"But Aren't Cults Bad?": Active Learning, Productive Chaos, and Teaching New Religious Movements

Benjamin E. Zeller
Lake Forest College

Abstract. *This article considers the challenges inherent when teaching about new religious movements ("cults"), how successful instructors have surmounted them, and how teacher-scholars in other fields of religious studies can benefit from a discussion of the successful teaching of new religions. I note that student-centered pedagogies are crucial to teaching new religions, particularly if students disrupt and defamiliarize the assumed and reified categories of "cult" and "religion." I argue that what works in a classroom focusing on new religious movements will work more broadly in religious studies classrooms, since the challenges of the former are reproduced in the latter.*

The students file into class, find their seats, and sit down. They glance over the syllabus and wait for the first day of classes of a new semester to begin. This class is titled "New Religious Movements" (NRMs), but as I will find out, they signed up for the class based on the course description, which mentioned such hot topics as brainwashing and polygamy, apocalypticism and the second coming. I begin the class by asking students if they know what a NRM is. I am met with silence pierced by an undercurrent of mumbling. I switch tactics and ask them if they know of any groups they would call "cults." The students produce a list of the usual suspects that I dutifully record on the board: Scientology, Satanists, Mormons, and Pagans. One student volunteers the Marines, and another adds the Southern Baptists. I suggest Trekkies. Finally, I ask how we can tell the difference between cults and other things (religions, social movements, churches, and so forth). A productive chaos of mumbling, side-conversations, and rustling of papers ensues as students attempt to determine the nature of this troublesome category and reexamine their preconceived notions. The productive chaos continues throughout the semester. At the end of the term, I ask students the same questions. The answers I receive vary, but the students now respond in far more critical ways. The class has – in my mind, at least – succeeded.

This article considers the "productive chaos" that characterizes the interlude between the first and final discussions in my class on NRMs, which I offer annually at the small liberal arts colleges where I currently and previously have taught. I submit that there are some fundamental challenges that all instructors face when teaching about new religious movements, but that similar issues face most teachers in the broader field of religious studies. These involve confronting students' assumptions, presuppositions, and stereotypes about the subject matter, and even questions about the merit of studying the topic at all. Students tend to assume they know what "real" religion or "good" religion is, and how to distinguish it from what they generally consider its opposite, a cult. This issue becomes particularly acute in a classroom focusing on NRMs, but any religious studies

course introduces topics that call into question students' assumptions about fundamental categories. Therefore, the approaches that achieve success in classes on NRMs offer value to scholars teaching in other subfields of religious studies.

The best approaches to teaching about NRMs are those that utilize student-centered learning and teaching, namely techniques that ask – or force – students to become active rather than passive learners. But these approaches work when a skilled instructor utilizes them in a highly specific manner, asking students to disrupt their assumed categories, to defamiliarize these topics and the presuppositions behind them, and thereby introduce a sense of productive chaos that forces them to reassess what they thought they had known. The takeaway of this article is therefore that when teaching about controversial and difficult topics like new religious movements – or the Bible, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, or many other topics within religious studies – one succeeds by asking students to struggle with overcoming their assumptions about the subject, and transforming that struggle into an opportunity to learn.

"But Aren't Cults Bad?": Situating the Teaching of NRMs

In the only book-length treatment of the pedagogy of teaching about new religious movements, editor David G. Bromley comments that "teaching about NRMs and learning about NRMs pose a challenge precisely because these movements have attracted so much public notoriety. Students are likely to be fascinated by NRMs but also to harbor the popular misconceptions about cults that are so widespread in North America and Europe" (2007, 25). While students bring a fascination with the topic to the classroom, which makes motivating the students somewhat easier, they also bring a set of presuppositions that makes it far more difficult to teach about NRMs. This is true even today after the "cult-wars" have calmed in many parts of the globe, particularly in North America, where I teach. Yet cults remain in the forefront of popular thinking about religion, even if not the headlines. My students seldom can point out Syria on a map or know what specific religious positions Al-Qaeda advocates, but they all know what religion Tom Cruise practices (Scientology), and the theological-social positions taken by members of the Westboro Baptist Church. Cults might have disappeared as a broad social menace (at least in North America), but my students report that their parents still warn them against joining one, and they bring that sentiment to the classroom.

Furthermore, to the extent that students recognize new religious movement and cult as something roughly synonymous, they generally assume NRM/cult as a category completely distinct from that of religion, a category to which they apply greater value. This introduces two problems: first, students tend to reify each of these categories and therefore the movements within them. Once these become static categories it becomes more difficult to critically assess them, much less deconstruct the assumptions and definitions that underlie the project of distinguishing them. Religious studies teacher-scholars far outside the subfield of NRM studies are familiar with this problem. The past generation of scholars has engaged in extensive criticism of the reifying of religion as apart from other cultural projects, noting that this approach limits our ability to critically examine and assess the subject of our scholarship and teaching. Russell McCutcheon has argued that this reification, what he calls the error of envisioning religion as *sui generis* (of its own kind), "sanction[s] and sustain[s] sociopolitical and material agendas" (1997, 4). While McCutcheon was not thinking of new religious movements, his argument clearly applies to the teaching of NRMs. Since many students initially identify cults outside the

sui generis category of religion, they position them as outside of the appropriate study of religion.

Reification also introduces a second problem: students associate these two distinct categories with different sets of characteristics. While today's students bring a variety of preconceived notions about religion, their views of NRMs/cults are profoundly negative. They tend to assume that the category of cult corresponds to brainwashing, violence, abuse, drugs, delusion, heresy, and suicide, among other characteristics. As scholar of new religious movements Eugene V. Gallagher aptly describes of students,

> Like many in the general public, they "know" that leaders of "cults" are not "really" religious but rather power-mad and psychologically unstable master manipulators who seek only their own benefit. They also "know" that those who join "cults" cannot have done so with a full understanding and deep appreciation of what they were getting into but must instead have been lost or aimless individuals who were particularly vulnerable to a wily leader. Finally, they also "know" that little if any good can come of "cult" membership and that those who join are liable to suffer personal harm or even do harm to others. (Gallagher 2007, 274)

One cannot underestimate the degree to which these interlocked assumptions create a troublesome resistance to the serious consideration of NRMs and learning about the actual history, development, social processes, and significance of new religious movements. "But aren't cults bad?" asked one of my students on the first day of class one semester. Since our shared Western culture has generally characterized cult as bad, the instructor might be tempted to answer this question in one of two ways. One might take the rhetorical approach and say that yes, cults are bad, and therefore we do not use the term cult but rather NRM. One might also invoke an objective relativism, and say no, that cults are just types of religions and that they are neither innately good nor bad. Here I propose a third way to answer this question: refuse to answer it, and tell the students that they will figure this out for themselves over the course of the semester.

The basic fact is that traditional pedagogies predicated on the professor as fount of knowledge transferring said knowledge to receptive students simply does not work very well when teaching NRMs. Students possess too much resistance, and the cultural pressure against taking new religious movements seriously is too strong. Rather, instructors must utilize techniques that are student-centered and engage students in active learning, since only the students themselves can teach themselves to overcome their presuppositions and assumptions. This is hardly a new or radical suggestion within pedagogy, but it is a particularly acute one within classrooms focusing on new religious movements. "Student-centered learning," as it has come to be called, understands the role of instructor as facilitator and guide, and eschews the traditional approach of lecture (Weimer 2002; Land and Hannafin 2000). Numerous approaches to student-centered learning exist, and admittedly the past decade has seen a proliferation of pedagogical jargon such as experiential education, problem-based learning, and active learning strategies (Doyle 2008; Eison, forthcoming). Jargon aside, these approaches all emphasize pedagogical ideas that respond to contemporary students in their current intellectual-psychological location, ask students to take charge of their own learning, and focus on students themselves as teachers. But in the NRM classroom – and more broadly in the religious studies classroom – this style of active learning is only the beginning. Active learning describes the process, but the goal is more specific: defamiliarizing oneself with one's

assumptions about what constitutes religion, how that category differs from cult, and the various presuppositions one carries about those concepts. Because teaching more broadly in religious studies introduces the same challenges as teaching the more narrow topic of NRMs, the same process and similar goals extend into those classrooms as well. My solution: ask students to reconsider and defamiliarize themselves with their assumptions, provide them opportunities to reflect on this, and then give them space to emerge from this productive chaos with a new understanding of the topic.

Challenging the Categories: Deconstructing the Nature of Cult and Religion

To successfully teach new religious movements, instructors must directly face the problem of the reification of religion and the ways in which the category is generally socially constructed so as to create a boundary between religions and cults. Teachers and their students must therefore engage in an act of creative deconstruction wherein they excavate the ways in which these categories are created and understood. Instructors need not utilize avant-garde critical theory or assign the classics of deconstructivist theory in order to do so. In fact, I suggest avoiding the likes of Derrida, Delueze, and de Certeau. Rather, students themselves can effectively deconstruct the categories of cult and religion, and because they do so through their own active learning rather than reading how someone else thinks one ought to do it, they will better understand the lesson.

Two recent articles in *Teaching Theology and Religion* have described similar techniques to successfully teaching new religious movements using just this approach. The authors of these two articles did not stress the theory behind their practices, but I argue that in both of these cases, the methods worked because they emphasized active learning that disruptively challenged the students and introduced a sense of productive chaos. Because the instructors stepped back into the role of facilitator and enabled the students to challenge their own assumptions and presuppositions, the individual classroom exercises succeeded. These examples offer possibilities to faculty in numerous subdisciplines of religious studies.

Airen Hall's short Teaching Tactic write-up, " 'Cult' or Religion?," describes her technique of forcing students to reassess "their assumptions about religious organizations not familiar to them and to consider the role of slanted language in shaping popular perception of religious groups and people" (2011, 355). Hall gives students a handout briefly describing the qualities of a leader of a religious movement, without indicating who the leader is or the name of the movement. For example, to describe Jesus and the origin of Christianity, she offers this description:

> A young man begins traveling around, preaching to anyone who will listen that they should give up their belongings, reject their families, and follow him. People claim he performs miraculous healings. His inner circle includes mostly poor laborers with little formal education (Hall 2011, 356).

Hall offers similar descriptions of the founders of a variety of both major world religions and recent new religious movements, including Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church and Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple. Hall then asks the students to consider which group is a cult and which a religion. From descriptions, students often choose figures like the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King as a cult leader, and decide upon Moon as a leader of a bona fide religion. Hall then reveals the actual names of the

groups and founders, and leads a discussion on the manner in which language affects perceptions (and vice versa). She finds value in the exercise because "students recognize how language shapes the ways in which groups are treated by society and how categories like 'cult' and 'religion' are culturally conditioned. They engage in serious reflection about both their own preconceptions and the preconceptions of others" (Hall 2011, 355).

Hall's approach works because it asks students to take charge of their own learning. The K-12 educational system and broader culture has molded today's generation of students to expect student-centered activities and classrooms in which they feel valued and central to the learning experience. In her recent study of the cultural orientation of the millennial generation and what they bring to college classrooms, Communication Studies scholar Karlene Ferrante notes that today's college students "crave interactive learning experiences," having grown up with structured play dates, "helicopter" parents, and lives suffused with marketing, technology, and multitasking. She recommends an "inside-out" classroom wherein the students engage in active learning that requires them to become central in their studies, rather than passive receptors of what their instructors teach (Ferrante 2008). Hall's approach does this, asking students to deconstruct the categories of cult and religion in a way that centers the students as teacher-learners.

Hall's approach shares some underlying similarities with that of Mathew N. Schmalz, whose article "Scientology and Catholicism Do Mix: A Note on Teaching New Religions in a Catholic Classroom" (2006) considers the teaching of NRMs within the context of his Jesuit institution. Schmalz indicates that he approaches teaching NRMs by focusing on "encouraging self-reflexivity," and pushing his students to critically self-examine their assumptions about the categories of cult and religion (2006, 29). Schmalz assigns his students a set of readings on Scientology, one of the most notorious of new religious movements because of both media coverage and the fame of members such as John Travolta and Tom Cruise. These readings include materials produced by a sympathetic scholar, the anti-cult movement, and Scientology itself. He then assigns material on Marian devotion and Marian apparitions, here focusing on material that either psychologically deconstructs or is otherwise critical of this Catholic movement. Finally he asks students to reflect on a comparison of these two movements, and respond to a "devil's advocate" polemical statement he authored that condemns both Scientology and Catholicism as "not religions at all" but "cults" (Schmalz 2006, 31–33).

Schmalz found that students responded in a variety of ways, and his article details a remarkable range of such responses. Many of his students attempt to rhetorically distinguish between the categories of cult and religion, but they also recognized that these categories were neither objective nor unproblematic. Others explicitly note the constructed nature of both categories. The majority took steps towards contextualizing how they understand the meaning of ideas like religion and cult, and Schmalz concluded that the assignment had succeeded. He identified this assignment as working towards what he called his "pedagogical goal of bringing into focus dynamics of *cult discourse* by having students themselves reflect upon the implicit distinctions they often make between established and alternative religions" (Schmalz 2006, 32).

Both Schmalz and Hall engaged the millennial student using Ferrante's "inside-out classroom" approach, asking students to do the heavy lifting and therefore the serious learning. These exercises succeeded not only because they made students active learners, but because they made the students' thinking essential to the learning process. But even more specifically, Schmalz's and Hall's approaches work because they inculcate a sense of productive chaos wherein students lose sense of the clear-cut distinctions between

cult and religion and need to reassess what they thought they knew about not only these categories, but the process of categorizing itself.

My own approach to enabling students to deconstruct the categories of religion and cult relies on classroom discussion and the use of a classic trick article – David G. Bromley and Anson D. Shupe Jr.'s "The Tnevnoc Cult" – a remarkably useful article published before the majority of my students were born (Bromley and Shupe Jr. 1979). Tnevnoc, Bromley and Shupe inform us, is a widespread nineteenth-century religious movement that bears remarkable similarities to the NRMs of the twentieth century and today, particularly in the way that its critics targeted it for its alleged abuses. According to these critics, Tnevnoc leaders lured young girls from their urban families, isolating them in rural environments and subjecting them to all manners of totalistic control and socialization. The unfortunate lasses were woken up as early as 4:30 am, faced arduous manual labor, were fed only occasionally and according to strict regiments, slept on thin straw mats, and faced long hours of bizarre compulsory worship. Tnevnoc created a fictive kinship system, banned sexuality, and even insisted that members assume new names. Rumors circulated of grotesque sexual misconduct, corporal punishment, and food deprivation, though Tnevnoc leaders denied this. Remarkably, this characterization of the Tnevnoc communities mirrors those of modern NRMs, as propagated by their anti-cult foes and popular culture. Yet, as the greater movement of which Tnevnoc was a part gained legitimacy in America, this characterization and the accusations ended. When society no longer construed Tnevnoc communities as evil, their socialization techniques and lifestyle became understood as legitimate as well.

Having assigned this brief and easy to read article, I initiate a classroom discussion by announcing that there is a trick to this article, and that students who realized the trick should refrain from telling the secret for now. I then ask the students to identify what elements of the Tnevnoc group are most cultish and most abhorrent. They identify issues like separation from family, required renaming, a series of bizarre rituals involving mock marriage to a dead founder, and ritual cannibalism, as the article described it. Most students are appalled by these facts, and when I ask if Tnevnoc is a cult and if the government should have banned it, students generally say yes. I then ask the students who realized the trick to come up to the board and slowly write out the name of the group: T-N-E-V-N-O-C and ask the other students to read it backwards.[1]

When students realize that we have voted to ban Catholic convents, that one person's "ritual cannibalism" is another's Eucharist, and that "separation from families" is in fact a normal part of monasticism in nearly all religions, the conversation takes a remarkable turn. Students almost immediately engage in a process of critical self-reflection wherein they ask themselves why they were so willing to condemn a group that most consider either harmless or positive. I say very little in this conversation, serving as a facilitator whose primary role is redirecting conversation when it lulls or reminding students of what they had said earlier, before they realized the trick. Every time I teach my class on NRMs, the Tnevnoc discussion returns again and again in subsequent classroom discussions when students make assumptions, rely on unsubstantiated rumors, or fail to investigate inherited categories. "Remember Tnevnoc?" is all that a student needs to say.

[1] This trick of course replicates Horace Miner's well-known "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" (1956) which playfully invokes anthropological tropes to exoticize 1950s Americans.

Certainly other instructors have used the Tnevnoc article in the same way when teaching about NRMs. But what works in our classrooms to teach about cults works just as well in a broader religious studies classroom. This exercise forces students to reassess their assumptions and the loaded categories of religion and cult. Faculty teaching on other topics in religious studies face the same challenges in students assumptions about topics ranging from biblical authorship to Hindu devotionalism to feminist criticism. Students in all our classrooms enter with presuppositions that challenge us, and the Tnevnoc exercise – or those used by Hall or Schmalz – shows that when students defamiliarize the categories religion and cult through this active process of learning, they emerge from the experience better aware of their own assumptions.

Through the intentionally disruptive reading and discussion of an article written before they were even born, students in my class begin to transform themselves into "masters of inquiry," in the words of educational psychologist Virginia S. Lee (2003, 2). She argues that this should serve as the goal of contemporary higher education and concurs that active learning approaches work best to encourage this transition. She calls it "inquiry-guided learning" (IGL), and writes that IGL "refers to an array of classroom practices that promote student learning through guided and, increasingly, independent investigation of complex questions, problems, and issues, often for which there is no single answer" (Lee 2003, 2). I had not read Lee's approach to IGL when I first began teaching, but her approach and mine emphasize the same skills: "to formulate good questions, identify and collect appropriate evidence, present results systematically, analyze and interpret results, formulate conclusions, and evaluate the worth and importance of those conclusions . . . to identify problems, examine problems, generate possible solutions, and select the best solution with appropriate justification" (Lee 2003, 3). Certainly contemporary liberal arts education also seeks to nurture these skills, and here one can see how a class on new religious movements – or any course in religious studies – can serve a valuable role in helping students to gain these skills.

Creating Chaos and the Emergence of Understanding

This article began by noting the "productive chaos" evident on the first day of my NRM class. Both of the classroom activities described by Hall and Schmalz, as well as my own approach, conjure this sense of productive chaos. Theologian Susan Willhauck has described a similar sense of chaos that became a "potent space, a place of incubation" of new ideas in her classroom (2010, 64). Willhauck's chaos differs somewhat from the chaos of deconstruction that occurs in my classroom and in those of Hall and Schmalz. For Willhauck, chaos emerges out of classroom discussions wherein students respond in unpredictable ways or otherwise unpredictable things occur, such as ringing cellphones during a test. Yet we agree that "when the redeeming characteristics of chaos are present in the classroom, it facilitates learning" (2010, 66). The chaos of breaking down categories and assumptions opens up a fruitful arena for discussion and learning.

Chaos erupts in my classroom discussions when students realize that their inherited categories such as religion and cult, and the various presuppositions they hold, do not fairly and adequately describe the realities that they perceive. Chaos literally manifests itself in mumbling and side conversations as students self-express or turn to neighbors to vocalize their thinking, but the interim mental chaos between certainty and reassessment is the real chaos towards which I aim. This works when students have become aware through critically examining their own suppositions and through classroom discussion with other students, that is to say active learning. Chaos is only natural when

one's assumed categories come under siege, and all the more so when it is the students themselves who have besieged them – rather than passively reading them in a textbook or hearing them in a lecture. Like Willhauck's chaos, new ideas emerge out of my classroom's chaos, and out of the chaos of Hall and Schmalz's classrooms. In these cases, students self-discover that the reified categories of religion and cult must be interrogated, and that one must critically assess what is meant when we talk about cults and new religious movements. I call this chaos productive because it lays the foundation for the rest of the course wherein we assemble new approaches to studying new religious movements – and in fact, religion itself – to replace the assumptions that students initially brought to the classroom.

In Bromley's (2007) anthology on the pedagogy of teaching new religious movements, several scholars of NRMs offer suggestions on how to effectively teach the topic. Most of these suggestions fit within the paradigm of productive chaos, in that they call for students to jettison inherited assumptions and create new syntheses of ideas in the fruitful space left behind. With the exception of Gallagher, none of the contributors consider the theory behind the pedagogy or engages contemporary scholarship on pedagogy, yet they nevertheless predicate their approaches on student-centered active learning pedagogies that unsettle students and force them to reassess what they think they know.

To offer only a few representative examples, James T. Richardson and Massimo Introvigne recommend an approach aimed at "creating a cognitive dissonance" about anti-cult accusations by providing some baseline material on nineteenth century moral panics against Mormonism and Catholicism – groups that are considered much less threatening in most circles today – and then asking students to compare them to contemporary anti-cult literature. They remind students of the social construction of cult "scares" and anti-cult accusations. Richardson and Introvigne also suggest classroom exercises wherein students reflect on their responses to three conversion narratives that are identical except for what the convert joins: the military, a conventional monastery, or a NRM (Richardson and Introvigne 2007, 101–102). Sarah M. Pike, in her contribution on teaching about gender in new religious movements, similarly suggests using strategies "starting with student assumptions." At the beginning of the course, Pike asks students to analyze familiar, more established religions in terms of gender, and then to think about what they have heard or read about gender in NRMs. This prepares students to "test their views" through discussions and papers wherein Pike pushes students to humanize NRM members and disrupt assumptions about them (2007, 225–226). Pike's approach is especially important since teaching about gender raises tension for many of our students. In their suggestions on how to discuss the equally tense topic of religious violence, Thomas Robbins and John R. Hall offer nearly identical suggestions to "coax students out of the safe place of silence" and encourage critical thinking (2007, 258).

All of these approaches introduce a sense of chaos, since they disrupt the assumptions and presuppositions of students. Yet productive chaos requires moving from chaos to production. One of the most explicit ways to encourage the production of understanding out of the chaos of challenging students' preconceived notions is asking them to do hands-on research as part of the process of (re)learning about new religious movements. This process is crucial, since while students have defamiliarized and disrupted assumed categories, they must have the chance to create new ways of understanding the material. Again, this approach is hardly unique to classrooms focusing on NRMs, and colleagues throughout religious studies engage in the same sort of processes.

I ask my NRM students to produce case studies that they then teach to the class. Each case study focuses on a particular historic or contemporary NRM. Working in groups of three or four, class members read primary and secondary source materials to familiarize themselves with the movement, then create a twenty-minute presentation for the class. I require students to present on a defined list of characteristics related to worldview, practices, and beliefs of the movements (theology, soteriology, cosmology, rituals, daily practices, interpersonal relationships, and relations with outsiders). In addition to speaking on these topics, I require presentations to involve the class using an interactive component. Students have chosen some remarkably creative interactive components, ranging from teaching their fellow students Shaker dance to sharing Hare Krishnas style food, to asking their classmates to analyze a Bob Marley song from the perspective of the Rastafari movement.

Student-teaching works very well as a technique to engage students and encourage them to master the material. They do very well synthesizing this material, since they know they will have to present it in a very brief format during class to their fellow students. In fact they understand it much more deeply than they would otherwise, since they must teach it and not merely recall it, a reality to which teachers can relate. Psychologist and pedagogue Terry Doyle explains that "when we ask our students to teach, we place them in a learning situation that requires that the one doing the teaching understands the knowledge or skill being taught. Having students teach one another promotes deep learning" (2008, 107). My experience in teaching new religious movements has indicated that Doyle is correct.

The approach I have outlined above succeeds because it asks students to become unsettled and then resettle themselves, forget what they thought they knew about cults, and then learn again from the bottom up. It forces students to work as active learners. My experience and the various approaches I have considered from Bromley's *Teaching New Religious Movements* (2007) and *Teaching Theology and Religion* indicate that student-centered pedagogies that ask students to disrupt their assumptions and enter a period of productive chaos is crucial to teaching new religions, and that this offers insight into the broader teaching of religious studies. Because scholars of NRMs usually do not possess training in educational psychology or pedagogy, they tend not to emphasize these points in their own writing. One exception is Eugene V. Gallagher, an accomplished pedagogue as well as scholar of new religious movements. In his contribution to Bromley's *Teaching New Religious Movements* (2007), Gallagher makes extensive use of pedagogical theory to argue a very similar approach to my own: that instructors must challenge students' preconceived notions about NRMs in order to successfully teach them, and that a variety of student-centered approaches help in this regard. Gallagher focuses on rhetorical teaching, an approach he borrows from religious studies scholars Richard Miller, Laurie Patton, and Stephen Webb (1994). In Gallagher's assessment, rhetorical teaching functions much akin to student-centered learning:

> Teachers will need to conceive of themselves, not primarily as experts on course management or as transmitters of knowledge; rather, they will situate themselves as fellow learners with their students, all of whom are striving to construct persuasive and trustworthy knowledge out of their specific encounters with common subject matter and with each other. (Gallagher 2007, 281)

Gallagher's approach leads to active learning, and a shift in students from passivity to explicit encounter with the material. Since Gallagher aims to help students overcome their resistance to studying NRMs and their preconceived notions about the topic, this approach works well.

The reason that student-centered or active learning approaches work best when teaching about new religious movements is basic psychology. Recall the numerous presuppositions and assumptions that students bring to the study of NRMs. Telling students that they are wrong, that their assumptions are erroneous, and that their preconceived notions have little basis in fact is more likely to precipitate resistance and anger than it is to open minds. Like political debate, one accomplishes little by simply talking at another person. For students to truly overcome their assumptions, they must themselves reassess their previously held assumptions and choose to discard them because of new information or ideas. The process must be active and centered on the students. Instructors serve as facilitators who provide the data (evidence, examples, trick readings), but allow the students to do the computing. In my own philosophy of pedagogy, I call this "giving students the dots, but having them draw the lines." Another way to understand why this sort of approach works best when teaching NRMs is that by asking students to reassess their assumptions and think critically about a controversial topic, we engage them in a lot of mental and academic work. "The one who does the work does the learning," a colleague once pronounced in a teaching circle conversation. This is quite true, and asking students to take charge of their learning does just this. All of the successful approaches to teaching NRMs discussed here take such an approach. But they have done so in a highly specific manner: disrupting students' assumptions and then asking them to reassess what they thought they knew.

The Payoff: Teaching NRMs and Religious Studies

Teaching new religious movements has its own set of problems, given the preponderance of negative stereotypes, social stigmas, and incorrect information circulating through broader society about them. Yet the study and teaching of NRMs is just the study and teaching of religious studies writ small. Teacher-scholars in every field of religious studies can point to similar stereotypes and errors that their students bring to the classroom, ranging from expectation that all religions are basically variant forms of the students' own religion, to fetishizing exotic foreign religions, to assuming that they already know the "real" form of a particular religion. Teachers who focus on issues of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other forms of power dynamics face similar resistance, and even faculty teaching in scriptural studies – among the most common of courses offered in religion programs – know that students bring bundles of assumptions and preconceived notions to these classes.

What works to teach new religious movements works to teach these courses too. I have adopted the approach of creating a productive chaos wherein I challenge students to disrupt and then jettison their inherited assumptions and forge new ways of thinking about the topic. In her study of the teaching of religious studies in American higher education, Barbara E. Walvoord found what she calls a "great divide" between what students expect from a religious studies classroom and what faculty want (2008, 6). Students expect to think about their own beliefs and values, and to learn about others'; faculty want to teach critical thinking skills. The approaches outlined in this article help bridge the great divide becase they ask students to use their own beliefs and values in order to develop and enhance their critical thinking skills. As Walvoord indicated, the

most effective religious studies classrooms are those wherein faculty bridge this divide. How instructors of new religious movements try to do so offers value to other teacher-scholars in religious studies for precisely that reason. I began this article by noting the productive chaos of the first day of class, and a student's provocative challenge, "But aren't cults bad?" – meaning why should we study them? By the end of class that particular student still believed that cults are bad, but she had a much more nuanced view of what she defined as a cult, and understood why making generalization about such groups is unwarranted. She also understood where they came from, how they functioned, and what NRMs show about society. For me, that is a success.

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