Good teaching is a craft. It requires constant honing. While perfection eludes most of us most of the time, our best days are intellectually generative, meaningful, and often quite fun. I intend this essay as a gesture in that same spirit.

At the 2011 American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings, I had the distinct pleasure of being a panelist on a workshop: teaching anthropology of religion courses to undergraduates. The workshop goal was to explore strategies, questions, and resources for creatively and effectively building courses in the anthropology of religion. The stated hope was to host a dialogue that would offer equal benefit to all. Those designing a course for the first time could play with different approaches. The veteran and confident could discover a few possibilities for those pesky portions in need of tweaking. And the frustrated could begin reimagining a course. Based on the attendance and enthusiastic participation at this early morning session, I would wager we were more successful than not.

In this essay, I reflect on some questions that have occupied my thinking since the workshop and will no doubt find their way into my next version of the course. I hope the following will serve as a practical guide for as many readers as possible: a little musing, a lot of question raising, some advice, and absolutely no checklists, directives, or formulas. This essay concentrates on two questions that emerged from the workshop, which I am considering most thoroughly, and a coda emphasizing the need to be ethnographers in, of, and for courses in the anthropology of religion.

How Can We Integrate ‘Classics’ of the Field and Definitive Theoretical Debates?

The basic dilemma here is one that I suspect will sound familiar to many readers: while we find the intellectual dogfights and bellwethers utterly fascinating and vital, our students find them difficult to appreciate, tedious, or, at worst, irrelevant to their anthropological training and a world rife with social problems. Short of awaiting their awakening or calling it cough syrup (‘difficult to swallow, but very good for you’), how can we combat this predicament?

We might begin by stressing elements of continuity. In short, we can assert in good faith and much accuracy that ‘classic’ does not mean outmoded, dusty, stale, or only useful as intellectual
history. Many classics in the anthropology of religion age like great Bordeaux (without the inevi­table peak and decline). Take just a few examples. E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s ([1937] 1976) account of how Azande witchcraft explains unfortunate events has stood the test of time and sets up the kind of emic analysis that travels well to all manner of contemporary global, indigenous, mainstream, and marginal religions. Robin Horton’s (1967a, 1967b) ambitious, point-by-point comparison of traditional African and Western secular scientific theorizing continues to inspire contemporary anthropologists of religion (e.g., Luhrmann 2012) to complicate so-called commonsense models for explaining reality. Mary Douglas's (1966) *Purity and Danger* is very engaging for undergraduates. The trick, I find, is to assign selected portions of the book (e.g., chapter 1, “Ritual Uncleanness”) and then have students go out and observe the drive to separate and reconcile ‘dirt’ in their immediate social surround—the classroom building, the campus, their homes, local restaurants, or the classroom itself (as one of my fellow panelists demonstrated so cleverly by variously tampering with and continuing to drink a bottle of water).

The persistent role of definitional debates is certainly a testament to the endurance of classics. One of our oldest debates—what is religion?—continues to play a central role in one of our newest debates: public sphere exchanges that get framed, or frame themselves, as ‘religious versus secular’, along with accompanying arguments that a post-secular age has begun. Teaching definitional debates in this manner opens up maneuvers such as reading Durkheim in tandem with The Immanent Frame blog. Another example concerns the ever-present, always tricky category of belief. Alongside disciplinary critiques of belief as the *sine qua non* of religion (Carlisle and Simon 2012; Klass and Weisgrau 1999; Lindquist and Coleman 2008), we can invite students into the study of religion’s ‘media turn’ (Engelke 2010): how very tangible, empirical, and analyzable social practices—language, materiality, embodiment, music—work to mediate classic religious concerns such as belief and experience.

A third strategy for integrating classics and theory is to foreground a debate structure. The pitfall for some students is that the discipline seems to be consumed with infighting and theory-for-the-sake-of-theory. But I find this to be more a small hole that students can easily step over than a gaping one into which they will fall. For most students, having topics and specific religious traditions presented in a debate frame reveals the dialogic process of knowledge production, demonstrates different models of critique, provides insight into the culture of the academy, and makes clearer the real-world application of ideas that they seem to deem so necessary. And, of course, who can resist the drama of intellectual jabs, hooks, and the occasional knockout? The vast majority of textbooks and readers—wonderful as they are in many ways—tend to rely on a fairly standard formula: some progression from defining ‘religion’ to conversion, magic, myth, shamanism, witchcraft, healing, sectarianism, pilgrimage, revitalization movements, charisma, and the like. Each of these areas translates well to a debate structure (as does a course organization based on different religious traditions). The reason is that each topic has its own arguments. For example, some instructors may be very invested in having their students read Clifford Geertz’s ([1966] 1973) “Religion as a Cultural System.” I have taught this essay three different ways: by itself; with a contemporary ethnographic article that is distinctly Geertzian; and in dialogue with one of Geertz’s critics. Hands down, the last was the most successful. Using Talal Asad’s (1983) critique, students were brought into several ‘big ideas’ in the anthropological study of religion at once. It is perhaps for this very reason—the payoff of teaching through debates—that this journal features three inherently dialogic sections: a portrait section, a debate section, and a section in which authors ‘meet’ (and respond to) their critics.

A final strategy sutures theoretical and ethnographic work to ongoing global trends and problems as a means to demonstrate the necessity of a comparative anthropology of religion. Consider four examples. The rising adherence of various religious fundamentalisms (Christian,
Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu) is well-documented, and anthropology is uniquely positioned and qualified to understand this phenomenon. There is ample work on a range of cases to draw from: religious violence in Northern Ireland, Muslim–Coptic relations in post-revolution Egypt, gender inequity, social conflict ensuing from conflagrations of religion and race, and struggles over religious avenues to political capital. Equipping students with rigorous ethnography of religious fundamentalisms will move them beyond superficial headline news, facile normative reactions, theologically motivated rants, and, most importantly, the ease of apathy. There is also ample anthropological work on specific case studies of globalizing religious movements. The example I am most familiar with is the explosion of charismatic Christianity throughout the global South and in ostensibly secular locales in the global North. There is enough excellent work available (let alone the remaining volumes that are just pretty good) to present different explanations for why this movement has spread so widely, how localization occurs, which transnational processes are operative, how charismatic Christianity interacts with indigenous religions, and the elements of charisma that hold up in the tumult of global flows (cf. Bielo 2011; Robbins 2004).

The continual movement of travelers, migrants, and refugees across borders leads to two further examples. Courses in the anthropology of religion pose a perfect opportunity to address the formative role of religion in diasporic lives. Comparative bodies of ethnographic work are growing on Afro-Caribbean faiths and Mexican Catholics in North America, North African Muslims in Western Europe, and upwardly mobile Indian Hindus in Eastern Europe. This area of study allows students to consider how religion functions as traveling mercy, social glue among cultural strangers, social division in response to cultural strangers, and a prized vehicle for cultural memory. Entanglements of religion and globalization are also uncovered by the paths of pilgrims and tourists. Indeed, students can examine the empirical, ideological, and material convergences and divergences of pilgrimage and tourism as intersecting journeys (Badone and Roseman 2004). Unlike the case of diasporic religion, pilgrimage and religious tourism bring numerous cultural Others into contact, but only briefly and through defined frames of action. To highlight just one example, an impressive literature, connecting the political and the experiential, is growing with regard to the study of American evangelical Protestant travelers to the Jewish Holy Land (e.g., Feldman 2007).

All of the above is aimed toward integrating classics and theoretical debates in creative and meaningful ways in order to engage, excite, inspire, and encourage students. These strategies seem especially useful to me because they are not simply about teaching religion more effectively. In addition, they build connections to other goals in anthropological curricula, insist on the primacy of the study of religion for the study of contemporary life, and tether the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ in the anthropology of religion.

**How Can We Most Effectively Use Empirical Materials as Part of Our Courses?**

The basic dilemma here is how to take students from simply reading and talking about religion to looking at religion-in-practice. I believe that, at its core, this is an ethnographic impulse (not merely good pedagogy): we want students to confront religious action in its own terms, to integrate the voices of adherents into the course, and to work empirically. In the inaugural issue of this journal, Andrew Buckser (2010) outlined a very helpful series of questions for creating field assignments. Given his contribution, I discuss other strategies for using empirical material in the course and intend the following as a complement to (not a replacement of) field assignments.
One could design assignments from the possibilities I outline below, but they could also be used to structure exercises for before, in, or after class and as supplements to reading ethnographies.

First, we can make use of students’ own religious backgrounds. I see two general strategies here. Students can engage in an auto-ethnographic exercise in which they reflect on their experiences and encounters with ‘the religious’. This can be an effective means for getting students to think about the range of phenomena that they classify as ‘religion’ and to articulate their biases, as well as a means for us to gather data on our audience for the term. The method works best when we give students a range of questions to think about but do not let them respond in a completely open-ended fashion. Another strategy is to have students interview each other. This technique can help build classroom intimacy and provide students with the opportunity to hear narratives of conversion, deconversion, and ritual practice. If we have a religiously diverse collection of students, we can create interview pairs that make use of cultural differences. Note also that both of these exercises work as methodological training: many of us keep a fieldwork diary that includes introspective narratives, and, of course, interviewing is a bread-and-butter ethnographic technique.

Second, we can have students look at media representations of religion. Consider three examples. A variety of media outlets feature religion-focused series, often in the form of regularly updated podcasts. American Public Media hosts and catalogues online Speaking of Faith, a journalistic (and sometimes self-help-inflected) forum where different religious traditions are reported on and adherents interviewed. While the program is often not especially analytic or ethnographic, it is an easy way for students to hear religious practitioners perform presentations of self. A less common, but often more in-depth, resource consists of interviews conducted with former sectarian members. Despite being laced with critique, such interviews can be extraordinary expressions of detailed memory, ritual action, and conversion experiences. Lastly, we might also make use of documentary film. Depending on the religious tradition or cultural area that we want to address, there are numerous films about religious groups. These can be viewed in their entirety or selectively in portions during class or prior to a class session. Note also that this approach provides the opportunity to talk about popular and partisan media texts as representational acts.

Third, and perhaps most promising, we can make use of the many ways in which religious groups materialize themselves in the world. Together in class or as an out-of-class activity, students can read spiritual memoirs and poetry, listen to religious radio and music, watch ritual performances on YouTube, play religious games (Bado-Fralick and Norris 2010), or analyze Web sites of religious tourist attractions, congregations, denominations, entrepreneurs, and incorporated religious groups (to name a few). Note that this method capitalizes on the elemental anthropological idea that when people make things, they reveal themselves culturally.

For me, integrating empirical material into anthropology of religion courses is non-negotiable. Much like sending students into a local field context, what is curious, baffling, exciting, intriguing, and revealing about religious life is most visible when students can observe it themselves. The strategies outlined here achieve two basic purposes in this regard. They work to minimize sensory and performative, if not physical, distance between students and religion-in-practice. And they enhance the classroom as a dialogic, poly-vocal space.

**Coda: Being Ethnographers in, of, and for Our Courses**

I conclude with a reminder. We need to be ethnographers in, of, and for all the courses we teach—in particular, when teaching something as important and challenging as the anthropology of religion. Teaching, after all, is a form of social practice that is integral to our scholarly lives (Coleman...
Perhaps this seems like an odd reminder. In the field we listen, in the classroom we talk. Right? In the classroom we are the authority, in the field we are not. Right? These are very unfortunate separations. We exist ethnographically in the classroom to improve our craft, and we do so by learning our context. How better to learn a context than to do some ethnography?

Being an ethnographer in, of, and for our courses raises at least four sets of questions. I do not hope to be anywhere near exhaustive for any of the four, but I do hope to stir your thinking.

First, what is your university context? Is it public or private? Is it secular or faith-based? What are the demographics of race, class, age, and gender? What kinds of religious diversity do you have on campus? What are the most common majors? What resources does your university library have? Who else teaches religion on campus? Where—geographically and culturally—is your university? Second, what is your departmental context? Is it joint or anthropology only? Where do religion courses fit in the curriculum? Is religion a required course? What is the enrollment cap? Do you alternate teaching religion with other subjects? In what other courses is religion addressed? Third, what is your classroom context? Is it majors only or mixed? How long does each class session last? How many times a week do you meet? What kinds of classroom technology do you have available? Do the spatial dimensions allow for different in-class exercises? Fourth, what is your enrollment context? What is the particular set of experiences (personal, social, academic) present with each term’s particular collection of students? If you have students who are especially suspicious of or faithful to religion, how can you best accentuate their contributions? Do your students fit in with the general demographic and cultural character of the university?

These questions help us think through elements of audience expectations, the everyday cultural surround of teaching, and the course material that is likely to be overly ambitious, feasible, or underwhelming for students and our own course objectives. As we work through definitive debates and ethnographies in the anthropology of religion, we are aided by knowing the resources that are at our disposal, the biographical and everyday experiences of students, and the socio-political contexts at work. In a very basic way, this is about background knowledge: what is safe to assume, what we need to unpack, what references are likely to resonate. There is much to be gained, and not only for ourselves. Encouraging students to adopt an ethnographic attitude toward their classroom, class colleagues, campus, and university contexts will help foster how they engage with course content. In the best of all possible worlds, students begin to be everyday ethnographers, changing how they consume media and popular culture, interact with others, and observe anew the world that has been in front of them all along.

Being attentive to how your course is variously contextualized, as is the case whenever good ethnography is pursued, will always be worth the time invested. The more intricately we know our universities, our departments, our classrooms, and our students, the more successful we will be in accomplishing the two main challenges that I have discussed in this essay: integrating classics and theoretical debates into our courses, and using empirical materials in the classroom.
NOTES

1. This workshop was masterfully organized by Natalia Suit (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). My fellow panelists—Daniel Varisco (Hofstra University), Gregory Starrett (University of North Carolina at Charlotte), and John Napora (University of South Florida)—gave superb presentations, and this essay greatly benefits from their dedication to teaching.

2. As a bit of context, my ethnographic research concentrates on the anthropology of Christianity with a focus on the varieties of American evangelicalism. Since the fall of 2008, I have taught in the Department of Anthropology (a four-field program offering BA and BS degrees) at Miami University (a co-ed, public, liberal arts institution with around 15,000 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students), which is located in a small town in southwestern Ohio (a one-hour drive from the nearest urban center).

REFERENCES