

Teaching in the Global Village: Notes Towards a Religious Studies Rhetoric

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Abstract. *The author describes her participation in a religious studies teaching workshop where she was asked to think creatively about the art of teaching, what implications result from changes in the field, and the relationship of religious studies to other fields. General conclusions endorse pedagogies that are dialogic, participatory, and experiential and invite possibilities provided by changes in the field that encourage courses that are more inclusive of marginal voices and attentive to multicultural inflections. In assessing the relationship of religious studies to other fields, the author draws on her interdisciplinary background in religion and literature to apply Aristotelian rhetoric to the interpretation of a short story, thereby providing an actual model of how disciplines can complement each other while also highlighting aspects of the pedagogical and multicultural principles endorsed by the workshop participants. The application of Aristotelian principles of logos, ethos, and pathos becomes for the workshop participants a religious studies rhetoric: a provisional model for how to interpret classroom conduct.*

“We dwell in possibility.”
– Emily Dickinson

Near the end of his life, Woody Guthrie checked in to a hospital where an admissions clerk sought the usual information – age, residence, occupation – and then asked, “Your religion?” “All of them,” Guthrie replied. Although most of us are not as boldly pluralistic as Woody Guthrie, “All of them” certainly depicts the vast array of topics religious studies instructors confront daily in our attempts to shape an appropriate curriculum. “All of them” could also describe the complex and overwhelming number of issues I

encountered in “Teaching in the Global Village,” an American Academy of Religion teaching workshop sponsored by the Lilly and Luce Foundations between June 2000 and July 2001. Over the course of a year, fifteen teachers from a variety of settings and in different stages of their academic careers met four times to discuss the shape of the field of religious studies and its impact on teaching. We were asked to think creatively about the art of teaching, what implications result from the changes in the field, and the relationship of religious studies to other fields.

Some conclusions we came to unanimously and enthusiastically endorse. We all agreed that our pedagogies should be more dialogic, participatory, and experiential. Opportunities for taking religious studies outside of the classroom and into communities of faith and activism we saw as vital to the subject. We also embraced the possibilities provided by changes in the field that encouraged us to develop courses that were more inclusive of marginal voices and attentive to multicultural inflections. Multiculturalism, we observed, is inherent in the subject matter of religious studies but it is also a pedagogical principle we strive to uphold and it is a substantial aspect of how we need to communicate to our increasingly diverse population of students.

Yet when it came to evaluating the relationship of religious studies to other fields, our conversations did not enjoy the same unanimity except inasmuch as we agreed that the classroom was a site of more than just content. As one participant described it, religious studies was a container. Furthermore, we concluded that this container was not an ancient vessel that held timeless wisdom we must unerringly preserve. Rather the container was intended to carry many aspects of our social, historical, and practical existence that come into play when one explores the kinds of cultural practices and beliefs that make up religious studies.

Thus, the container could hold a host of interdisciplinary examples that would accent aspects of religious studies, and my colleagues were inspired in their suggestions for ideas drawn from art, drama, music, film, and other subjects.

My contributions to the container included literary examples because, although trained primarily in religious studies, my graduate program was so interdisciplinary in nature that when I graduated I was qualified to provide instruction in English departments. This skill proved useful as I bounced around from job to job and was able to endure the vicissitudes of the academic job market because I could always find work teaching introductory writing courses. Provoked perhaps by this background, during the course of the workshop I found myself returning to the concept of religious studies as a container. The formal dimensions of the container concept dovetailed nicely not just with the tools of literary analysis I used in my scholarship but also with methods I used in writing classes.

As I reflected on my own experience teaching writing, therefore, I came to appreciate that the forms we develop to talk and write about religion are really the ways we craft our container. Simply put, I realized that what united our efforts around the workshop and what provided a link between pedagogy, content, and other disciplines, was the container. The container was the form of religious studies and this container is shaped by our rhetoric: our skill in using language effectively and persuasively. Yet while most of us who teach religious studies are expected to provide instruction on textual interpretation and have been responsive to adopting methods of interrogation adapted from literary criticism, we are also expected to teach students how to write, despite the fact that many of us have not actually been trained in the mechanics of writing and the art of rhetoric – the skill that shapes our container. Thus, we may not even be aware of how we use – or misuse – rhetoric to teach our students.

Furthermore, as the title of the workshop highlights, there is a paradoxical quality to our ambition to teach in a global village that complicates our pedagogical principles, our multicultural standards, and our interdisciplinary content, when we consider them in the context of rhetoric or how we communicate to our students. We want to create the intimate exchange that characterizes life in a village but we also want to speak in a way that has global meaning. As teachers we want our classroom to be a village that invites the whole world in. Or as a motto proclaimed in a mission church we visited in Santa Fe, New Mexico: *tutto il mondo e paese* “the whole world is hometown.” But where do we begin when confronted with all of them?

It was while reading Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric*

that I came across some concepts that pointed me in a direction I thought illustrated something important about how we shape our containers. Typically I am a modernist, not inclined to resort to the ancient greats as touchstones for our contemporary dilemmas. Yet in a moment of coincidence – or was it grace – a student engaged me in a conversation that indirectly highlighted Aristotelian principles I had recently been studying in order to teach my freshman students the structure of argument. My encounter with Michelle made me consider that perhaps our container was an ancient vessel after all and that we could use the lens of rhetoric to look more closely at the containers we craft in our classrooms. Simply put, I realized that we instructors were the container.

At the time, I was also teaching African American literature. A white instructor, I had a large and diverse class of students. Confronting students as a non-black teaching African American topics was not a new experience for me. Indeed, I had long wrestled with issues of representation and my own position in relationship to the subject I was teaching. I had even published an essay several years ago (Connor 1995) where I discussed the perils and the prospects of racial representation in the classroom, using a metaphor derived from jazz that described what I had come to believe embodied the posture instructors should take when teaching an ethnic topic if they were not a member of that particular group, a posture that emphasized a kind of humility supported by a sound command of the subject. But until my encounter with Michelle, I had not been fully conscious of the influence I had to argue for the relevance of my course and the ways in which I had used not just my command of course content, but my own rhetorical strategies, to persuade students that I was a good instructor. I had not considered how I could embody the container that carried the subject to my students nor how powerfully provocative this embodiment was, especially in multiculturally charged academic settings.

Michelle was an African American student who had also taken a course I had taught in Ethnic American Literature. She was preparing to apply to graduate school and stopped me one day to ask me for advice. I wasn't certain exactly what she wanted to study so I asked her to be more specific in describing her goals. Her reply stunned me. She said: “I want to be you.” After a pause she continued: “I want to know what you know and do what you do.” Although deeply gratified by her response and her affirmation for the role that I had played in her life, as I reflected on her comments several things became clear to me.

For one thing, Michelle did not expressly articulate ethnicity as an aspect of her ambition but it was implied in our relationship that was based on a mutual regard for and interest in ethnic American literature.

By saying she wanted to be me she clearly didn't mean white. She meant how I represented myself (how I was me or who I was). Her subsequent comments clarified not just how I represented myself but what I represented (what I knew or what I had studied) and why I represented what I did (why I was a teacher or why I cared). In her spontaneous and simple reply she affirmed what all teachers hope to convey to a class: that they know something about the subject, that they recognize and commit themselves to its value, and that they appreciate the ways in which they can communicate that knowledge and value to others.

These three aspects of teaching are also central to Aristotle's rhetoric. In basic terms, an effective argument will possess and utilize several sources of persuasion: *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. *Logos*, of course, implies reason and demonstrating that one is soundly in command of a body of information. *Logos* is what we know. *Ethos* is how, in argument, we communicate that knowledge by basing it not just on our intellectual authority but on our character, on the kind of person we demonstrate ourselves to be, as one who can be trustworthy and fair or even admirable. *Ethos* is who we are. *Pathos* is the emotional component of any argument, how we involve our hearers in the subject matter and make them care about it. *Pathos* is why we do it. In Aristotelian terms, as instructors we want to be rhetoricians who lucidly expound on our subject matter while projecting an impression of virtue and goodwill so that we can create a suitable disposition among our student audience.

Aristotle revolutionized rhetoric because he moved it from the abstract realm of philosophical contemplation to the practical level of persuasion. He maintained the intellectual credibility of rhetoric while also insisting on its functional role. In other words, Aristotle appreciated how important it was to build a container in order to affect others as I had apparently affected Michelle. My reading of Aristotle, combined with my conversation with Michelle, led me to speculate that in order to craft our containers for teaching in the global village, religious studies instructors were using (whether consciously or not) the simple elements of rhetoric: *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. For whether we admit it or not, much of what we do is argue for the relevance of religious studies. We "dwell in the possibility" that we can persuade students that religious studies is meaningful and that we are authentic conveyors of that meaning. We try to participate in the creation of new knowledge that is the goal of education but also the essence of argument. We want to look at things in an original way that includes and participates in the diversity we recognize and value and promotes this way as a foundation for intellectual and spiritual growth.

Diversity becomes even more complicated, however, when in addition to the multicultural menu of

ethnicity, gender, orientation, and class, we recognize how each of us plays multiple roles in the classroom. Yet, these multiple identities we all embody line up neatly with Aristotle's three elements of rhetoric. We are teachers, students, and scholars and these identities shift and mutate constantly in transgressive and creative ways that exploit the possibilities inherent in *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. Like skilled rhetoricians we use each at different times to make our points. Sometimes we are scholars who insist on the centrality of knowledge or *logos*. Sometimes we are students who are engaged in a process of shaping and building our character, our *ethos*. Sometimes we are teachers with a mission to move others to appreciate what we value through *pathos*.

It is in how we improvise our performance of these twin sets of holy threes – the roles we play and the rhetorical principles we uphold – that we fully embody our profession. Creative pedagogy alone does not make us good teachers. Likewise, simply advancing and manipulating principles of argument does not automatically result in effective rhetoric. Aristotle also emphasized the importance of propriety or the ways in which one understands how a certain manner of expression will suit a specific content and maximize its impact. No one was better at recognizing the significance of propriety than Booker T. Washington who observed that when he was giving public addresses he would "find the doubter in the crowd" and "go straight at him." He remarked further that it gave him "great satisfaction to watch the process of his thawing out. I find that the most effective medicine for such individuals is administered at first in the form of a story" (Washington 1995, 119).

So, to illustrate my point about how rhetoric illuminates our influence over our doubting students in our arguments for the value of our courses and in our attempts to persuade students that religious studies is meaningful, I took a cue from Washington. I shared with my workshop colleagues a story that enacts the rhetorical principles I found so compelling and sets them at play in a series of encounters between a professor, her students, and her colleagues. It is a story that touches on the essential multiple identities we embody in our rhetorical performances and complicates them with multicultural resonance. "Come and Be Black for Me," by Ethel Morgan Smith (1998), is not about religious studies or even about teaching, *per se*. But it is about how we represent ourselves and how we talk about those representations. The story illustrates the significance of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* in multicultural encounters and reveals how rhetorical manipulation can shape us – for better or for worse – as containers for the subjects we teach.

In some respects one also could say the story embodies the traditional elements that structure

religious studies. It derives from an originating and enduring myth that has been translated for various purposes. It suggests a ritual pattern of manners that should be followed for the myth to sustain its meaning. It holds individual experience as pertinent and necessary for any articulation of identity. It constructs and deconstructs doctrinaire formulations about what we believe about each other while providing an ethics of reciprocity. It proposes ways to build community and identifies symbolic forms that both reinforce and confuse our identities. Like religion, "Come and Be Black for Me" shows how we are both bound together and set apart and why this tension needs to be maintained – understood but not overcome. The interpretation I offered my colleagues (and now readers here) was not intended to be a definitive treatise on Aristotle's rhetoric but rather a practical application of Aristotelian principles that exposes assumptions made by people in academic settings and reveals how instructors manipulate rhetorical strategies to communicate to students and shape themselves as containers.

"Come and Be Black for Me" sets a specific tone of irony at the outset, thus reminding us, as we often find in religion, that things are not always what we say they are. Smith's use of irony is situational, verbal, and even dramatic at times. The presence of irony demonstrates how rhetoric can obstruct or clarify a multicultural encounter. Yet one unshakeable aspect of the narrator's posture is how she uses ironic rhetoric to resist, even refuse on many occasions, to be a symbol for the myth of essentialism. By insisting that people manage awkward multicultural encounters by using ritual courtesies that denote ethos and by relying on canonical or doctrinal literacy that demonstrates logos, the author reveals how as individuals we can dignify our multicultural community and move it towards pathos.

Smith begins with a lament over the arrival of Black History Month (symbolically the coldest and darkest month of the year) when, as the title notes, she is expected to "come and be black." Her weariness over this annual event recognizes the problems that arise when a lack of cultural literacy about a topic forces those who do know something to supply the necessary information. Her first rhetorical caveat, therefore, is to draw our attention to the fact that she cannot supply the ethos or inspire the pathos that others wish to get from her until she is allowed to represent disciplinary literacy or logos. As her story progresses in a mundane and even tedious recitation of events in one day, she shows us another important feature of rhetoric: that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. In Aristotle's formulation, all elements of persuasion work together only when there is an overall shaping influence that locates, arranges, and articulates the

argument in language appropriate to the topic and the circumstance. Or as one colleague at the workshop observed, we make progress "student by student, class by class."

The tedium of Smith's litany of encounters creates for the reader the very conditions the protagonist experiences during Black History Month. This is how she moves her readers rhetorically. Whatever the original myth was meant to explain about the African American experience, Black History Month has become for the protagonist a symbol of the dominant culture's misguided multicultural doctrine, summed up in the multiple requests she gets to "represent 'my people'" (Smith 532). Students, colleagues, and strangers alike ask her not to be an authority on her subject of African American literature but to perform their idea of blackness. In other words, most of those who ask her to be black do not do so because of the logos she has been trained to articulate nor even because they presume she possesses a certain ethos. What they want, only, is that her mere presence as "anyone who can come and be black for them" (Smith 532) generate for them a pathos, a feeling of being black based on how they perceive blackness.

The pathos the story elicits, however, is not the sort that people wish to experience. Rather than promoting an exoticized blackness or supplying people's need to feel that they are respectful and concerned about the African American experience, her rhetoric recreates the actual experience of objectification so many black Americans feel daily. As she dryly puts it when one colleague exclaims his fascination with Africa and inquires about her interest in "going to see my homeland," her homeland is "Alabama" (Smith 536). In this respect her title is ironically accurate. She does, in fact, elicit from her readers an authentic experience of being black.

So the story begins and proceeds from abstract and distant encounters in which the protagonist sifts through several boxes of mail with requests for her to come and be black to actual exchanges with various people who want her to supply some variation on the theme of being black. Her ritual attention is initially identified when she generally accepts those with "a pleasant tone," and recycles (a pun on the myth of eternal return, perhaps), those that "point out (if not in so many words) that their tax dollars pay my salary and they rightfully deserve a piece of me" (Smith 532). Even colleagues whom she does not know offer her services to those looking for an African American.

Each instance is concluded by the protagonist enacting ritual courtesy, thanking people for calling or coming to see her; even if her ironic tone undercuts the authenticity of her gratitude, she observes the ritual nonetheless. The ritual sustains for her a tentative kind of ethos, as one who will be polite, if distant, but

certainly never rude. What generates a fuller rhetoric from the protagonist, however, is when she is confident that the request made of her is based on *logos*. Just as she will not easily play black, she will not prioritize blackness in others but will hold them to the same standards to which she holds herself. In other words, the protagonist demands full rhetorical proficiency for complete engagement.

Thus a white student who wants her on his committee because of her expertise is acknowledged in kind. She assumes a sincere ethos on his part but also insists he satisfy her demands for *logos* when she says, "I want to know when I can expect some of his work to begin reading" (Smith 533). The same is true for a young man who thanks her for introducing him to the work of Toni Morrison. As the narrator states: "I like him now that he knows I'll only discuss literature" (Smith 535).

On the other hand, an African American female student who was upset that Smith had taught a novel that featured an interracial romance is treated differently. The protagonist recalls an earlier incident when she had lost her rhetorical cool with the student ("I blew up at her in class and asked her who made her God of Blackness?") and this past context diminishes the degree of ethos she will allow now. Nonetheless, she corrects her earlier behavior and resumes a ritual politeness but reminds the student that figuring out the rest of her life is not her job as a teacher but the student's job: "I suggest improving her grades" (Smith 533). The student must engage in *logos* to demonstrate her ethos. In a similar fashion the narrator refuses to rhetorically engage a black female student who challenges her choice of novels because of how they depict black men, and she rejects an invitation from another female student to develop *pathos* based on a presumed sisterhood symbolized by fashion.

Smith's story does not just address the assumptions made about her. She goes into detail about a Native American woman who calls herself an "apple – red on the outside, white on the inside" (Smith 537). She also mentions a white male student who grew up around bigots and was trying to change himself by taking her course. She describes how a student rejects a book because it deals with homosexuality, and a class that divides itself according to skin color. She even mentions how difficult it is to obtain required reading for her courses because the books, by black authors, are out of print. All of these situations reflect the protagonist's own dilemma; furthermore they underscore the broader social context in which her personal drama is played out and reinforce the cultural norms that make her exercise in rhetoric so frustrating. As when she asks her classes to think about the unavailability of black-authored texts, students only complain about the inconvenience and do not register

the racial dynamics and power valences that created the situation.

The most sustained rhetorical display, however, is revealed in a series of flashbacks the narrator returns to during her recitation of daily events. After informing us that she has rejected a folklorist colleague's invitation to speak at a conference (despite his self-described sensitivity to how she gets exploited during Black History Month), she proceeds to relate an occasion several years prior when she was new to the faculty and felt obliged to accept his invitation. Not long after she accepts she is informed that her participation is to be based not on *logos* or even ethos but simply on *pathos* – on her being there, being black. Her role is limited to service ("keep[ing] time") and performance ("be[ing] lively") – a classic reinscription of paradigms of authority between black and white (Smith 534).

Despite the rude absence of the colleague who invited her, and her own compromised participation, the protagonist does, in fact, wield her *logos* and create a genuine ethos through her display of knowledge and her invitation to others to respond. What she elicits, however, is contrived *pathos*: whites who trot out their liberal credentials, participants resistant to ethnically inflected information they deem insufficiently scholarly, and an emotionally devastated Native American presenter. Her anecdote concludes with the protagonist maintaining her rhetorical posture by relying on *logos* and displaying her ethos as she continues to expound on African American literature and the problems that arise when it is not studied in a historical context.

Running throughout the story are other literary devices that allude to the African American historical and literary tradition the protagonist recommends we all know. The most obvious example is that the narrator remains unnamed, recalling the metaphoric meaning of the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Also persistent throughout the text is the narrator's hunger as she searches for bits of nourishment to sustain her in her coming to be black for me encounters. Sustaining herself on raisins and rice cakes is reminiscent of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in which the author's existential, spiritual, intellectual, and creative search for identity is related as various forms of hunger. Finally, the claustrophobia created by mountains of mail, persistent phone calls, visits, and interruptions (even from her memory), recalls Harriet Jacobs's ordeal of escaping slavery by enduring a seven year confinement in an attic that she recounts in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Despite these formidable precedents for achievement, the protagonist slips in the fact that among all the requests for her to come and be black there are two letters of rejection from publishers who will not accept

her work. As the literary tradition “Come and Be Black for Me” makes clear, even when elevated to canonical status – like the works of Ellison, Wright, and Jacobs – texts by black authors may limit the cultural fulfillment to which African Americans are entitled. Invisibility, deprivation, and confinement – the tropes set forth by Ellison, Wright, and Jacobs – are the classic roles the dominant culture expects black protagonists to play. Their identity, therefore, is defined by these mythic standards that one presumes the narrator, given her rhetorical posture, did not wish to embody. That her work may have projected a different image of blackness and rhetorically challenged the doctrinaire norm is symbolized by the rejection of her work by publishers.

Thus, we are left at the end of the story with a recognition of the persistence of the myth of blackness. The few signs of hope, such as students wanting to achieve proficiency in African American literature and wishing to escape their racist upbringing or the protagonist being invited to join a university task force on diversity, are overshadowed by the dominant expressions of rigid doctrine and skewed symbolism. Ritual enactment only preserves the status quo. Individual experience is seldom transformative and no meaningful community emerges.

Yet it is precisely because of all these actual failures that “Come and Be Black for Me” is a rhetorical success. By drawing our attention to the problems in communication that confuse and distort our multicultural reality, Smith shows us how to begin addressing our circumstances by using rhetoric to clarify and dignify our encounters. Her rhetorical achievement, moreover, does not resort to simplistic solutions or happy endings. Whatever we have gained by way of *logos* (learning about our circumstances) or *ethos* (appreciating the character of others and ourselves) is generated by a *pathos* that is more genuine than if she had concluded with some trite scene of reconciliation. Because our multicultural sensibilities are awakened as a rhetorical achievement and not as an actual one, Smith generates a more honest *pathos*. She elicits an imaginative empathy for people in her situation and a reflexive awareness of our own complicity that sustains her argument because she presents us something new that we did not expect and persuades us that it is true. She gives us what her title invites: to come and be black.

As we discussed the story around our workshop table, several colleagues who represent or teach minority topics nodded their heads in agreement. They

were able to identify with Smith’s narrative because at one time or another they had experienced similar encounters with earnest but uncomprehending colleagues, misguided or rude students, and had felt themselves called to come and be . . . (fill in the blank). Yet even those who did not bear this particular burden were able to find a point of entry into Smith’s experience because what we all shared was a vocation of teaching religious studies that called on us to represent a topic that by its very nature both proffered and challenged human modes of representation, including how we represent ourselves as teachers in a classroom.

Smith’s story begs the question we came to the workshop to answer: will the rhetorical container hold? Can we, as instructors, embody our profession in a way that uses our influence wisely – argues fairly and persuades with dignity? Although Smith’s story supplied no easy resolution, the application of Aristotelian principles to her story became for the workshop participants a provisional model for how to interpret our classroom conduct. More than just a literary maneuver, Aristotle’s rhetoric offered us a way to begin to address the very issues we set out to explore when our workshop began. It provided a pedagogical strategy that allowed for multicultural sensitivity and interdisciplinary scope.

A colleague in our workshop once described what religious studies teachers do as “a mystery that keeps us in conversation.” Smith’s story, combined with my encounter with Michelle and my engagement with Aristotle’s rhetoric, convinced me that when “all of them” and all of us are shaped by the rhetorical principles of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* – what we know, who we are, and why we do it – we can dwell in the possibility that we can come and be, if only student by student, class by class.

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