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Document Version
Final published version

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Displaying religious Jews in Jewish Studies classrooms

Dr Katja Stuerzenhofecker, Religions and Theology, University of Manchester

This paper reports on an evidence-based study of student learning in Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester. The research collected alumni perceptions of long-term learning outcomes of the study of contemporary religion on the 2nd year undergraduate course Religion, Culture and Gender. ‘Exoticisation’ of contemporary religious Jews, their practices and thought emerges as a key concept that captures some student responses to the curriculum. Post-colonial analysis of the data problematizes the pedagogical value of memorable teaching moments, and their desirable and undesirable outcomes.

Description of Religion, Culture and Gender

Religions and Theology at Manchester offers non-confessional Jewish Studies in the sense that it is not affiliated with any Jewish religious movement and does not offer rabbinical training and/or Jewish educational training. As a result, significant numbers of students are not Jewish. Religion, Culture and Gender covers critical approaches to the study of gender, gender roles and representations in Jewish and Christian communities. These are explored through the study of religious institutions and practices as well as scriptures and teachings, and they include non-hegemonic and ecofeminist perspectives. The movement of material
invokes the history of feminist theory and theology from Western hegemony to
diversification and intersectionality. I aspire to establish equal focus on women’s and men’s
issues, and on Judaism and Christianity as practiced in Britain. However, I have observed
over the years that the majority of students are less likely to have prior knowledge of
Judaism and are therefore less likely to self-select assignment topics related to Judaism.
Notable exceptions are Muslim students, many of whom are specifically interested in Haredi
practices and beliefs related to strictly binary gender constructions.

The Jewish Studies material includes foundational texts on Judaism and gender and a
number of sociological studies of gender issues in contemporary Jewish communities with a
focus on constructions of the family. Most case material relates to Britain unless there are
no such studies available, hence we make a few excursions to Israel and North America. It is
a great challenge to cover the range of Jewish movements present in Britain because most
of the available gender-sensitive fieldwork – limited as it is anyway – is carried out in Haredi
and Hassidic communities.

The assessment tasks consist of reflective writing, student-led discussions and a guide
written for a professional, non-academic audience on a self-selected topic. Students have
written about Judaism and homosexuality, abortion, intermarriage, tzniut fashion, and
breastfeeding in shul.

*Religion, Culture and Gender* is studied by approximately 40 students per year, not a large
number, however their learning is of wider social significance in that many of them move
into careers in education, the public service and the third sector where they use their
religious literacy in service provision, policy development and communication.
Religion, Culture and Gender alumni data and analysis

Fifteen anonymous alumni survey respondents and two alumni co-analysts, who I call Emma and Lucy, have generated data between November 2012 and January 2013. They studied the course at least three years prior to taking the survey. The survey asked them what they perceived to be the trajectory of their personal long-term learning in relation to my course: why did you enrol, what did you learn, what has been significant to you beyond the duration of the course?

All bar one answer to the question why alumni had decided to register on RCG contain the word ‘interesting’ or equivalent expressions. What several respondents (Q3 R3, 4, 12, 15) meant by that was the study of contemporary real-life issues. Many referred to its ongoing contribution to their understanding of current affairs and social practices (Q4 R1, 4, 6, 10), which some of them have drawn on in their subsequent studies (Q4 R7, 8, 9) and in their professional roles (Q4 R5, 9, 15). In addition, respondents mentioned the relevance to their own practice, and existing or emerging interests that coincided with the curriculum (Q3 R1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14). Emma (E1 23:37 – 23:54) made a telling comparison with other course units: “You can apply it to your life and the life of the people around you, that’s what I meant by interesting. So, it wasn’t a course which was about a man that lived 2000 years ago, you know.”

Most respondents recorded an increase in their knowledge and understanding of the studied religious traditions. Specific reference to Judaism is made in eight out of 15 responses, some of them referring specifically to women’s roles. What is striking is the link
many respondents made to the course unit’s focus on the ways in which religious beliefs are guiding action (Q6 R1, 4, 10, 11, 12, 14; Q9 R1, 5, 12, 13). As Emma (E1, 45:54 – 45:56) expressed it, “you’ve got to be able to understand where people are coming from.” This reflects Eugene Gallagher’s (2009, 208) extension of Stephen Prothero’s concept of ‘religious literacy’, which “must involve not only a degree of mastery of basic information (...) but also some insight how people use that basic information to orient themselves in the world, express their individual and communal self-understanding, and give their lives direction and meaning.”

Since most students are not Jewish and are therefore what we might call outsiders, it is important to note how they relate to the curriculum. The following statement by R4 (Q6) suggests that studying religious practices as an outsider, in other words etically, might nevertheless take on personal significance: “[The course unit] has made me more keen to take time to understand (...) Jewish practices and beliefs, and to appreciate the benefits that these can bring to practical living.” While this respondent professed that “I can’t think of one particular way in which my life has changed” (Q8 R4), there is a clear statement that developing empathy is in itself change: “I’d say that [the course unit] has helped me to view situations and people differently and to have more patience” (Q7 R4).

Similarly, Emma emphasised that the studied material challenged students’ prejudices, and helped them to develop empathy with alien perspectives. Lucy (L2, 38:31 – 39:12) suggested that autoethnography as an assessment task served to raise individuals’ awareness of the subjective nature of what they considered to be ‘other’ and why. The data shows that many
respondents developed the necessary empathy and reflexivity to lower barriers between self and Other.

However, several responses highlighted the power of memorable learning moments, memorable ideas, and memorable individuals in face-to-face encounters with the curriculum. Some of what alumni have cited as memorable, points to the danger of exoticising (Huggan 2001) that can lead to othering (Spivak 1985): there seems to be a tendency to equate all religious Jews with certain Jewish movements who they tend to see as backward, legal-minded, internally oppressive of their communities’ women, homosexuals and trans persons, and as pathologically separatist from wider society.

An example of ‘exoticising’ is given in R12’s (Q5) detailed list in response to the question whether they had thought of the course since it ended and if so, of what: “Jewish ideas surrounding menstruation and the rape of Dinah, Superman as Jewish! How phallocratic religion can be and is, the stigmatisation of women, learnign [sic.] about how positive stereotypes of the male have been created and perpetuated by religion, such as the word testament being related to the testicles etc.” Emma (E1, 50:38 – 52:13) also recognised her ongoing fascination with perceived “exotic” Jewish practices, e.g. around menstruation: “Am I only remembering the unusual aspects of Jewish practices like the mikveh? Then when you meet Jewish people, you think, oh, do they go to the mikveh once a month, what’s that like?”

Graham Huggan (2001, 13-14) defines the exotic that is at once “threateningly strange and reassuringly familiar” (22) not as an inherent quality, but as socially constructed by a mode of perception that leads to a distorted comprehension of diversity. Thus, exoticising is a political practice of unequal power relations that renders the exotic as other. This is
recognised as an aspect of the insider/outsider problem in the study of religion (McCutcheon 1999).

Exoticising and othering of Jews have been shown to be significant aspects of antisemitism (Wistrich 1999). In Britain and across Europe, Jewish communities are currently suffering resurgence in antisemitic violence. My data raises the question how pedagogical interventions can contribute to the mitigation of this alarming development by supporting desirable learning outcomes of outsiders’ encounters with Jewish lived religion in the ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1992) of the non-confessional Jewish classroom.

Concluding thoughts towards recommendations

In order to design effective pedagogical interventions that mitigate the phenomenon of ‘exoticising’, and guide the affective dimensions of non-Jewish outsider responses to representations of contemporary Jewish lived religion, it seems useful to engage with antisemitism studies, postcolonial theory, cross-cultural learning theory, and theoretical perspectives on the insider/outsider problem in religious studies. I can only pick up on the first two.

A promising starting point could be taken from an insight in the study of antisemitism that educating non-Jews about Judaism is not effective without addressing the psychological roots of antisemitic ideology (Marcus 2015). In my case, memorable teaching moments should be protected from the exoticizing of informants and case material through encouragement of empathy and reflexivity. This should involve participation in informed and reasoned debate across different positions, and open-ended learning activities. To
encourage just and sustainable learning, and to avoid the danger of inductive encounters being exploitative, students’ positionalities vis-à-vis the curriculum should be deconstructed and reconstructed through academic practices of critical evaluation and autoethnography. In order to be effective, this needs to be integrated into summative assessment.

Secondly, postcolonial theory prompts me to ask who benefits and who suffers from my curriculum choices. Postcolonial theory offers “a reading strategy and discursive practice that seeks to unmask colonial epistemological frameworks (...) and interrogate stereotypical cultural representations” (Kwok 2005, 2) in my curriculum design and in learner engagement. The evidence of coloniser mentalities among my alumni suggests that learning opportunities should prompt students to decolonise their minds and practices.

The Chinese-American Christian theologian Kwok Pui Lan’s (2005) proposal of a dialogical mode of postcolonial imagination alerts me to the fact that in my context, the human objects of case studies cannot talk back to the interpreters unless they are embodied in the classroom, otherwise this leaves an “empty chair” (Kwok 2014). While case studies give learners some vicarious access to communities and experiences they might not encounter otherwise, could community placements provide the missing platform for dialogical encounter?

Further, Kwok (ibid., 99) argues that “reading together with others in community [can be beneficial] in order to challenge our own biases and investment in particular interpretive method. We have the challenge to turn the postcolonial ‘contact zones’ into places of mutual learning”. She (ibid., 43) borrows Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the ‘contact zone’ as the place of encounter between dominant and subordinate groups, and between people with different and multiple identities. Pratt (2007, 7) defines contact zones as “social places
where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination”. I recognise that the contact zone of my classroom is not automatically benign and beneficial. Namely, does the mobilisation of embodied knowledge and experience that is present in the classroom really mitigate the Othering process? Or does it raise the danger of abusing minority students as authentic “native informants” to help educate their hegemonic peers (Kwok, 2014)?

To conclude, whatever the pedagogical interventions, the aim within and beyond the classroom should be to support the development of reflective practitioners who meet the Other as their neighbour.

References


