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Using 'Homemade' Documentary Video in Religious Studies

Abstract

On the whole, the lesson I learned from making *Abraham's Children*, and the one I would like to pass on, is a fairly simple one. If an instructor can imagine a video that would enhance his or her religious studies teaching in specific ways, but cannot seem to find a strong candidate available in the current market, that instructor may want to consider producing a "homemade" video with the primary goal of improving his or her own students' education, and the secondary aim of making your project available for purchase to colleagues who may be facing similar pedagogical challenges. In our current higher educational climate, in which there appears to be much interest in and funding for improving undergraduate instruction through the application of new media technologies, those of us who teach religion and who think we have ideas for quality instructional films, might well want to strike while the iron's hot, and see if there is not some way we can create these films ourselves. I speak from experience when I say that the process can be an extremely rewarding one.

A Pedagogical Challenge

When I first began teaching in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University - fresh out of graduate school and still working on my dissertation - I had only the dullest sensitivity for the need for ethnographic data in the religious studies classroom. I remember having vague memories of my own undergraduate desires for field experience in my religion courses, but I also remember dutifully learning to repress them under the influence of the subtle propaganda that the "real" stock and trade of the "true" student of religion was history and its texts. By the time I was a graduate student working on issues in medieval Muslim religion and society, I had all but forgotten my earlier hunger for fieldwork, naively willing to leave such extra-textual endeavors to those of my colleagues who labeled themselves "anthropologists." It was with this background that I took up one of my first assignments to teach R152, a departmental service course then titled "Introduction to Religions of the West," but actually focusing almost exclusively on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam with no indigenous American religions component.

On the first day of one of my first offerings of R152, I remember staking my ground as an historian. I informed the students that if they did not like history, R152 was the wrong course for them. I told them that the study of religion was in large measure an analysis of the historical development of religious ideas,

institutions, and the societies which both gave rise to, and were in turn shaped by these ideas and institutions. I assured them that I would try to make our whirlwind exploration of the histories of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam that semester as stimulating and exciting as possible, but I also warned them that if they had no interest in historical developments - in some instances developments that reach almost as far back as four millennia - they may want to reconsider their enrollment. I realized then that this was tough talk, especially coming from a neophyte teacher. What I did not realize was just how much of a neophyte I was.

I recall checking the class roster a few days later to see if it shrank substantially in the wake of my bold historian's disclaimer. It did not, so I took a deep breath and plunged into a one-semester, three-unit look at the respective histories of the three Abrahamic traditions I was committed to cover.

Judging from performance on examinations, course evaluations, and student feedback gathered by the graduate instructors throughout the semester, the course seemed to have been adequately successful. For the most part, the students who were historically inclined, really enjoyed the course. Among those students who would not necessarily describe themselves as history lovers, the graduate instructors and I identified at least three groups. Of course, there were the extremely bright and motivated students who by virtue of their own intellectual abilities, curiosity, and drive always make the most out of any opportunity to learn. They

expressed a general satisfaction at having been exposed to a variety of new historical factors that they would now have to consider whenever they were asked or posed their own questions regarding the three big western monotheisms. For example, many of these students commented how their eyes were opened to the significant degree of evolutionary change - remarkably interwoven with the maintenance of real continuity - that was a salient feature of the histories of all three of the religions we studied. On the opposite end of the spectrum was that group of students who were compelled to take the course - some of whom were mildly turned on, some of whom loathed every minute, but most of whom posed questions on their review forms such as, "Is there any way you could offer this course with less reading?" (The reading load was an average of thirty pages per week.) Then there was the largest group of students who, on the whole, appeared to have appreciated being introduced to the importance of history in the study of religion, but who nonetheless expressed disappointment. One student from this middle group penned the following representative criticism on his or her review form: "I liked the history, but there was too much of it. I took this course to find out what Jews are like. What do they think? What do they feel? " Another student from this middle group expressed a similar criticism and suggested, "Perhaps you might consider bringing in guest speakers. You know, Jews, Muslims, and even Christians who are willing to speak to the class about their religion."

After an exhausting semester giving what I thought was my "all" to the students of R152, my initial reaction to these last two comments, and those like them, was defensive. I remember feeling exasperated and thinking, "I told them this was going to be a history course!" At that moment I did not yet recognize the value of this type of student feedback which, I would come to realize, was not so much complaining about historical study as much as it was telling me that the historical review was, by itself, incomplete. For this to sink in, however, it would take hearing similar comments yet again from an entirely new group of students after a second go-around with R152. Unfortunately, at the time, the extent of my pedagogical resolve was to articulate more emphatically and precisely a new and improved version of my historian's disclaimer. I would refer to the comment of the student who wanted to find out more about what Jews were like and call future students' attention to the important methodological fact that I am unable to speak for the thoughts and feelings of individual Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I would ask them rhetorically: "Even if I were to make an attempt at such an artificial masquerade, which individual Jews, Christians, and Muslims would I dare to represent? From which part of the world? From which historical period? From which social class? Of what age or gender? I decided to tell the students that the most intellectually honest and effective encounters we could have with particular personages from these traditions would be through the textual legacy of those individuals whose influential thoughts were preserved in the historical record (such

as a Maimonides, or a Paul, or a Ghazali). As for getting to know less-famous, more ordinary contemporary people from these faith traditions, I would communicate to future students my hope that a course in the history of the ideas and institutions of these traditions would provide them with the background and vocabulary they will need to cultivate a deeper understanding of the individual Jews, Christians, and Muslims they would encounter in their own personal interactions. I thought if I made all this clear in a new introduction to the course, then I would finally be "off the hook," and would not be expected to provide the personal connection that I was simply not equipped to provide.

As for the suggestion that I bring visitors into the class, I considered it carefully, but decided that since I had the students for only seven, fifty-minute sessions per tradition, the best thing to do would be to try to incorporate visits into the discussion sections. Because, however, this would mean that some sections would have visitors and others would not (discussion section and potential visitors' schedules vary so much), the assistant instructors and I concluded that it would be more manageable and equitable if we devised discussion section assignments that would allow students who identified themselves within a particular tradition to speak from that tradition, if they were inclined to do so.¹

In short, I prefaced my second offering of R152 with a new and improved historian's disclaimer. I incorporated some of the new discussion assignments that

enabled students who wanted to speak as representatives of their own relevant religious traditions. I also made sure to underscore the contemporary relevancy of past developments by redesigning the course readings packet to couple classical texts and issues with their contemporary counterparts.² Despite these efforts, however, what I all-too-slowly began to interpret as a very basic desire for contact with the living, everyday people and realities of these traditions, was still foremost on the minds of the students who wrote my second set of course evaluations for R152. "Too much history" and "What about a few class field trips?" were among the more concise representative comments in this batch. Finally, it hit me that I had to do something more. I had thought of field trips, but the logistics of getting 150 to 200 students into a local shabat service or jum`a prayer gathering were extremely difficult. For one thing, the local Jewish and Muslim communities are relatively small and would be overwhelmed by a mass visit, and equally burdened by requests to host multiple smaller discussion section visits. In addition, with the exception of one Friday afternoon section, none of the sections ever meet at times when the students would really get to see the communities "in action." Then there is the question - even if a larger Christian church could accommodate an en masse class visit: is it fair to require a course visit not on course time? Many students at IU have a six-course load and part-time jobs and cannot easily adjust their schedules to provide for additional time slots outside the lectures and section meetings. Another question that arises is whether or not it is fair and pedagogically sound to sponsor

a visit to a church (and not a mosque and synagogue) in a predominantly Christian culture with predominantly Christian students, simply because there are church buildings and Christian communities large enough to accommodate the whole class without our being an undue imposition?³

Finding a Solution in the 'Homemade' Instructional Video

I was perplexed - determined somehow to revise the course to meet the students' obvious and understandable need for ethnographic data, but unsure how best to go about doing this. I finally found a solution to my dilemma when I received a brochure in campus mail announcing competition for a grant to use video materials in course revision and development. I was sure that the use of some kind of course documentary video would not by any means be a substitute for actual field experience. Indeed, I remember thinking that if I got the grant and produced a video for R152, I would have to call this fact to the students' attention. But a course documentary video certainly did seem to be the next best thing, and perhaps even a better medium than the brief field trip, with a group Q & A period, for introducing students to the thoughts and feelings of individual religious practitioners.

Around the time that I was considering applying for this grant, I was rereading Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* for another class I was teaching. While I had never fully concurred with Smith's thesis in this

book that the term "religion" is intrinsically unhelpful and even misleading in the study of human religiousness, I very much appreciated his attempt to have people interested in the analysis of human religiosity think in terms of the dual categories of "cumulative historical traditions" and "faith." In fact, I would argue that Smith's use of "faith" is not without distinctly Abrahamic overtones and therefore does not free us from the Western ethnocentric trap he claims we find ourselves in when we use the heavily loaded term "religion." Nonetheless, it struck me that Smith's exposition of "faith" as one half of a dialectic with "cumulative historical tradition" provided a theoretical framework (with some adjustments) for an approach to the study of religion that was just what my students needed. In his explanation of what he means by "faith," Smith tries to universalize the term's application by defining it as that aspect of religious life that pertains to the individuals personal "commitment" to whatever he or she finds to be sacred. As I reread Smith, I began to think that what my students in R152 wanted, in addition to an historical approach, was access to precisely what Smith perhaps misnames, but nonetheless so eloquently describes to be a critically important, yet sorely understudied, aspect of human religious experience - the individual's personal commitment to his or her religious identity, community, and worldview.

Inspired by Smith, I wrote a grant proposal to create a video documentary that would feature personal interviews with individual Jews, Christians, and

Muslims from the community surrounding Indiana University. My contention was that if I could capture these individuals on film as they talked about the importance of their religion in the particularities of their own lives, I could use this footage in creative ways to provide R152 with what I have come to see as the necessary "personal" and contemporary complement to the treatment of religion as "cumulative historical tradition" that I already had in place in the course, but that was by itself so obviously insufficient. I maintained that if, through the use of such a video, I could expose my students to religion both as "cumulative historical tradition" and as "personal commitment" (the term I use instead of Smith's "faith"),⁴ then my teaching of R152 would be far more effective, especially in my attempts to demonstrate the links between these two aspects of religious experience.

Suffice to say, the grant committee was persuaded and I got the opportunity to create *Abraham's Children: Interviews with Jews, Christians, and Muslims* in a Midwest College Town. The piece is almost sixty minutes long and includes primarily interview footage with some "B-roll" of worship and other community activities.⁵ The format was shaped by the material we gathered which seemed to arrange itself according to six themes. The first theme, "Worship," deals with the meaning and relevancy of worship practices for the interviewees; "Memories" focuses on times in the lives of the interviewees during which their various religious identities took on a memorable importance; "Sacred Seasons" explores the

interviewees' understanding and experience of the special calendrical observances of their traditions; "Role Models" features interviewees talking about the people in their lives who have been most influential in shaping their religious identities; "Religion and Society" takes up the question of the role the interviewees' religious communities play in the context of the larger society in which they find themselves; and "What is a ...?" presents a final collage of the interviewees from the three traditions and their responses to being asked what it meant to be a Jew, Christian, or Muslim. Within the sections devoted to these themes the viewers meet and become acquainted with about fifteen individuals, each of whom appears within a community cluster of his or her fellow interviewees from his or her congregation. Each community cluster is, in turn, juxtaposed with two other parallel clusters from the other two communities such that, for example, in the "Worship" section the viewer meets five Christians from the focal church, then four Muslims from the focal mosque, followed by four Jews from the campus Hillel center, all of whom are talking about the role worship plays in their own individual lives. This format allows the viewers to become gradually acquainted with each interviewee and to place each interviewee's discourse into the context of that interviewee's particular religious community and what the other interviewees from that community are saying. It also allows the viewers to begin to make inter-traditional comparisons among what individuals in the three different communities have to say about the

practice of worship, or the celebration of sacred seasons, or any of the other four themes and related issues.

A Sample Application

In a classroom setting, the video can be shown all at once, but I prefer to use it by showing short segments relevant to particular lecture and discussion topics. One example of how this can be done also provides a good illustration of how the contemporary, ethnographic angle of the video complements the historical agenda of R152 by allowing me to establish a link between religious history and personal religious experience, thus demonstrating the insights we can cultivate by taking an approach to the study of religion that moves from the perspective of both historical and ethnographic analysis.

One of the dilemmas in teaching R152 which the video helped me solve was how to awaken the students' historical sensibilities early on in the course, and engage their attention and intellectual energies in my lecture on ancient Israel and the roots of Judaism. The specific clip that helped me do this effectively for the first time is one of a lively young Jewish woman - a student at Indiana University - who, in an idiom shared by the vast majority of the undergraduates in R152, relates the story of her first trip to Israel and her first encounter with the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

In the clip, she recounts how all through her youth growing up in northern Indiana she would hear relatives and friends refer to Israel as the "Jewish homeland," and she would react rather cynically. "I couldn't understand why Jews were calling it their homeland if they'd never been there before." When she finally got the opportunity to go to Israel herself, she says she was largely motivated by her curiosity over all the 'hype.' Shortly after arriving in Israel, however, she had an experience she did not anticipate. She relates that one of the first things her tour group did after their twelve-hour plane ride was to visit the Wailing Wall. "I got there," she recalls, "I see the men's side and the women's side, and I'm thinking, 'There's really nothing like this in America.'" She then describes her approach to the Wall: "Here's this American teenager who's thinking about going to discos and meeting all kinds of people in Israel, and I walk up to the Wall. I see the women with their faces pressed up against the Wall. I took a step back and chills ran down my spine and tears started flowing from my face. Nothing like this ever happened to me before." After she remarks a few more times about there not being "a place like this" in America, and after she recounts how she moved away from the Wall without turning her back to it, she poignantly concludes: "Then I thought, 'now I know why they call this the Jewish homeland.'"

The last semester I taught R152 was the first semester I taught it with the aid of the video. I began my lecture on the history of ancient Judaism by showing

the clip described above. As the clip ran, I noticed that a majority of the students were comfortably attentive with this medium that was - somewhat sad to say - obviously so much more familiar and inviting to them than some of their readings, classroom lectures, and classroom conversations. The clip lasted approximately three minutes, and when it was finished, we had the lights turned up, took a few seconds' pause, and began to talk a little about what we saw. We began our discussion with the question: "What happened to this young woman at the Wailing Wall?" The responses were terrific.⁶ One student: "She says that it was a turning point in her life. That she's never been quite the same since." Another student: "Yeah. Like she said, she discovered that Israel really was the 'Jewish homeland.'" "In what way?" I asked. Yet another student: "She said there was nothing like the Wailing Wall in America. I think what she meant was that she found out that by being Jewish she belonged to something much larger than her community back in her hometown." "I agree," added another student, she went to an ancient site where she saw Jews from all over the world and maybe even thought of all the Jews in history who had ever been there. I can see why she was so moved." And finally the comment that could not have been pedagogically more helpful if I had scripted it myself: "It's like she was finding her identity in history."

When I asked the student who made this last comment to explain what she meant, she said: "[The woman in the video clip] was trying to find out who she was

in the world, but not just here and now. She was trying to find her identity in history; she saw that she belonged to something that stretched back a very long time." I then posed the following question to the whole class: "How many of you feel like you have a history, that you are part of a story that's bigger than your own individual lives? And if so, why is this so important?" About twenty percent of the hands went up. I chose one and the response was another gem: "If you have a history, then you sort of have an idea of what's important to you." Another student said, "If you're part of a story that's bigger than your own life, maybe that helps you figure out what your life should be about?" I was in teachers' heaven; it was as if these students had seen my lecture plan and prepared to serve up exactly what I was fishing for. (My one anxiety now is over how I can duplicate this conversation - or at least approximate it - at those future moments when the responses will inevitably be substantially different.) In any event, since I wanted to avoid the risk of losing focus on the students' marvelously incisive remarks, I tried to affirm these last two comments by telling the students that they were beginning to make very important statements about the nature of history, especially in a religious context. I explained that, as part of religious worldviews, history is usually embedded in a larger myth which, as the students had at that point already learned,⁷ in a religious studies sense does not refer to a "false" story, but rather a story that answers (and, in turn, poses) some of life's "big" questions such as: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "What are my aims in life?" "How do I relate to others?", etc. I explained that this is a feature

of religion that is very interesting and important to study because, among other reasons, the rhetoric of religious history and the sense of communal and individual identity it conveys has often been and still is a powerful element in world politics today. For example: questions of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim history are at the heart of the rhetoric of protest and confrontation in many "hot spots" around the world.

It was at this point that I attempted a segue into my treatment of ancient Israel. I told the students that they had seen the importance of history to the identity of the young Jewish woman at the Wailing Wall. She was trying, as one of the students remarked and as I paraphrased, "to find her place in the history of her people." So who are this people, the Jews? What is this history that appears to be so important in understanding Jewish religious identity? I suggested to the students that to answer this question we would have to look back into ancient Middle Eastern history some 2,000 years ago. I remember thinking to myself, "Now is the moment of truth. In the past, this would have been the point at which eyes started to glaze over. But, lo - a miracle! As I looked out into the students' faces, I saw that the vast majority of them appeared eager to do some historical investigation. Many were looking straight at me, or at the map of the ancient Middle East I had put on the overhead projector. Pens and pencils were in hand, eyes were bright, the video clip had apparently worked. As I suspected from the excellent feedback I got in response

to the clip, the students could relate to their peer at the Wailing Wall and could, therefore, relate to a look at the history of ancient Israel that seemed to play such a central role in her experience at this sacred site. For the first time in three offerings of this course, I had them (and they had me) for the lecture on ancient Israel. The remainder of the session, which focused on the Abraham myth and sketched the history of ancient Israel up until the Exodus, turned out to be tremendously gratifying both for me and, I think, for many of the students. When we turned to an analysis of the Moses myth in the following session, many students were asking and attempting to answer rich critical questions like, "What kind of identity can someone distill from claiming the story of the Exodus as part of their own history?" In fact, there were a number of other significant moments in the semester like this one - moments that I now believe could never have been realized without the course's "homemade" video.

Although there is still much room for improving both the syllabus as well as the content and technique of my lesson plans and presentations in R152, the course has improved immeasurably by the addition of the "homemade" video material. The students are performing better on their examinations and participating more in discussion sections now that they are not so alienated from the historical data. Also, comments expressing frustration over not knowing "what Jews or Christians, or Muslims are like" are conspicuously absent from the evaluation

forms. In some respects, however, there is a danger in this. There is a danger in the students' feeling satisfied in having met people from these traditions through the medium of the course video. This is why I consider myself under the perpetual obligation to relate to the students the very story I have told in this essay, the story of why I chose to produce the video. In so doing I must continue to caution them not to think that they have actually had a field experience without leaving the classroom. I must continue to stress to them that this video has been edited and produced by people with a specific agenda which only allows them to see certain aspects of the individual interviewees and, of course, which does not provide them with the opportunity to ask the interviewees their own questions, or to interview alternative subjects.⁸ I must try to get the students to see that the video, along with the historical material of the course, merely provides them with a starting, and not an ending point in their attempt to understand "Jews, Christians, and Muslims" (since the video, the new title of the course, emphasizing the important personal focus in the study of religion). I must continue to remind the students that the course and its dual historical and personal approach is designed to give them only a basic literacy in the three traditions and the discipline of religious studies, a literacy which by its nature is no more than an incomplete, and perhaps even flawed, springboard for further exploration and deeper understanding.

Multimedia Teaching and the Entertainment Trap

A legitimate and important question that one must always ask oneself when introducing multimedia, and especially film, material into the college classroom is the extent to which, by the introduction of such material, one is substantively enhancing the educational experience of the students rather than enhancing the popularity of the course as one that is "fun" and "entertaining." While it is important for the efficacy of a course that the students enjoy their learning experience, a very real danger for the large number of instructors who have to be conscious of enrollments and positive student reviews is the temptation of falling into the trap of purveying what one educator has recently dubbed "lite" education⁹ - that is, entertainment for the large blocs of bored college students one encounters regularly in the lower-level courses at a big state institution like Indiana University. Sidestepping the entertainment trap is no easy challenge, particularly for the instructor who is desperately searching for some engaging video footage that will provide the multimedia diversion factor that an increasing number of students have come to expect, and even demand, especially in their introductory classes. Avoiding this trap, however, is much less of a struggle when using video material that is tailored to meet specific and clearly defined pedagogical needs. When we made *Abraham's Children*, our guiding agenda was not to make a film that would be a "hot" seller on the educational video market. To be sure, the entire production staff harbored hopes that the finished product would be marketable. If we could sell our video, our work would gain a wider audience and at the same time help defray some

of the considerable production costs. Nonetheless, our primary concerns were always focused on the pedagogical application of our project in the course for which it was originally designed. The driving question behind all our conceptual and editorial decisions was, "Will this work for the students in R152?" Indeed, if the instructor who uses such a tailored or "homemade" video takes the additional step of making the video clips available at the library for student review and then includes on the course examinations questions that relate to certain clips, he or she can be pretty confident of avoiding the entertainment trap.

Conclusion

On the whole, the lesson I learned from making *Abraham's Children*, and the one I would like to pass on, is a fairly simple one. If an instructor can imagine a video that would enhance his or her religious studies teaching in specific ways, but cannot seem to find a strong candidate available in the current market, that instructor may want to consider producing a "homemade" video with the primary goal of improving his or her own students' education, and the secondary aim of making your project available for purchase to colleagues who may be facing similar pedagogical challenges. In our current higher educational climate, in which there appears to be much interest in and funding for improving undergraduate instruction through the application of new media technologies, those of us who teach religion and who think we have ideas for quality instructional films, might well want to

strike while the iron's hot, and see if there is not some way we can create these films ourselves. I speak from experience when I say that the process can be an extremely rewarding one.

¹ This and other kinds of role playing—such as assigning the students sides in a theological or legal debate that reflects the tensions between different doctrinal schools of a particular tradition—seem to be very effective activities which I continue to incorporate in my current, substantially revised version of the course discussed below.

² For example: the text of ancient Christian councils and some annotation regarding the socio-political roles these gatherings played in the formation of the early church, coupled with the *New York Times* coverage of the closing of the Second Vatican Council and an article on the proceedings of a recent Presbyterian assembly and its consideration of such timely and controversial issues as whether or not to ordain openly gay and lesbian people to the clergy.

³ Recently, in another course, I assigned a field report on Muslim worship practices at the beginning of the semester which had a deadline of six weeks. I placed each of the students in small "field groups" of five or six people. I then asked each group to choose a "captain," and assigned a volunteer "host" from the local mosque to each of the groups, giving both the captain and his or her respective host each other's telephone number and e-mail address. I then gave the groups class time on more than one occasion during the first and second weeks of the semester to confer about convenient times for a mosque visit so that the captains could then speak with their respective hosts to arrange for a visit. In this particular case, it was helpful to segregate the field groups by gender because of the segregation of space at the local mosque which requires all women to observe/participate in the women's section of the mosque with a female host, and all men to observe/participate in the men's section with a male host. This "field group" scheme proved to be a very successful and effective way of requiring a visit to a local religious community without a) placing undue stress on a small community to host a large group; and b) demanding that students skip another class or miss work in order to attend a one-time field trip. I am currently considering introducing this scheme into my upcoming offering of R152, although the logistics of having the group captains arrange three visits with three hosts, instead of only one, will be a bit more challenging. Even with this field trip scheme in place, however, the course video—which I will discuss below—will still prove invaluable for giving students the kind of "personal" contact (i.e., acquaintance with the thoughts and feelings of discrete contemporary Jews, Christians, and Muslims) they desire.

⁴ Although the Abrahamic overtones of Smith's original "faith" would not be inappropriate for a course like R152 on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (all three have concepts of "faith" or "faithfulness"), I have chosen to use "personal commitment" because it broadens the application of Smith's insights to the degree he had hoped in his original selection of, and attempts at redefining "faith."

⁵ Of the many side benefits of developing a "homemade" or "tailormade" video are the leftovers—the indirect compilation of an archive of footage that never makes the final piece. In editing any video, practical editorial decisions involving time considerations, quality of the interviewee's presentation, and overall "editability" of a proposed segment, all result in leaving some very interesting and illuminating material "on the cutting room floor," so to speak. In the case of *Abraham's Children*, the archive we compiled to make our sixty-minute piece totals well over twelve hours. In these twelve hours are moments in interviews—sometimes too awkward to be edited or too long to be included in the final piece—which can be enormously useful in a classroom setting where I, as the instructor, can provide the necessary context. Just one example that quickly comes to mind is the eight- or nine-minute segment in which one of the interviewees tells a Hasidic tale which he points out (although not in these exact words) is a kind of personal myth for him. I find this piece very useful in initial R152 discussions on the nature and function of myth for the religious community and/or individual. (See below, note 8.)

⁶ The following reconstruction of the conversation that ensued is from memory and thus not likely to be 100 percent accurate. I made every effort to avoid embellishing with my historical imagination, but—thanks to theorists such as Hayden White—we all know that to do this in any absolute sense is impossible.

⁷ In the first three weeks of R152, the students spend most of their time learning how to interpret and use two important words in the analytical vocabulary of the study of religions: "myth" and "ritual." This brief unit on elementary religious studies methodology is an important part of the course because R152 is meant to function, not only as an introduction to three religious traditions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), but also as an introduction to the discipline of religious studies.

⁸ Some students who have attended voluntary field trips to the religious communities featured in the video report having met some of the interviewees and having had some genuine conversation with them. Of course, for those who may use the video outside the Bloomington context, as well as the majority of my students, this opportunity does not arise. This is why it is important for me to underscore the fact that the video is by no means a substitute for field experience, and why I am attempting to incorporate into the course required field visits of the type discussed above in note 4.

⁹ Mark Edmundson, "On the Uses of a Liberal Education: I. As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students" in *Harper's*, September 1997, pp. 39-49.