- A) “We learn how an experience of the world is seen through different eyes, and we thereby *enter imaginatively* into that person’s experience”(my emphasis).
- B) “Such conversations provide information about how to treat persons with due regard for their experiences and circumstances. They contribute to our cognitive map of considerate and appropriate behavior.”
- C) “Such conversations render visible to us the assumptions and patterns of our lives; in becoming familiar with a new context we see our own idiosyncrasies, our distinctiveness, our strengths, and our limitations.”
- D) “Broadening conversations challenge us to articulate clearly our own experience and positions, since the partner does not share our exact background and all of our assumptions.”
- E) “Broadening conversations chasten our tendencies toward dogmatism and engender what Hollenbach has called ‘Epistemological humility’,(2) reminding us that there are many approaches to and views of the normative.”
- F) “Broadening conversations help us to understand which differences are irreducible because they are rooted in different experiences, different institutional systems, or incompatible moral worlds.”(3)

There are (at least) three things in this list which bear further examination and which relate directly to a Performance Studies approach to Religious Studies. The first is her comment that we can enter imaginatively into another person’s experience by seeing how that experience is seen through different eyes. A Performance Studies approach is specifically designed to place the student in a position of seeing and experiencing through another person’s eyes. This is because Performance Studies is highly participatory, requiring the fully engaged involvement of the whole person. Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosting describe it this way:

Performance Studies takes *participation as its working procedure*. Its mode of inquiry demands *physical, sensuous involvement in a performance event*. The methodology depends upon

personal responsiveness, somatic engagement, and cognitive analysis. Performance Studies mandates a methodology of participation. (4)

It is the participatory nature of Performance Studies that brings persons into an engaged involvement and relationship with one another. This is more than simply an academic exercise. I believe it is, in fact, an experience of transcendence, but of a kind of transcendence that is rooted in relationality. It is this blending of transcendence and relationality that makes a Performance Studies approach all the more vital to the study of religions.

Transcendence is central to religious experience. But it is also central to being a person. To be a person means to be in relation. Personality is the potential to be in relation as well as the particular qualities of relating that an individual manifests. Martin Buber describes this when he says, "Individuality makes its appearance by being differentiated from other individualities. A person makes his (sic) appearance by entering into relation with other persons." (5)

Relationship and relationality are a necessary part of transcendence. It is not enough to describe transcendence simply in terms of going beyond one's limits and boundaries, but also to understand that one is going beyond those limits to make contact with an other, with that which lies beyond oneself. To be in relationship, in fact, requires transcendence. In order to make contact with an other, whether it be a person, a thing or God, I must go beyond the narrow confines of myself in order to approach and make contact with the other. But in order to be truly in relation I must also open myself up, let down my own boundaries or "guard," as it were, in order to allow the other to make contact with me. Relationship, then, is not only an extending beyond myself, but it is also an inviting and letting in.

The study of the craft of acting as a particular form of performance is an example of how insights from Performance Studies provide a means for entering imaginatively into another person's experience. The humanity of the actor is where the kind of transcendence and relationality I have been describing occurs. It is by the actor existing fully in the body, expressing emotions, psychological tensions, desires, failures and achievements through the body that transcendence can occur. Whatever problem or task that is set before the actor becomes a voice, an emotion, a sound, a physical gripping of the body, and is expressed *by the imagination* through the body. This expression occurs instantaneously, not as a product of reflective thought, or carefully considered pre-planning. The imagination works as an experience of Immediacy, transforming the abstract acting problem into an embodied reality. The imagination makes manifest in the entire organism of the actor that which previously was only an idea, a question, an abstraction.

A Performance Studies approach helps to develop the imagination's capacities and employs these capacities as part of the learning and research process. The student or researcher moves constantly between participation in a performance, ritual or other event and analysis and reflection upon that participation. The whole organism of the student or researcher - senses, feelings, emotions, thoughts, body movement and kinesthetic perceptions - is involved in the collection of information and its processing, as well as the analysis and synthesis of ideas, conclusions (however tentative), and theories.

The second item in Berling's list which bears further scrutiny is her idea of contributing to our cognitive map of what constitutes considerate and appropriate behavior. This suggests the idea of doing research as guests and observing the proper rules and etiquette of hospitality. When studying

another religion, it is important to keep in mind that it is also *another's* religion, that is, it is a religion that is practiced and believed (to varying degrees) by other people, fellow human beings. Thus, as in any human encounter and interaction, certain rules of etiquette and social conduct pertain. But it also is reminiscent of some of the concerns expressed by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his essay, "Methodology and the Study of Religion: Some Misgivings." (6) In that essay, Smith argues against a reliance upon methodology for its own sake when studying the religion of other people. Instead, the approach of the humanities is to set the context for encounters between human beings as fellow human beings, not as objects to be studied and categorized according to some set of methodological presuppositions.

Humane knowing - the knowledge of man by man (sic) - is an exercise in the meeting between persons, be it across the centuries or across the world. It is, therefore, not technical, not subordinate to methodological rules. In personal relations, whether face-to-face or mediated by man's symbolic forms of expression, the use of technical procedures, unless rigorously subordinated to primarily personalist considerations, is not merely inappropriate but potentially disruptive. Man cannot know man except in mutuality: in respect, trust, and equality, if not ultimately love. (7)

The academic study of religion above all should be sensitive to the fact that one is studying human beings in all their human complexity. Smith is afraid that too great a stress upon methodology will result in a disregard for and discounting of the human practitioners of a religion, and that methodology will be studied for its own sake rather than as being simply one way of thinking about what a person observes in a religion. "The characteristically human is not accessible to technical devices; and most of all, the religious does not lend itself to formalized impersonalism. 'We cannot engineer our way into the sacred,' as I have heard a colleague put it."(8)

In addition, Smith is concerned that a stress upon methodology will lead to a breakdown in scholarly integrity, wherein the academic researcher will seek out proofs and confirmations of certain methodological theories and procedures, and ignore those phenomena which do not fit predetermined criteria.

One problem here, in addition to all others, is that for the study of religion - especially other cultures' religion - centrally requisite is a readiness critically to revise one's presuppositions. Few things stand in the way of a genuine awareness of other's religious life more firmly than the imposing of one's own presuppositional categories upon the data of one's observation, ordering the material in terms of one's preformulated conceptual scheme. Surely we all know that. But do we also recognize it here? The methodological presupposition - whatever the method chosen: the sheer presupposition that a given method, especially one thought up by Western intellects, is important - works at least as well as any other a priori stance, and indeed better than most, in obstructing one's sensitive perception of what one is studying. (9)

Smith's comments and concerns serve as a necessary reminder to us of what our purpose is in studying religions. It is not to advance scholarly careers nor to gather anthropological information which might serve military interests nor to prove the superiority of one religion over another. Rather, it is to help human beings to understand other human beings better, if still only partially and imperfectly. It is to bring human beings together in order to share together our discoveries and questions about what it means to be human on this world in this universe, and to marvel at our extravagantly complex diversity.

Berling's concern about "(treating) persons with due regard for their experiences and circumstances," and Smith's concern with the humane study of religion as a meeting between persons are addressed by a Performance Studies approach in which human behaviors, feelings, ideas, creativity and expressiveness are studied in the concrete cultural situations in which the various religions and religious communities and persons are found. Human expressiveness is studied as a means of having access to the inner life of an other. This access is sought not to have dominion or power over the other, but rather as an act of compassion and empathy. As Ninian Smart describes it, "Empathy literally means 'feeling in': it is getting at the feel of what is inside another person or group of persons. It is not quite the same as sympathy, "feeling with" (*pathy sym* rather than *pathy em*), for sympathy means I agree with the other. Even [if] I do not agree with the other person, however, I can still have empathy."(10)

Arvind Sharma identifies this capacity for empathy as perhaps a maximum qualification for studying religion, or, more to the point, for practicing a religion, but it is not a necessity for the study of a religion: "...no 'special qualifications' are needed, howsoever desirable they may be, except that of any academic study, that the investigator be 'positively interested in the subject' and not that his or her interest should be positive" (i.e. positively empathetic). (11) In fact, citing Geo Widengren, Sharma maintains that empathy is not even a method, but rather a "...personal aptitude for using the existing methods."(12) However, it seems that hidden in Sharma's distinction are echoes of a Cartesian dualism which posits a detached observer investigating an object and deriving a set of universally valid principles from that observation, principles which maintain their validity because the researcher is separate from the object under study, and thus neither "taints" the object studied nor is tainted by it.

A Performance Studies approach, on the other hand, maintains that such detachment is neither truly attainable, nor is it desirable. Researchers such as Ronald Grimes have argued for the subjective experiences of the researcher to be part of the data (13) and Victor and Edith Turner have used re-enacted rituals as a pedagogical process. (14) Dwight Conquergood argues for the moral responsibility of ethnographers and performers of ethnographic research to become familiar with rather than removed from the people they study.

...[E]thnographers work with expressivity, which is inextricable from its human creators. They must work with real people, humankind alive, instead of printed texts. Opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books. Perhaps that is why ethnographers worry more about acquiring experiential insight than maintaining aesthetic distance. Indeed they are calling for empathic performance as a way of intensifying the participative nature of fieldwork, and as a corrective to foreshorten the textual distance that results from writing monographs about the people with whom one lives and studies. When one keeps intellectual, aesthetic, or any other kind of distance from the other, ethnographers worry that other people will be held at an ethical and moral remove as well.(15)

Performance Studies and Feminism

A final concern which flows throughout Berling's description of broadening conversations has to do with recognizing the limitations, cultural specificity and relativity of one's own religious understanding and practice as well as the limitations, etc., of another's religion. These concerns echo

the critique which Feminist scholarship has raised concerning the production of knowledge and epistemological claims concerning access to universal truth. Feminist theory, for example, begins with an examination of the gender and power-based constructions of knowledge and epistemology. One of the strongest critiques is leveled at the Cartesian dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, with objectivity being prized (and supposedly exhibited to a greater extent by men) over subjectivity (supposedly exhibited, of course, by women). Dale Spender discusses the Feminist critique of objectivity: “As a legitimating device, objectivity has served the dominant group well. Faced with the objective evidence that women are inferior, women have been discouraged from promoting change for the very definition of objective is ‘exhibiting actual facts uncoloured by exhibitor’s feelings or opinions’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*).”(16)

The rationality of the Enlightenment and the development of the Empiricism of Bacon and others was premised upon the singularity and universality of truth, which exists as an object outside of the individual and thus is untainted by the subjective feelings and impressions of the individual. In order to have access to this realm of universal truth, the individual must learn to think in an objective and detached manner. Such activities and theories of knowledge were circulated and affirmed in circles of men, of course, with various theories and ideas advanced concerning the “objectivity” of men and the “subjectivity” of women. Feminists have challenged both the gender division of objectivity and subjectivity as well as the claims of any group to have privileged access to universal truth. This has resulted in a different style of speaking about what is known and discovered through research, reflection and communal processing. “With this fundamental challenge to the objectivity of objectivity there has been a shift in feminist development. With it has come the acknowledgement that subjectivity plays a crucial role in the construction of knowledge and that rather than construct knowledge about women which ‘out-objectifies’ the knowledge constructed by men, new criteria for credibility are called for.”(17)

Part of the critique of supposed objectivity revolves around the role played by the “objective” observer as a spectator. Much of the earliest Feminist theorizing focused upon what men said about women. Spender describes it this way:

Women came to realize that the knowledge which men constructed about women...was frequently rated as “objective” while the knowledge women began to construct about women (which has its origins in the role of a participant rather than a spectator) was frequently rated as “subjective.” When men checked with men, their pronouncements were usually seen as credible, but when women checked with women, their explanations were frequently seen as illogical, emotional and liable to be dismissed by men. The hypothesis arose that legitimacy might be associated with gender rather than with the adequacy of an explanation, and this has led Adrienne Rich (18) to comment that in a patriarchal society, objectivity is the name we give to male subjectivity.(19)

Moving from a gender-based critique of objectivity, Feminist thinkers turned to a critique of the notions of objectivity and universal truth. “...[T]here is a significant difference between the way men have checked with men and often presented their explanations as the complete and only truth, and the way women are checking with women and offering their explanations as partial and temporary ‘truths’.” (20) Feminist thought focuses upon the idea of a multiplicity of truths, which are grounded in the particularities of one’s material existence: particularities such as gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality and cultural identity, class background, etc. Truth is bound up with subjectivity. But it is

not to be abandoned or disregarded because of this. Rather, the task becomes one of sharing our particularities and listening for expressions of truths in the experiences of others. Sociologist Ellen Stone argues for a combination of Feminist “disbelief” (suspicion of traditional systems of knowledge and research, “heretical” viewpoints, etc.) and Feminist “belief”.

We need a different stance in relation to the voices of subordinated cultures - one I call, for the moment, “feminist belief.” Feminist belief means putting aside our conditioned responses and allowing ourselves to experience total receptivity to “the other.” It means before subjecting previously silenced voices to our critical faculties, we need to take them in to find out how they resonate and what their truth might mean for us.(21)

What this means for research and teaching is still being determined. In fact, it is better to not say “determined” because Feminist theory tends to be processual rather than static, and there is really no terminus to arrive at or discover.

Because this new style is still being formed ... it is not possible to categorically define it. What can be said is that it is personal and political, and this constitutes a significant difference. Rather than separate the personal and political from the production of knowledge, feminists are attempting to bring them together and in this synthesis they are striving to construct more accurate, adequate and comprehensive explanations...than those which emerged under the reign of objectivity, and male supremacy. Feminists have focused on ‘research on research’ and have been extremely critical of the way in which knowledge has for so long been presented as a fait accompli with little or no acknowledgement of the part played by the personal in the process of producing such knowledge. Instead of trying to be ‘detached’, feminists are blatantly ‘involved’ in the knowledge which they are producing and unlike the traditional model in which the researcher is presumed to be ‘outside’ the subject matter being researched, feminist contributions frequently testify to the way in which women are changed by the research process. This is a concrete example of the way women are trying to bring politics and knowledge together.(22)

Elizabeth Gross offers the following as a sketch of what Feminist theory can involve:(23)

- a. Intellectual commitments, not to truth, objectivity and neutrality, but to theoretical positions openly acknowledged as observer and context-specific.
- b. It is neither subjective nor objective, neither absolute nor relative. Rather, its norms of judgment are developed from intersubjective, shared effects and functions. (p. 365)
- c. Instead of presuming a space or gulf between the rational, knowing subject and the object known, feminist theory acknowledges the contiguity between them. Feminist theory seems openly prepared to accept the constitutive interrelations of the subject, its social position and its mediated relation to the object. (p. 365)
- d. Feminist theory is an interweaving of strands that are simultaneously theoretical and practical. It is a threshold for the intervention of theories within concrete practices, and the restructuring of theory by the imperatives of experience and practice, a kind of hinge or doorway between the two domains. (pp. 366-367)

e. Feminist theory seeks to transform and extend the concept of reason so that instead of excluding concepts like experience, the body, history, etc., these are included within it or acknowledged as necessary for reason to function. It seeks a rationality not divided from experience, from oppression, from particularity or specificity; a reason, on the contrary, that includes them is a rationality not beyond or above experience but based upon it. (p. 367)

f. Feminist theory openly acknowledges its own materiality as the materiality of language, of desire and of power. (p. 368)

g. In rejecting leading models of intellectual inquiry (among them, the requirements of formal logic, the structuring of concepts according to binary oppositional structures, the use of grammar and syntax for creating singular, clear, unambiguous, precise modes of articulation and many other assumed textual values), and its acceptance of the idea of its materiality as theory, feminist theory is involved in continuing explorations of and experimentation with new forms of writing, new methods of analysis, new positions of enunciation, new kinds of discourse. (p. 368)

From these examples, the parallels and commonalities between Feminism and Performance Studies are obvious. Performance Studies is influenced by Feminism in recognizing the role of subjectivity and the spuriousness of claims to pure objectivity, the multiplicity of centers of knowledge and experience, the multiplicity of truths, the suspicion of universalizing, and the role of the personal in the production of knowledge. Performance Studies can offer back to Feminist thought a pedagogical process which engages the researcher/student bodily, sensually, emotionally, personally, subjectively, experientially.

There are implications for me as a teacher as well. Feminism offers a critique of the notion of the teacher/instructor being the possessor of and in control of knowledge, and students as being ignorant or unenlightened, passive recipients, or as being inducted into some hierarchical system of knowing. From a Feminist perspective, I can acknowledge the extent of my own knowledge and familiarity of a subject. But I need to also acknowledge the limits of my knowledge and to stress that in this class we will all be exploring together. What I can offer is my experience and perspective, and knowledge of certain topics and methods and approaches to learning and inquiry.

Performance Studies Methodology And Pedagogy

Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of a Performance Studies approach to research and teaching is its highly participatory procedure. Within the last two decades, research done into human learning and intelligence by people such as Howard Gardner (24) has demonstrated the multiplicity of ways in which people learn, process knowledge and generate new problems to investigate and/or solve. A pedagogical methodology which combines discursive, linear thought with feeling-based intuitive perceiving with artistic expressivity and sensual, whole-body (or “somatic”) involvement provides the best environment for learning for students, who represent all styles of learning and intelligence. A performance pedagogy is designed to provide just such an environment. Linear thought is encouraged through class presentations and discussions, as well as analysis of written texts and careful examination of the subjective experiences of the students during their field research. Intuitive feeling and perception is invited through the strong emphasis placed upon doing field research and constantly asking such questions as, “What did you see, hear, feel, etc.?” By encouraging students to notice

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particular movements or gestures and to try and recreate them (in a very cursory or representational fashion, of course), it becomes possible to involve the kinesthetic and artistic dimensions of intelligence and learning. These procedures are examples of what Pelias and VanOosting refer to as “personal responsiveness, somatic engagement, and cognitive analysis.”(25)

A Performance pedagogy for the study of Religion is one in which students bodily go out from the classroom and engage the traditions and people they study face to face. It is a teaching style that is process-oriented, and focuses upon human interactions and responses of the whole person, not just formulations of logic or discursive thought. Thus dialogue and the sharing of experiences and perceptions among the students and teacher is important. A certain open-endedness is also required in order to allow the learning process to unfold within each student. Thus, the students do field research not to learn anything predetermined or required, but in order to experience the religious activity as it is, as it is performed by its adherents. This is then compared to what the religious tradition says and claims about itself and its understanding of the world through its sacred texts, devotional writings and apologetic literature. Each student is encouraged to develop their own understanding of the religious traditions studied, but also to acknowledge and take responsibility for the limitedness of that knowledge. Because that knowledge is limited, the students are then encouraged to participate together in the act of research and analysis of what is observed and experienced. Thus, learning also occurs as a joint enterprise: students participate in each other’s processes of learning.

ENDNOTES

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- 3). Berling, op cit., p. 9.
- 4). Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosting, “A Paradigm for Performance Studies,” in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73 (May, 1987):219 (emphasis mine).
- 5). Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd ed., trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 62.
- 6). Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Methodology and the Study of Religion: Some Misgivings,” in: Baird, Robert D., ed. *Methodological Issues in Religious Studies*. The School of Religion of the University of Iowa, 1975.
- 7). Ibid., p. 9.
- 8). Ibid., p. 12.
- 9). Ibid., p. 18. _
- 10). Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*. New York: Charles

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18). Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silences*, (New York: Norton, 1979).

19). Spender, p. 5.

20). Ibid., p. 6.

21). Ellen Stone, "Claiming the Third Story: The Challenge to White Feminists of Black Feminist Theory," unpublished manuscript, Brandeis University, 1990. Quoted in Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 242.

22). Spender, p. 7.

23). Elizabeth Gross, "What is Feminist Theory?" in Crowley, Helen, and Himmelweit, Susan, eds. *Knowing Women: Feminism and Knowledge*. Cambridge, UK: The Open University, 1992, pp. 355-369. _

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