Conversation

The Devil in Mr. Smith: A Conversation with Jonathan Z. Smith

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Abstract: *This interview was recorded in November 2012 in Jonathan Z. Smith's Hyde Park graystone. Professor Smith offers insights into how he thinks about his classroom teaching and his students' learning through descriptions of various assignments and classroom activities he has developed over more than forty years of teaching. The discussion ranges broadly over such topics as: how students read, the failure to adequately prepare graduate students as teachers, students' faith commitments, the use of newspapers (and humor) in the classroom, and the role of definition, de-familiarization, and critique of the study of religion in introductory classes. The discussion presents vivid glimpses into Jonathan Smith's teaching practice and his teaching persona, including the time a student brought a minister to class to do an exorcism because she thought he was the Devil.*

Thomas Pearson: Thank you for having us today for this conversation. Your essays on the history and methods of the study of religion have been widely influential in the field for a generation. And what's truly remarkable for a scholar of your achievement and influence on the guild is that you have also written quite extensively and substantively about our shared profession as teachers. Your well-known essays that interrogate the research assumptions and preoccupations of the discipline are matched by your insightful interrogations of the assumptions underlying teaching. You have been especially articulate about the role of introductory religion courses in the humanities curriculum. But we thought today we would encourage you to explore not the curriculum and content of religion courses but the pedagogies of classroom teaching practices. So let me start with this area of questioning: Is there anything like a distinctive pedagogy for teaching religious studies? Should there be? How would you describe your teaching practices? How would you characterize the teaching practices of your colleagues in the field?

Jonathan Z. Smith: Well, I don't think I want to concede that there's a particular pedagogy for religious studies. I think basically I've always thought we teach reading and writing, acknowledging that this instruction is not entirely discipline free. At the undergraduate level we ought not be thinking that we are training professionals in the field.

There are, however, certain problems that present themselves in the religious materials we study in class, which don't often have analogies in materials used in other

disciplines. You alluded to one of them in our earlier correspondence: students' experiential or faith commitment to the material is probably louder in religious studies than in other fields. It's not entirely absent in other fields but it is something that needs to be attended to in our field especially. If you're not conscious of it you might be surprised when it disrupts the class.

But, no, I don't think there are pedagogies peculiar to the field of religion. I suspect our teaching is rather in the spectrum of things that liberal arts teachers do. We're probably more wedded to the text than some other fields are. We certainly don't really have a very effective idea of what a hands-on lab component of a class would be. We ask students to write essays, which is not really the same thing as a lab. I probably put more emphasis on how you read than a physics instructor would. So I think there are differences, but I don't think they are telling. Certainly I don't think a religion professor could simply wander into another discipline's classroom, but then I don't think you could wander into another professor's classroom within our *own* field either.

I remember during my first year at Santa Barbara I was given a semester off from teaching to finish my dissertation, and the instructor they hired to teach my class thought he could just use the syllabus that I had developed. He called me almost immediately, asking: "Why is this assignment next to this other assignment? Why are you talking about this person? What kind of nonsense is this?" – et cetera, et cetera. No one can teach another's syllabus. That's why I rarely publish my syllabi. I get so many requests to provide a syllabus for various publication projects and so on, but I think they're useless. Someone else's syllabus can suggest a reading you might not have thought of, so it might have a certain primitive value. But what we do in our courses is probably more personally idiosyncratic than disciplinarily idiosyncratic. I think there are more differences between individual instructors than there are differences between different fields such as English literature and religion.

Thomas Pearson: So how would you describe your own idiosyncratic method in the classroom?

Jonathan Smith: I have a whole host of things that I do, and I try to do many different things – sometimes reinforcing something I've done in a previous class session, sometimes doing something different, purposively. I play a different role each time.

In many of my classes I require short reading reports each week. This is helpful because by the time we get to the large final essay I have already interacted with a student's writing ten times or more. (And I think it's important to read and return these short reading reports by the next class session, or the students don't remember what they've written, they've moved on.) Reading is the key to what they're doing in the course – and it is the one thing I can't watch them do (without violating all kinds of privacy laws). These reading reports give me some sense of how they're reading and I can react if there's something that troubles me. I always take the first ten minutes or so in class to discuss what I learned from their reading reports.

This is the place where I often handle the issues involving their faith commitments if they arise. I usually have one reading report assignment early on designed precisely to smoke this issue out. Because this issue probably looms larger for us than it does in other fields (although I suspect it may play a role in political science and if philosophers would teach something other than linguistic analysis we would probably get it there too).

Another thing I found very helpful is to collect their books to see how they have been underlining or making notes in the margins. Their *schmearing* on the page really tells me what they're looking for in the reading, what they think is important. In contrast, they usually tip their questions in class to what they think I'm looking for; but they don't tip that yellow schmear on the page of their book. So I have found that, although it takes a lot of time, it is enormously useful to actually collect their books and inspect the pages for their notes and schmears.

I have found funny cases. I may have mentioned this in something I wrote, but there was one kid who obliterated with black ink everything that he thought wasn't important. It was like the old communist-style censorship. And in another case, a student explained to me that she was interested only in Durkheim's facts; she had highlighted every little stupid detail about the Aborigines putting the feathers on the right buttock and then moving it to the left buttock, et cetera, et cetera – but she had no use for any of his "opinions" about society, just the facts. That's a gift from God to spot something like that. The whole class benefited from that, because if one student had that notion then others did too.

Tim Jensen: I'd like to ask you about what I call "*Forschungsgeschichte*" – or the study of the history of the study of (the history) of religion. That is a very demanding field. In Denmark where I teach, I am preparing students to teach in the secondary school system. I have them for a three-year course of study. I am able to introduce the basics of the study of religion in the introductory course and then move on in subsequent courses to these more difficult issues. But you have written about the norm in the United States in which most of your students take only a single introductory course and never another one after that. So how do you broach the more complicated issues in the study of the history of the study of religion?

Jonathan Smith: It means the pressure is enormous because for most students that one course is it. You can't have in mind in an intro course that you're laying the pathway to a Ph.D. I don't try to introduce them to the study of the study. But I do introduce them to the history of the words.

Students don't generally understand the weight that words are carrying. So we pause over words so that I might impress on them the importance of using a historical dictionary. I try to show them, for example, that the meanings of the terms "objective" and "subjective" reversed from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century; each took on the meaning that the other one had. That's handy to know if you're going to be reading those historical texts. But it tells them something more than that. It teaches them that our major tool in the humanities is words. It is important for students to realize that we are stuck with the terminology we inherit. I try to get at this in part by staging the readings. In the first three weeks of the course the readings keep hitting on the problems of definition, on our relationship to the material – but without being all that explicit about it.

I lay little booby traps for them. The first thing we read that isn't about definitions of religion and such a selection from Schärer's *Ngaju Religion*. We read the cosmogonic myth in there. Outside of the fact that it's a fairly extraordinary myth my reason for reading it is that I know that they're going to bite on the phrase "Tree of Life" in the myth. They're going to get all excited over it. Some of them will think, "Thank God. This proves that Christianity is universal. You see, even these naked savages know about

the tree of life." I get reading reports on this. And that gives me the opportunity to address this in class. The reason why I picked this text is that he's a missionary. So that allows the question about words to come up in another sort of way. I tell them that this may be an overly Christian translation, but that I see nothing wrong with the phrase "Tree of Life." I see it used in a wide variety of cultures that do not share influences. But what's the difference in how the words are used? Well, to make a long story short, one of the big differences is that in this myth two deities have a fight and by accident knock some moss and bark off of the tree and out of that comes the first man and first woman. I can show them that an accidental creation is far from the "Tree of Life" in the Genesis story. It's nice that they saw something familiar in the text. You have to recognize that instinct. They're desperate for something familiar if you're not just teaching them their own tradition. So I tell them it's good that they found something familiar. This is what a philologist would call a false friend – they abound in this business. You just have to be alert to it. In this particular case the differences become more important than what is probably just an accidental verbal similarity.

The point is, I try to select the readings not only for their content and for advancing the overall narrative of the class, but also because I think certain ones will provoke some fairly predictable responses that will be useful. And because I'm getting a reading report from them every week I can keep track of responses and I can intervene. I don't have to wait until the last paper. By then there's nothing to intervene in because they're gone. For most of them that will be the first and only paper they will ever in their lives write on religion. It's not a grand finale. Interventions have to be done before that paper. The final paper allows you to see whether with a different sort of assignment they remember to address the sorts of things you've been showing them through the semester.

I don't give them free papers. They're told what to write a final paper on. They are to take their initial definitions of religion that I asked them to write in the first five minutes of class and revise them with specific reference to materials we've read and to our class discussions. This assignment shows them the ethic of revision and being self-reflective. On the whole I've been very pleased with this assignment. I haven't changed it for ten years. They all know it's coming; they're told in the syllabus. There's no reason why they shouldn't be thinking about the final exercise as they go through the course.

But to return to your question, I think that at the undergraduate level it is over-professionalization to focus on theory. I think it is more properly part of graduate training, which, if it is any good, ought to force you to understand and critique the theory but also in some way to employ it. But this is a distraction from what I want to be doing with my average "Introduction to Religion" course. The students don't come to the class with the questions those theories are designed to deal with. Their questions are: Is it true? And how can someone believe something like this? Their questions are highly value-laden.

Eugene Gallagher: Have you given any thought to the fact that students taking the introductory religion course have had no high school preparation, in contrast to other undergraduate disciplines such as English or chemistry, which have been part of the secondary school curriculum?

Jonathan Smith: If they've had any study of religion it has been in religious school, which is not helpful. For the majority of our students this will be the first and only reli-

gion course they'll ever take, and that means that you shouldn't teach as though you're recruiting majors and future scholars in the field, or you'll miss what's most important for your students.

Tim Jensen: It is interesting, again, to compare this with the context where I teach in Denmark. I said earlier that our curriculum is oriented toward preparing our students to be teachers of religion in the primary and secondary school system. Thus in Denmark we have a fairly good religion education program and I can count on students coming into my university classroom having a more or less solid knowledge base. This is how we have survived as a discipline in the university system, by preparing our students to become teachers of religion education in primary and secondary schools, and then receiving their graduates in our university classrooms with an already somewhat developed knowledge of the field.

Jonathan Smith: No, we don't have that at all in the United States. And it's interesting to see that almost every professional society has an education journal because they're involved in preparing teachers for their disciplines beginning at the primary school level. History has a deep interest in what's going on in primary school education, as do English and math and the sciences. In religion we are sealed off from all of that and so teaching becomes more of an avocation than a vocation in our field. It might be a hobby but it's not part of your dossier. That makes religion somewhat peculiar in the university curriculum: we have no colleagues in primary and secondary education.

This explains to me why the link between religion and education – which has from the beginning always been a very strong link – is rarely studied as a dissertation topic. We have very few studies that look at the educational function of religion. We're beginning to get more studies on law, which is also very important in religion, but education still is not on our map. And I think this is because religion education in the United States is confined to a very small portion of the life cycle of the student (except in parochial schools, of course). So it's not an obvious topic. Even highly esoteric fields, after all, have a curriculum for general physics or general chemistry in high school, if not earlier. So we have this funny situation where you can't take a basic knowledge of religion for granted when students walk into your classroom and you have to stage activities to find out what they do know – and also what they may be concealing.

Tim Jensen: You wrote in an essay titled "Basic Problems in the Study of Religion" that "the role of a college teacher is to be precisely that of insuring that his students have 'wrinkles on their brows' and that they become adept in the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' " (2013b, 27).

Jonathan Smith: Yes. But I would add that my aim is that they not be defeated by that. I want it to be a spur to more thought, not a blockage or impediment. "Wrinkles on the brow" is the most basic definition I have of the teaching enterprise. We enable wrinkles. And then there's the "suspicion" part. My goal is that they not fall for it: "Don't be taken in by it; use the skills of critical inquiry that we've been teaching you, allegedly."

I think there are some students who are genuinely frustrated. They want the last day to be some sort of summing up. But for me, the last day is always a day of questions. I require students to submit them in writing in advance. I want to know what really pissed them off. What's the biggest problem they've had? I try to tell them that I recognize

their problem and that it's a *real* problem. It's not that I've withheld an answer from them. Hopefully it's a much better problem than they raised on the first day of class. And I want them to see that it's okay that there is this problem. It really is.

Thomas Pearson: Do you think learning happens when students feel disturbed? Is that an important moment?

Jonathan Smith: It's a moment, certainly. But you can't keep it. You can't disturb students for fifty minutes without end because they won't be back the next day.

Thomas Pearson: There's the important element of resistance, where they *refuse* to learn.

Jonathan Smith: That's right. Or they just say, there he goes again (which is actually the worst). It can be devastating once they think you've gotten on your hobby horse again. So you have to be very careful. You can use humor, but you can't be flip. Sarcasm doesn't work, although I'm very tempted sometimes.

Thomas Pearson: It's misinterpreted?

Jonathan Smith: They write things down and they don't know I was kidding.

So you don't want to be sarcastic. But, on the other hand you're trying to model that you don't have to get all serious and speak in Latin just because you're talking religion. You don't have to wear a black suit and look solemn. It's a perfectly fun field of study. You want to let that happen. But you want to draw the difference between having fun and "making fun of." Sometimes I go to extraordinary lengths to show why something that appears patently ridiculous may not be so ridiculous after all. On the other hand, it seems to me at times, that you just have to say, "I really – try as I will – can't understand *this* one." That usually comes up when someone asks me something. It's not built into the course.

Thomas Pearson: Returning to something you said earlier about students' discovery of the tree of life in the cosmogonic myth, it seems to me that in part why learning can take place there is that it starts with recognition. You take what's exotic and make it familiar.

Jonathan Smith: That's right. But then you have to do the opposite too. But I start by saying, "Good, you found a point you can relate to in this complicated, crazy story where mountains are talking to each other and so on. That's important. Now however, you have to think about the text that you found a way into and you have to ask yourself if that story really is talking about what you think you're relating to it? Is this really the way the actors in this particular narrative are acting?" And the answer, I think, is probably no.

And then also you have to take the familiar and make it exotic. I use the Bible a lot in class, and when I get through, it's not the Bible they've ever seen.

Thomas Pearson: So you take the exotic and make it familiar, and take the familiar and make it exotic.

Jonathan Smith: Yes. They hear this from the very first day: familiarization and de-familiarization. These are two of the very few technical sounding terms that I hit them with right away, and keep hitting them with – because it's both. The whole art of the business is how you balance those two apparently contrary impulses. What's useful is that it's not just a question of the difference between us and them. It can also be the difference between us and our own past. That's why the Bible plays such an important role in my class. I ask them: "Did it always mean what you just told me it means?"

Satoko Fujiwara: In this context, your famous line in the introduction to *Imagining Religion* that there is no data for religion has, I think, played a very de-familiarizing role. How do students respond to that?

Thomas Pearson: That's de-familiarizing for the academic professionals, as opposed to our students, isn't it. It de-familiarizes us from what we thought we were doing.

Jonathan Smith: If I had a nickel for every time that sentence has been quoted I could have retired forty years ago. But I have to say that sometimes the way the quote is used is de-familiar to me! I wasn't saying we should abolish the term, for example. I didn't think I was saying anything very significant when I wrote that. I thought it was a self-evident proposition and I just went on.

I don't know that I have ever taught that text to undergraduates. Instead, I come at it in the context of the definitions I ask them to write on the first day of class. Right at the beginning of the course I ask them to write a little essay telling me what religion is and what the study of religion is. I take a cigarette break outside and when I come back it has to be done. I collect their definitions. And then I say what we have to do is define definition. I say there are a lot of general nouns like religion, and the problem of providing a definition lies in the general and the particular. Religion is a very loose term, but we have a lot of very loose terms.

On the last day of class someone will usually raise a question that allows me to ask them if their understanding of the word religion is elastic enough to embrace all of these things they've been reading this semester, or have I asked them to read some things that they might think is not religion? And earlier, when discussing definition at the beginning of the class, I always remind them that definitions are defining words in terms of other words. They're not descriptions of things.

Eugene Gallagher: Earlier in the conversation, you alluded to training graduate students to be teachers of undergraduates. Have you thought at all about what would be an appropriate way to train graduate students for entering into the undergraduate classroom?

Jonathan Smith: We don't value apprenticeship much anymore in most trades and professions, so why is it the only mechanism we have in *our* profession for teaching graduate students to be teachers; an invitation and an apprenticeship – and it's all left as a fairly unreflective process.

We have a situation in which some professors are obviously quite good at teaching and a lot of us really aren't. But we don't have a general education on education – and what is more, we tend to disdain it. We say that teaching is all in the heart, and all that garbage. A particular professor is beloved by his students and it's because he tells jokes

in class. There is actually an anti-education feeling among many educators. They don't want to be in the business of education.

I think one really has to break down the process of teaching. You can't do it in situ because everything comes at you all at once. You have to disaggregate. So let's talk about writing. Or, let's talk about problem-solving. Let's talk about different styles of learning – but let's also talk about the different styles of presenting. I'm very self-conscious about what style of presentation I'm using on any particular day – whether it's narrative mode or problematic mode, and so on. By the time the semester is through I've tried four or five styles for teaching.

There's so much good stuff written on teaching, and there are usually people on any campus who can talk intelligently about it. It's just unconscionable to simply throw the graduate students into the water with maybe just a seminar on teaching (which typically consists of a gripe session).

I've long advocated that part of a Ph.D. requirement ought to be the preparation of a syllabus with a careful justification for everything included. Your degree should in large part depend on that. Yes, there should be a dissertation, but the rest should not be simply time served. And it's not enough to be just a teaching assistant in a class – because what you're really saying is thank goodness I had someone to grade all those papers for me. That's not sufficient preparation for a license to teach. What I'm asking for has to do with the ethos. When you put teaching in the graduate curriculum and you make it a degree requirement, then instantly we get serious about it. You take that away and it's simply a hobby. It's an avocation.

Everybody works out their own style eventually. But it's like improvisation in jazz: you have to improvise on something. And unless there's an agreed upon something I don't know how we evaluate it. I don't know how we write letters of recommendation. I don't know how we hire, and rehire. Well, I do know: the question of teaching just never comes up. I've never seen a hire which has requested a syllabus. You'd think it would be standard.

Eugene Gallagher: At Connecticut College we've done that for a while now. Instead of teaching a sample class we ask you to bring a syllabus. And then we talk with you about it for an hour and a half. We ask job applicants to excavate the decision-making process in their syllabus, both pedagogically and in terms of field knowledge.

Tim Jensen: That's something new at my university; all of us now have to provide a teaching portfolio. And every time we hire somebody, he or she has to produce several pages.

Jonathan Smith: That's long overdue. I think it was at Princeton where they analyzed how faculty actually spend their time, and it's *not* spent writing books (which is what the dissertation is). We write articles; we give lectures; but we don't on the whole write books (and especially a book that's not simply a series of articles – which is what I do). So the dissertation is probably the last book you'll ever write, and it's advised by someone who has not written a book since their dissertation. This is a crazy system!

I like the idea that you should be able to give a popular lecture. You should be able to write a chapter for the Cambridge history of your subject – that is, a generalizing piece. You should be able to write an article that would be accepted by any refereed journal in your field. And you should have to present an annotated syllabus. All of these

should be part of the Ph.D. requirements. I think that unless we start putting some grit to this, it'll just be: nice guys think about teaching, and not nice guys don't. It becomes a moral statement, not a professional requirement. It's as if it's voluntary. I don't know any profession that lets you do that.

Tim Jensen: Again, it's interesting that my context in Denmark is so different. I teach a required course each semester on the didactics of religion education or the didactics of the study of religions. So I have to teach methodology of teaching. How do you present this or that idea? What choices have you made? Why do you use this book instead of that book? This comes up all the time, because we are teaching this to our students.

As part of the doctoral degree, students are required to write an essay that would appear in a popular magazine of some sort, and another essay that would be appropriate for an intellectual newspaper. Students are also required to analyze the issues that would come up if giving a television interview on, say, Shi'ite Islam or something like that. What topic would you pick? What's the important thing that you would want to say? And then reflect on how you as an academic differ from a journalist.

Jonathan Smith: These kinds of exercises reflect the profession. It's what we do.

Eugene Gallagher: Our job ads don't say: "Looking for person to write books on such and such," they say we are looking for a person to teach this, this, and this. And yet their training as graduate students is not all that well aligned with what they will be doing for us.

Jonathan Smith: We have looked at it as a research degree and we have ignored the fact that it's also the credential in a teaching degree. The question is how much longer you can ignore that.

Thomas Pearson: We spend a lot of time teaching graduate students to do research and how to write. And yet they'll spend their careers teaching. So how do we teach them to teach? Have you ever worked with a graduate assistant who has watched you teach? Can you reflect on that process? Is that an effective method? How do you teach someone to teach?

Jonathan Smith: Well, that's the apprenticeship model. It's *one* method, but I wouldn't want to make that the only method. It is partly imitation. That's how monkeys learn – so stop with the imitation already. But, let's be theological for a moment (although you hear this in the physics department too): it's charisma we're told. It's a gift. And some people have it and some people don't. The people who don't are probably pleased about that, by the way, because they don't get stuck with huge introductory courses. So it's one of the rare places where you'll hear faculty profess incompetence with great passion and great detail. It's a very strange thing we do by saying that teaching is an art – what we're really doing is saying it is not a profession. What we're really doing is denigrating it. I don't want an amateur to install my pacemaker and I don't want an amateur to teach me the Bible. It's just that simple.

So why is it that this enterprise of education, where 90 percent of the graduate students in any field are heading, is never discussed in a serious manner by most of the people who are training these people? For most of the institutions that are training

graduate students, for most of the journals they would think of reading, this issue is not even on the radar screen. You can't blame the graduate students for this. There's no reason for them to have thought that education was what they were signing up for – although most of them are there because of a classroom experience that they had, that led them to think that this is something they'd want to do with the rest of their lives. And we manage to pretty well freeze that out of them by the time they get through graduate school. That's just silly.

My wife is a professional musician, and she goes to conferences on pedagogy endlessly. Yes, you have to be able to play the piano and yes you have to be able to analyze the scores and do all of that. But what they seem to be going to meetings about all the time has to do with pedagogical aspects of their profession. And the sophistication of some of those pedagogical presentations is really quite stunning. Now, someone like Jerome Bruner is a lot bigger in learning theory than I would like him to be but nonetheless that's a name that means a lot to any of my wife's colleagues. I bet you could walk around Swift Hall at the University of Chicago and no one would know who you're talking about. That's an illiteracy that is serious when you consider that this is what we get paid to do.

Thomas Pearson: So how does a graduate student learn to teach? Can you learn to teach by reading a book on teaching?

Jonathan Smith: No, but it won't hurt you. That is, it will make you self-conscious. It will tell you things that you wouldn't have known because you haven't always been taught well yourself. Some of my colleagues spend hours grading papers and think they're being really good guys because they circle every mistake in grammar on the page – and we know that this sort of grading does nothing. It has no payoff. The kid glances at it once and goes on. The grammatical mistake continues.

So even the people that you think of as spending a lot of time with their teaching, you have to ask: are their comments really useful? Do they know what kinds of comments might help? Do they know how to suggest a revision in a way that the student understands (that it's not that you change your *idea*, which is what they all take revision to be, but it's instead that you change how you *said* your idea)? There is a lot of good literature out there now on this sort of thing. I keep making that snotty remark that we ought to keep up with scholarship of teaching to the degree that we keep up with scholarship in our field – which to a certain degree is clearly hyperbolic, I surely don't keep up myself. But you should have some sense of what's out there. Because we do have this comforting illusion that some people are just naturally good teachers and some people are not. That lets me off the hook, and it's not true. I mean, there's a bit of truth in it, but not a lot.

Eugene Gallagher: The further implication is that it therefore doesn't really matter much. It's not that important in comparison to your research profile. I think that's the profoundly damaging part given the economics of the industry and where people end up teaching.

Jonathan Smith: And if they looked they would see that there is serious research on education, using methods they're familiar with, alluding to theoretical resources they're familiar with. There's no department more despised on any campus than its education

department. I don't know of any profession that chooses to dump more garbage on its own profession than we do on education. They're the pariahs. We shut ours down at the University of Chicago. This is the tradition that goes back to Dewey. Do you think we need all that? I guess not. Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives is not considered a classic at this university. I have literally worn through a copy of Bloom. I'm on my third. The idea that you could sit down and map out an intelligible language of what you wanted to do in a fifty minute class – I never knew you could really do that with his level of precision: "I'm going to target thus-and-so in the next class because look what happened Tuesday." Now, I don't necessarily hold out for everything in Bloom. It's like any taxonomy. But I don't think the notion of teaching as an art allows for there being that kind of taxonomy. It's as if we went "oooh" and "awww" over the smell of a tulip, but never knew what genus and species the tulip was. And again, that's so counter to the way we act with respect to almost anything else in our field.

On the other hand, I will interrupt my class plans for a good newspaper article – what I call a gift from above. I think using the newspaper is important for a number of reasons. It puts the students and me on the same footing because we're both reading the same story at the same time – so it's not as though I've studied this text before.

My article on Jonestown came out of a class like this. Another example was the Iranian hostage crisis. How could I hold class without reading what the students are reading in the paper about this? Our first presupposition was that the Ayatollah isn't crazy. He's rational. So he knows he can't win. So the question is how can he lose with the best face? One kid sticks up a hand and says, "Maybe it could be like Jesus" – and I was ready to kill him. But he meant to suggest that maybe there is some sort of special religious day on which the authorities could release the prisoners and save face – like Pilate in the Bible. The students did some research, but they couldn't find such a day. But I said, let's stick with that idea. If they *did* have a day such as that, what day would they pick? And they did some more research and decided that they'd pick Martyrdom. That's not bad, I thought. And it happens to also fit with the date of the crisis, and so forth, and it happened to work out. My students figured out the eventual date of the release. They were off by a day only because the banks had trouble transferring some cash and so they had to delay the release for twenty-four hours (and this changed the symbolism entirely, because it was Reagan and no longer Carter who was in office by the time the release took place). The timing of the release switched from a religious to a western secular calendar.

They figured this all out by themselves. They learned a few Arabic terms. They went and pulled down books from the library shelves. And they read with one particular question in mind, this goofy idea about a date on which prisoners could be released without losing face, like in the Bible. I wouldn't have expected that if my life depended on it. The students actually had three or four other theories going as well.

Thomas Pearson: It's problem-based learning.

Jonathan Smith: Yes. And off they went.

Thomas Pearson: And it prepares them for how they're going to encounter religious discourses for the rest of their lives. They're not going to be reading myths throughout their adult lives, but they will be reading newspaper articles. They're learning how to interpret media.

Eugene Gallagher: Which also just happens to be what the institutions that they're spending all this money at are promising they will be able to do.

Jonathan Smith: I find newspapers very valuable in teaching. The *New York Times* had a story on a Tuesday about the weeping statue of the Madonna in a Catholic Church. On Wednesday, a Ganesh was leaking milk from his nipples in a temple. I brought this into class and asked students to compare how the *Times* handled the two stories. The first thing students noticed was that the tears were coming from an "icon" of the Madonna and the milk was coming from an "idol" of Ganesh. That was worth the whole day's discussion, how just a little change in a word could make such a big difference.

Tim Jensen: Exactly. The didactics of religion and the study of religion should include the coverage of religion in the media. The words they use. How religions are represented. It's so important.

Jonathan Smith: I find the newspaper very important because usually it is so un-self-conscious about these things. It doesn't know those words have a history.

[Doorbell rings. Jonathan Smith stands and walks across the room to peer out the window but does not open the door.]

Jonathan Smith: Hah! It's Jehovah's Witnesses. That's our data at the door. [Laughter.]

Satoko Fujiwara: Do you ever take your students outside of the classroom, like to museums and such?

Jonathan Z. Smith: No, it's not in the schedule. I will call their attention to things that are happening on campus or in the community. I think I've always slighted the whole visual world, and I don't think that's a plus. I think that's a minus. Honestly, I don't know how to do it without it getting awfully like show-and-tell. I'm sure there are ways to do it. I've heard people do it successfully. But it's not my style. I'm not a very visual guy. I rarely go to an art museum, but I go to a book every day. That's what I do. But I do think it's a loss.

Tim Jensen: In Denmark, we struggle with how to teach students to read and discuss difficult texts and also to expose them to actual lived religion, to do fieldwork and experience the sociology of religion. It's too much to cover. I think there is a drift toward emphasizing contemporary religion and contemporary issues. The classic texts and the virtues of reading a text and studying religions of the past are being lost.

I would like to return to an earlier point. When it comes to striking this balance between de-familiarization and familiarization – to challenge students without discouraging them or causing them to lose interest – there is also the problem of students having *too* much interest (in a sense) because they are relating to the course material *as* a Christian, or *as* a Jew. How do you handle that? Have you had to remind someone that they are here in the classroom as *students*? – that their comments are disruptive and are not the business that we are about here?

Jonathan Smith: Yes, but I don't do it in front of the class. Except there was this one time when a student brought her minister to class to exorcise me, because she had told

him that I was the devil. I came into class and there he was, this adult sitting amongst the students. He didn't have a collar on or anything, so I had to ask who he was and why he was there. It was explained to me and I said: "Now let's understand something here" – and I put it into language that he would understand – "In this classroom I am God, and no one comes in here unless I invite them. Now, if you would like to demonstrate what an exorcism is when we come to our unit on ritual later in the semester, I will invite you to come do what you're suggesting. But for now, you can get the hell out of here."

But that was the only time I've ever had a real chin to chin confrontation. After class I called up the counselors to tell them that I was a little worried about a student who was interpreting things in my classroom as the work of the devil. But more often I have students who get on a theme and can't get off of it. Actually, classmates usually do a pretty good job at stopping it, complaining that it's wasting their time. Just on economic grounds, they will not stand for too much of that sort of personal testimony.

If a student comes to see me I will listen to a good bit of their testimonial and religious search and try my best to answer using the language that they themselves are using, if I can. I try to pick up some of what they say and reconfigure it and hand it back to them. But to me, that's an extracurricular business. I assume that they know that if they come to a place like the University of Chicago that they really haven't signed on for that kind of affirmation of their religious experience. Since the George W. Bush administration I've found that I need to take a little time to make it clear that we are talking about religion, not faith. Certainly faith is an element in religion, but you can go a long way describing and analyzing what's going on in religion before you have to use the word faith. So you shouldn't start there.

Eugene Gallagher: Again, when preparing graduate students to teach, you have to remember that you are sending them out into a very different context than they will have experienced at the University of Chicago.

Jonathan Smith: I've never taught in an explicitly religious context. Other than Chicago, I've also taught in a state school, which was much more diverse than the University of Chicago (and probably still is). I think the smallest class I taught there had a hundred and fifty students – so whatever was on their minds would have been very difficult to tell.

I once taught a course with close to a thousand students and it was like being on an EKG. The sound that a thousand people make squirming in their seats when they're bored is like a slow rumble coming at you. Every sentence I muttered was monitored. I could tell if the rumbling started to get off of the idea. Time to do something else! Tell a joke. Do something! It just comes roaring up at you.

But I'm really not convinced that class size is necessarily as defeating as some people think it is. Certainly it takes a lot of work. I had a group of teaching assistants but I was present at every discussion section. Clearly, I can't hear a thousand voices and I can't read a thousand essays, but there are some things you can do and there are some things that won't work in a large state university context.

I remember my wife and I invited one of these large classes over to our house (not a thousand, but a class of maybe eighty-five or ninety). I'll never make the mistake again of setting out all the glasses I thought we'd need. Only one kid showed and we had eighty-five glasses sitting there on the table and this huge tub of beer and so forth. And

there I was with this one kid who really thought he had to stay for a long time, I guess, and help me out a little bit – a little therapy for the old man.

In the first few pages of the new book I've just published (2012) I say something about the importance of predictability when meeting with students. You should never cancel office hours. My students always know that I eat lunch before their class, in the same place. And I have a cup of coffee afterward. So they know where they can find me. But don't be disappointed if nobody shows up because adolescents have many other things on their minds besides you and your stupid course. What free time they have they will not necessarily want to spend with you. But just because they haven't shown for weeks and weeks, you shouldn't give it up. If you're still there, some will eventually come by. At UC Santa Barbara we had only about one quarter of a table, but I ate lunch in the student cafeteria every day and there would be a shifting group of maybe forty students or so. That was more than enough. Not everyone has to come.

Thomas Pearson: Do you ever go to student functions? Do you go see what they get involved in?

Jonathan Smith: I don't on the whole. I don't really see that as part of the job description. If a student organization asks me to come, I try to if I possibly can. But I want their effort to be in the classroom and on the books. And it's hard because students really don't expect or allow you to have a whole lot else on your mind other than your subject matter. After hours I'd rather talk about politics than sit around and talk about religion, frankly. But they don't allow me to have anything else on my mind. You can see that they've worked hard beforehand to think of something to say. "Let's ask him this." I just find that sort of thing stilted. It's easier at the graduate level because then you're in the same business so you can talk shop – formally, or informally.

Thomas Pearson: You've been teaching now for quite a long time. Have you noticed any change in the students over that period?

Jonathan Smith: There hasn't been anything dramatic, I'd say. Certainly the student population is much more diverse now. That's been a change I've noticed at University of Chicago. Student diversity was one of the things I loved at UC Santa Barbara. I'm sure it's even more diverse now. When I first came to University of Chicago we had feeder schools and a fairly predictable student body. Now we have the problem that our undergraduate college is so much smaller than our graduate and professional programs. Most schools here run their college supported by graduate programs. Our college doesn't generate enough income to support itself so that's always a problem. You can get a lot of money from central administration if you can increase the size of the class. The unintended effect of this is that the students have gotten increasingly diverse, not just in their demographic profiles but also in terms of their interests and career plans and the types of educational experiences they've had. Close to a quarter of the college class thought of a career in the academy when I first came here. An awful lot of them were professor's kids. That's all gone now. Certainly by all the usual demographic measures the student body is clearly more diverse because going on to higher education has been more diversified. I don't think the institution can take any credit for that.

I wonder, and I wish I knew, what difference has been made by the ubiquitous use of computers. Nobody writes by hand anymore in class, they just type away. I wish I knew

enough about computers to know what difference it makes, but I have never used a computer myself. I still refuse. So I don't have any real feel for it. Are things different when you have those sorts of tools available to you? Is it different when you can look up all this unmediated information on the internet? Students quote it to me from Wikipedia and I just shrug. But they know they're right and I'm wrong. One kid warned me that he was checking up to see if I had said things right. I told him that if it's that easy to find the right thing why do you bother coming to me? What are you putting me and you through all this for?

But I'm sure there must be a difference. I xerox all my readings, and the University wants me to put them on computers instead. But I won't do it. To me that's an insult to those texts. But I know you can provide things like visual art much more readily without having to bring in the slide projectors and all of that.

Tim Jensen: [laughing] I'm looking forward to your next PowerPoint presentation.

Jonathan Smith: That will be the day. I finally learned what it was! I had a vision that *THIS* was PowerPoint, [gestures emphatically with the middle digit of his hand, to laughter]. In the sciences now that's what they do. They all sit in the room together and look at the screen.

Eugene Gallagher: While they read the screen out loud to them.

Jonathan Smith: They don't even bother. They all just sit there and read it. Sooner or later this computer business has got to have made a difference. The authority of print has clearly been eroded in the minds of students. I've noticed that it is somehow rude to be critical toward a person, but it's okay to be critical toward a book. There's an etiquette involved, and there's so much now about making public what is personal. I think we're going to run into difficulty on this sooner or later. We may get a peculiar bifurcation whereby if you say it I won't analyze it, but if you have it set in lead, then I will. If it's flickering on a screen, then I won't. It may be like the suspension of disbelief in the theater. We may come to a point where we have genres that we will not or maybe ought not employ in certain forms. I don't know.

Thomas Pearson: Do you find that in the classroom the students are reticent to criticize each other's statements, because they are more critical of the text than they are of each other?

Jonathan Smith: They don't like to criticize each other and they rarely do. If they do it's allegorical. They'll address a point as if it was vaguely out there somewhere in the world and they're actually talking to the person sitting right next to them. Rarely is it face-to-face. I rarely teach a class that is small enough to be called a seminar, but generally at the University of Chicago a seminar is not a dialogue but a set of ejaculations. And, of course, a couple of people will consume most of the time of the seminar. So unless you're a traffic cop, not a lot of folks get to talk.

When I teach a large class of over a hundred students I take five minutes at the end of class and have them write a brief note to tell me the most surprising thing they learned that day and what they want to learn more about. They write that and hand it in

and then I take five minutes at the beginning of the next class to report back what people have said and use that somehow in the class.

When I have a class of about thirty or so I set up a rotating set of designated discussants. Three designated students and I will conduct the discussion of the book. The next time around it's another three up there with me. They are the surrogates. I find that I get more out of them than if it was just left to them to stick up their hand and chime in. Everyone benefits more. And they're told to interrupt me. They don't have to put up their hand; they're supposed to jump right in if they need to. It legitimates for all the students that they could do this too. They don't, but they could in principle.

Thomas Pearson: Then do you grade them on how well they do?

Smith: No. The only thing they get that would affect their grade is if they don't do it at all, or if on handing in written questions they do not return them in a timely manner. The idea is that they know in advance so it's not a surprise. The schedule is known in the second week of class because by then the circulators have settled down and it holds for the quarter.

Eugene Gallagher: So they get a couple chances?

Jonathan Smith: It depends on the size of the class. They usually get two shots at it. I have to say that it improves the second time around. That's good to see. They are more forthright with me and they're more interesting about the text. They're taking charge of the discussion more and moving beyond being simply exegetical. Any kid with half a brain can ask you an exegetical question: "Would you say a little more about . . . this." Which is what most class discussion questions tend to be – because they get credit simply for being active in class, you see. But with my system they know their turn is coming and some of them come in with notes. I can see if they are really prepared for this or not. And sometimes they think I don't ask the right questions. Every now and then I see some rumpling of papers in disgust. I want them to understand that not all speech is spontaneous and that spontaneity does not necessarily guarantee authenticity. They really do believe that.

Thomas Pearson: Well, thank you Jonathan, I think we're coming to the end of our time. I understand that this will be your last year teaching. I'm curious what you're going to miss the most about it.

Jonathan Smith: Oh, I think everything. It's kept me on my toes for a lot of years. But it's gotten to the point where it's too much. I can't do the logistics anymore. My wife has to get me there and pick me up afterward. I think I'm probably getting a little tired too. I think I've done a lot more repeating of classes in the last several years. It used to be that at the end of the last class session I would stand up and walk over to the wastebasket and throw away my notes on the way out of the room. That way I would be forced to redo the class for next year even if the reading list was the same. A class should not be a trip down memory lane. So I would dump the notes and some kid would grab them up. I've noticed the last couple of years that I have revised but not destroyed my notes at the end of class, and that's a sign to me that I'm not quite as raring-to-go or as fired up as I was. It's time. I'm seventy-four years old, and you used to have to get

out of the business at sixty-eight. So I figured I went a little longer than I had to, and that's enough.

I think I'll spend most of my time reading books that are not about religion. The third floor of my house is devoted to the books on religion; the second and first floor are lined with books that have nothing to do with religion. They're all novels or poetry. I think I read three of those for every book on religion.

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