

March 2021

Ritual among the Scilohtac: Global Catholicism, the Nacirema, and Interfaith Studies

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Recommended Citation

Houck, Anita (2021) "Ritual among the Scilohtac: Global Catholicism, the Nacirema, and Interfaith Studies," *Journal of Global Catholicism*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 4. p.40-63.

DOI: 10.32436/2475-6423.1086

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol5/iss1/4>

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Ritual among the Scilohtac: Global Catholicism, the Nacirema, and Interfaith Studies



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In the first episode of the CBC sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, the beneficent and beleaguered Reverend Magee finds that he has unwittingly rented the hall of his Episcopal parish to a small Muslim community that is using it as a mosque. When a congregant, Joe, stumbles upon the community's Friday prayers, he reacts with horror. The good pastor tries to reassure him. "They're Muslims," he explains; "they pray five times a day." Joe's shock only increases: "You rented the parish hall to a bunch of fanatics?"¹

In a move as old as Plato², the scene's humor is targeted at Joe's ignorance. But the target is less Joe's ignorance of Islam than his ignorance of his own Christian religion, which has its own traditions encouraging frequent prayer. In contrast, Magee's response recognizes this shared value: Christians pray; Muslims pray—and Muslims may even pray better.

The scene points toward capacities that many teachers in interfaith studies, comparative theology, and religious studies try to foster. First among them may be religious literacy, an understanding of religious traditions that allows an accurate sense of similarities and differences and that includes a sound (if evolving) awareness of one's own religious identity. But these courses also tend to value what we might call interfaith dispositions, attitudes and skills that may be more difficult to teach—for instance, a sense of connection with those who are different, usually through a shared commitment to the common good or a shared search for truth; empathy with the Other, appreciated as fully human; and humility, including the willingness to question one's own cultural assumptions.³

- 1 Michael Kennedy, dir. *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, season 1, episode 1, aired January 9, 2007, on CBC, Youtube, January 21, 2019, <https://youtu.be/9xJQwqb7jh4>.
- 2 *Philebus* 48-50 specifically locates the laughable in ignorance, particularly self-ignorance, in those without the power to retaliate.
- 3 While there's no one curriculum or list of learning goals for interfaith competence, references to dispositions for interfaith study appear in many prominent texts. For instance, comparative theologian Catherine Cornille articulates five different "conditions for inter-religious dialogue": "epistemological humility"; "generosity or hospitality toward the truth of the other"; "commitment," or "identification with a particular religion from which one engages in dialogue"; "interconnection," or "belief that one may actually understand the teachings and practices of another religion in a way that might open up one's own religion to new insights and actions"; and "empathy" (21). Mary C. Boys's four characteristics of interreligious dialogue include similar dispositions: "the ability to enter another religious tradition without losing one's own boundaries,"

In their efforts to help students develop such interfaith dispositions, teachers have many resources available, pop-cultural artifacts like *Little Mosque* among them. But few are as reliably successful as Horace Miner's classic 1956 article "Body Ritual among the Nacirema,"⁴ published by *American Anthropologist* as an ethnographic study of a little-known North American people. "Nacirema" was not written as a pedagogical tool; indeed, it's spawned studies in various academic fields, including homages by scholars using Miner's distinctive style to depict other groups.⁵ But it

"the experience of investing in the health and welfare of another's religious tradition," "movement beyond tolerance to a genuine religious pluralism," and "keener awareness of both commonalities and differences between religious traditions" (50-51). Eboo Patel's *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* argues for a complex network of necessary characteristics, with dispositions appearing throughout: "identity"; "theory"; "vision"; "knowledge base"; a "skill set" that includes awareness of one's context and one's own narrative, as well as the ability to facilitate interfaith communication; and personal "qualities" that can be "honed," like "grit" and "reliability." Interfaith Youth Core's IDEALS (Interfaith Diversity Experiences & Attitudes Longitudinal Survey) study of college and university students in the U.S. links knowledge and attitudes: "despite making gains across the college years, students have much room to grow in their religious literacy. Correspondingly, there may be an opportunity to improve their attitudes toward people with diverse religious identities" (22). In an important anthology, *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, Madhuri M. Yadlapati, reflecting on teaching religion in a public university, argues for "the kind of transformative learning that builds autonomy and critical self-reflection" ("Dharma and Moksha," 177). Wakoh Shannon Hickey and Margarita M. W. Suárez, in their essay in *Interreligious/Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field*, argue for not just "religious literacy" but "interfaith literacy," which requires "the dispositions of reflexivity, empathy, and humility" (109), all conducing to a pluralist stance: "We also want to persuade students that people who differ from us have something useful to teach; not just about themselves but about ourselves" (112). In the same volume, Usra Ghazi endorses what Alyssa N. Rockenbach and Matthew J. Mayhew (creators of the IDEALS survey) call a "pluralism orientation," defined as "the degree to which one is accepting of, recognizes shared values and divergent beliefs with, and meaningfully engages with others of different worldviews" (204); in the same essay, Mark E. Hanshaw concludes that interfaith studies promotes reflection on one's own "values and ethics, as well as how ethical attitudes or assumptions might influence social behaviors and interactions within a broader context" (208). On the other hand, the essay by Kristi Del Vecchio and Noah J. Silverman identifies six themes that recur in curricula in interfaith studies, and none of these could be considered a disposition. However, dispositions likely underlie two of the six—experiential learning (50-52) and personal reflection (56)—and contribute to the field as a whole, since "interfaith/interreligious studies centers fundamentally around human relationships" (57).

4 Horace Miner, "Body Ritual among the Nacirema." *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 3 (1956): 503-7, doi: [10.1525/aa.1956.58.3.02a00080](https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1956.58.3.02a00080).

5 For a brief review of the reception of the article, see Mark Burde, "Social-Science Fiction: The Genesis and Legacy of Horace Miner's 'Body Ritual among the Nacirema,'" *American Anthropologist* 116, no. 3 (2014): 549-61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12123>. Among Miner's imitators, Burde mentions Michael Kimmel, "Ritualized Homosexuality in a Nacirema Subculture," *Sexualities*, 9, no. 1 (2006): 95-105, doi: [10.1177/1363460706060695](https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460706060695); and Robert Alun Jones, "Myth



is best known for its ability to lead students to question their own cultural assumptions and reframe their approach to the unfamiliar.⁶ The present article explores the perennial success of Miner's text in the classroom and asks whether Catholics & Cultures may be able to do some of the same pedagogical work—and may even do it better.

FROM 'LIKE US' TO US: TEACHING THE NACIREMA

In a brilliant study of Miner's article, Mark Burde issues a wise invitation: "Readers unfamiliar with 'Body Ritual among the Nacirema' may wish to consult Miner's article before proceeding, lest the bluntly prosaic nature of the following synopsis spoil the author's intended effect."⁷ For those disinclined to follow Burde's advice, here is a taste of Miner's work: the passage that, in my experience, has probably horrified the most students, both in college and high school classes:

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. . . . this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures.

In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augurs, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth-man opens the client's mouth and, using the above mentioned [sic] tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes. If there are

and Symbol among the Nacirema Tsigoloicos: A Fragment," *American Sociologist* 15, no. 4 (1980): 207-12.

- 6 The IDEALS report, which promotes "preparing students to be successful leaders in our religiously diverse society" (6), recommends four "educational interventions." The first is to provide opportunities that "challenge assumptions and prompt perspective-taking" (29). A. Rockenbach et. al., IDEALS: Bridging Religious Divides Through Higher Education, Interfaith Youth Core, 2020, <https://www.ifyc.org/ideals>.
- 7 Burde, "Social-Science Fiction," 550.

no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied.⁸

As the passage suggests, the thesis of Miner's article is that the "magical beliefs and practices" of the Nacirema qualify them "as an example of the extremes to which human behavior can go." This extremism appears above all in their excessive fascination with "the human body, the appearance and health of which loom as a dominant concern in the ethos of the people." Miner describes ritual objects such as home shrines with charm-boxes full of "magical packets [that] are so numerous that people forget what their purposes were and fear to use them again"; rituals that, besides the mouth-rites described above, include a rite for men that entails "scraping and lacerating the surface of the face with a sharp instrument" and, for women, "bak[ing] their heads in small ovens for about an hour"; and an array of ritual practitioners, from "holy-mouth-men" to "vestal maidens" to a "witch-doctor" known as a "listener."

The key to the text's success is that it is superbly executed as a trick. In what Burde calls "twenty paragraphs of disciplined deadpan delivery,"⁹ Miner's diction expertly guides the reader to share the author's apparent revulsion. Almost every student—and, indeed, almost every scholar I know—buys in, expressing varying levels of concern, disgust, and shock. Even those few who notice the bias in Miner's language ("magic-ridden," "sadistic," "barbaric") may find themselves as troubled by the practices Miner describes as by the anthropologist's description. Yet it's not uncommon for students to defend the Nacirema by noticing similarities: "Well, we have something like that. Going to the holy-mouth-man is a little like when we go to the dentist." Eventually, some student new to the text figures out what Miner is up to, or one of the students who read the article in a previous course (and who has been sworn to secrecy up to this point) reveals that "Nacirema" is "American" spelled backwards.

When students realize that the people they've been shocked by are (a slightly dated version of) themselves, the response is often a groan approaching—and sometimes actually becoming—laughter. The class then recites a litany of practices

8 Miner, "Body Ritual," pars. 10-11.

9 Burde, "Social-Science Fiction," 550.



that they now see are not just *like* ours¹⁰ but in fact *are* ours: medicine cabinets full of expired prescriptions; tooth-brushing, shaving, going to a salon that has “those hair dryers you use for updos”; dentists and nurses and psychologists. The result is almost invariably what Burde calls “moments of sudden Gestalt shift, of abrupt reassignment of signifiers to signifieds in young adult minds, often before the very eyes of the knowing instructor, momentary merchant of astonishment.”¹¹ Students are often struck by how often they sensed that the Nacirema were like them in one practice or another. While they failed to solve Miner’s puzzle, they succeeded in practicing important interfaith dispositions by identifying similarities, expressing a sense of connection, and even feeling empathy for the Naciremans’ apparent suffering. After the reveal, many take a further step in empathy and connection, volunteering examples from their own traditions that could look similarly strange to outsiders. Many students, unlike Miner, talk about actual religion, including, at the Roman Catholic college where I teach, the Eucharist.

Though Miner’s piece relies on deception, no student I know has objected. Instead, as Burde notes, “The force of the mental tea-tables upset has been enough to drive young people the world over to web chronicle the nature of the firecracker moment and to plaster the Internet with their amazement.”¹² The article’s staying power, then, lies primarily in its ability to show convincingly, viscerally, and relatively painlessly that the culture students inhabit is not normative, is not more logical or natural than the cultures of others. As Elizabeth Miller puts it, “Students, therefore, learn to become aware of their own assumptions so that they might not come to ethnocentric conclusions about other cultures. . . . [Miner’s] deliberately erroneous and etic description of American culture makes it clear to students that to understand a culture, one must first disconnect from one’s own (ethnocentric) cultural lens and learn the culture’s meanings.”¹³

10 “Ours” and “we” are usually the words students use. Like *Catholics & Cultures*, Miner’s piece can be used to question the assumptions and overgeneralizations behind such language, for instance, by examining the examples of shaving and hair dryers.

11 Burde, “Social-Science Fiction,” 550.

12 Burde, “Social-Science Fiction,” 550.

13 Elizabeth Miller, “Learning to Interpret Cultural Meaning through an Etic Description of a Familiar Culture,” *Teaching Sociology* 42, no. 4 (2014): 299-300, doi: [10.1177/0092055X14540584](https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X14540584).

An essential reason why the exercise triggers recognition rather than resentment is humor. To be sure, most students miss the jokes skewering the foibles of anthropologists, “gag upon gag carried off in deft parody of the participant-observer form being imitated.”¹⁴ Instead, their recognition and laughter are directed at themselves,¹⁵ expressing one of the dispositions needed for interfaith studies: intellectual or epistemological humility, which Catherine Cornille explains as “recognition that there is still room for growth in one’s understanding of the truth.”¹⁶ They haven’t, after all, laughed at the Nacirema; they’ve been concerned for them, shocked by them, but not drawn into mockery. Instead, it seems likely that the use of humor, as Sherryl Kleinman, Martha Copp, and Kent Sandstrom write of similar exercises of defamiliarization, “discombobulates students and gives them a lighthearted way to analyze a practice they wish to take for granted”—in this case, the practice of seeing the world through their own unquestioned assumptions. “Mak[ing] students laugh,” they continue, “. . . helps soften their resistance to critiquing a practice they have accepted as polite or benign.”¹⁷ In the end, initiating students into the secret of Miner’s famous article has the benefit of creating the same kind of community that’s achieved by an inside joke.¹⁸ Throughout the semester, when a comment in

14 Burde, “Social-Science Fiction,” 550.

15 Self-deprecatory humor is often seen as praiseworthy in general and pedagogically helpful in particular. This view has come under renewed scrutiny, particularly as it applies to members of marginalized groups, in response to Hannah Gadsby’s influential 2018 Netflix show *Nanette*: “I built a career out of self-deprecating humor. That’s what I built my career on. And I don’t want to do that anymore. Because do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins? It’s not humility. It’s humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak.” The issue is a crucial one for educators. In the case of “Nacirema,” the students laugh at themselves together, in their identity as students and scholars, and my sense is that this laughter is salutary rather than destructive. Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*, filmed at the Sydney Opera House, Netflix, 2018.

16 Catherine Cornille, “Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 21.

17 Sherryl Kleinman, Martha Copp, and Kent Sandstrom, “Making Sexism Visible: Birdcages, Martians, and Pregnant Men,” *Teaching Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2006): 130, doi: [10.1177/0092055X0603400203](https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X0603400203).

18 Lisa Gasson-Gardner and Jason Smith argue for the importance of “shared affective experiences” in comparative theology, which should foster “other kinds of knowledge—embodied knowledges—that are not dependent on propositional truths but are generative of classroom community” (120). Lisa Gasson-Gardner and Jason Smith, “Feeling Comparative Theology: Millennial Affect and Reparative Learning,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 113-25.



class suggests ethnocentrism, we can lightly remind each other, “Let’s throw a little ‘Nacirema’ on that.”

Miner’s trick initially works by portraying difference, but ultimately it relies on collapsing difference into identification—on moving from “barbaric” to “like us” and finally to “us.” Thus one reading of the piece, which Burde articulates but doesn’t necessarily endorse, is that ethnocentrism can be vanquished by seeing similarities: “‘Nacirema’ implicitly points to the duty of anthropologists to find the recognizable and the ordinary in another people’s unfamiliar and superficially strange behavior. Let us thus be hawkers of familiarity as much as merchants of astonishment. May the exoticizing cease.”¹⁹ But authentic interfaith engagement also requires the recognition of difference—what Eboo Patel calls “the ‘inter’ in interfaith”²⁰—and here Miner’s article is of less help. The article does lead students to question aspects of their own cultures, including tenacious but arbitrary standards of beauty. But it doesn’t offer them the chance to wrestle with real difference, since the Other evaporates before posing any lasting challenge. Indeed, when students experience actual interfaith difference, whether visiting congregations in town or watching Muslim students at Rutgers explain their choice to cover in the video “Hijabi World,”²¹ they often retreat to the familiar, concluding happily that “we’re all the same.” It’s an assertion admirable for its empathy and interconnection, but, like similar statements in the realms of racial/ethnic and gender identity, it erases too much. Thus Madhuri M. Yadlapati ponders “how useful it is to allow students to make sense of unfamiliar traditions and practices by seeing parallels between, for example, Hindu polytheism and ritual devotion and Catholic veneration of saints and elaborate rituals. Could this be an avenue to make something acceptable, because it is like something already familiar, and therefore a way out of really questioning the categories they are forcing onto the study of these different traditions?”²² John Paul Sydnor

19 Burde, “Social-Science Fiction,” 566.

20 Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Boston: Beacon, 2016), EPUB edition, “Theory.”

21 Dina Sayedahmed and Hamna Saleem, “Hijabi World,” *Newest Americans*, 2015, <https://newestamericans.com/hijabi-world/>.

22 Madhuri M. Yadlapati, “Dharma and Moksha, Works and Faith: Comparatively Engaging the Tension between Ethics and Spirituality,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 188.

articulates the more desirable outcome: “Interreligious encounter interrogates the familiar, contextualizes the isolated, and doubts the obvious.”²³ In pedagogical terms, “just like me” may be preferable to defensiveness. But learning from Miner is only a first step toward being able to learn (unlike *Little Mosque’s* Joe) from those who are different from me.

IN SEARCH OF THE SCILOHTAC: TEACHING WITH CATHOLICS & CULTURES

Catholics & Cultures and “Nacirema” have much in common. First, both purport to depict daily lived religious experience: the website “seeks first to provide insight into Catholic practices and beliefs as they are understood by those who live them,” and Sylvester Johnson and Burde both give Miner some credit for spurring the study of religion, especially so-called Western religion, toward greater attention to materiality.²⁴ In this way, both sources provide a challenge to assumptions that religion is primarily textual, hierarchical, and dogmatic, a challenge especially important pedagogically because, as Yadlapati writes, “there is such a dramatic suspicion of ‘ritualistic’ religion that many students consider anything they identify as ritual to be less than spiritual.”²⁵ Second, both sources have a kind of sensory vividness, Miner through his explicit and tendentious language and the site through photographs, videos, and detailed verbal description. Third, neither source was created explicitly for the benefit of students in need of a lesson in cultural relativism. That said, the site, which identifies itself primarily as “a growing, changing depiction of the global Church today for an international and interreligious audience,”²⁶

23 John Paul Sydnor, “Teaching World Theologies through Film,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 217.

24 As Sylvester A. Johnson writes, “This recent turn examines Western religion as something that extends beyond texts and beliefs to comprise bodily practices, material structures, and a full purview of corporeality. What appeared a half-century or so ago as an unconscionable, ethnographic reading of US Americans as tribal people—a methodological heresy made palatable as light-hearted humor—has now become comfortably enmeshed in the mainstream of religious studies scholarship” (465). Sylvester A. Johnson, “The Rise of the Nacirema and the Descent of European Man: A Response to Manuel A. Vásquez’s *More than Belief*,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 4–5 (2012): 464–81, doi:10.1163/15700682-12341244. See also Burde, “Social-Science Fiction,” 553.

25 Yadlapati, “Dharma and Moksha, Works and Faith,” 188.

26 “About This Site,” Catholics & Cultures, accessed 14 May 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/about-site>.



embraces a pedagogical purpose Miner's piece lacks: "Catholics & Cultures is the first program in the nation to prepare students for leadership and participation in a Church that is global in scope and yet remarkably shaped by local culture."²⁷ Finally, though Miner's authorial intention remains debated,²⁸ the website addresses the same ethnocentric assumptions that "Nacirema" has become famous for dismantling: "Most Catholics experience the faith through a single cultural lens. Yet people all around the world live and imagine it in a rich diversity of ways. Catholics & Cultures widens the lens with a scholarly, vivid and accessible look at the religious lives and practices of contemporary Catholics in countries around the globe."²⁹ Thus both sources present to students, even those who have had years of Catholic education, something they will quickly realize they don't already know, and both can offer the experience of surprise.

Catholic & Cultures, however, gives students the opportunity to look at real religious difference, to apply their developing interfaith dispositions to people who are not merely defamiliarized but genuinely unfamiliar. Thus, as with "Nacirema," the site's initial effect is likely to be destabilizing. Catholics & Cultures isn't set up for the visceral and immediate shift "Nacirema" enables, primarily because the site works deductively: everything published there is already identified as part of a legitimate, modern religious entity that, in most contexts, is not as easily dismissed as Miner's "barbaric" Nacirema. It is possible, though, to use parts of the site, carefully decontextualized, to create something of the intentional defamiliarization offered by "Nacirema," and thus to offer a similar lesson on the temptations of ethnocentrism. In classrooms populated primarily by U.S. students, one obstacle to this project is that Catholics & Cultures doesn't yet explore U.S. Catholicism, so it isn't possible to have U.S. students judge themselves—a significant moral advantage of Miner's piece. But the site does cover parts of Anglophone Canada, which has cultural similarities to much of the U.S. As it turns out, the webpage "Христос Родився! Christ is Born! Ukrainian Catholic Christmas in Ontario"

27 "Educator Resources," Catholics & Cultures, accessed 14 May 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/educator-resources>.

28 See Burde, "Social-Science Fiction," especially 553-57.

29 "About This Site."

includes a passage that, when taken from the site without context and edited lightly to remove explicit references to Christmas, resembles “Nacirema” in many ways: unfamiliar (even italicized) terminology; detailed description of rituals; and references to cultural practices that might sound like magic, for instance, in aiming to predict or affect the future. Moreover, when the time comes to put the passage back in context, the students may get to grapple with the recognition that these people who sounded so strange can’t be dismissed as only Other: at colleges like mine, where most students identify as White, the family will look much like other families they know, even dressed for the most part in clothing recognizable from our Midwestern winters. Here’s the passage:

In a corner of the room is a *didukh*, a sometimes elaborately braided sheaf of wheat, recalling the family’s ancestors (the word derives from the word for grandfather), and serves as a sign of hope for a good harvest to come. An extra place setting at the table recalls ancestors no longer present, and is also a place for the stranger who comes in. Garlic around the *didukh* serves to ward off evil. At the center of the table are three braided loaves of *kolach*, . . . layered in three tiers, with a lit candle sticking out the top. This bread is not consumed at the meal.

The first course is *kutya*, boiled wheat berries mixed with poppy seeds and honey, and *uzvar*, stewed fruits. One of the most surprising traditions, one not kept in all households, but which all are at least aware of, is that the man of the house flips a spoonful of *kutya* at the ceiling. If it sticks to the ceiling, it is a sign of a good harvest to come, and prosperity.³⁰

Students’ responses to this passage resembled those of students reading “Nacirema,” in that they initially identified foreignness rather than similarities to their own practices. But even the site’s mention of “surprising traditions” elicited no dismissive comments, perhaps for several reasons: the ritual seems joyful and harmless, evoking none of the concern or indignation inspired by Miner’s descriptions of

30 Thomas M. Landy, “Христос Родився! Christ is Born! Ukrainian Catholic Christmas in Ontario,” Catholics & Cultures, updated May 20, 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/canada-ukrainian-catholics-celebrate-christmas-holy-supper-mass>.



“sadistic” practices; the diction is largely neutral; and the class (which had not read “Nacirema” as a group) consisted of upper-class students who had chosen a seminar in interfaith studies, not first- and second-year students required to take a 101 course in religious studies as part of the College’s core curriculum.

Holy Supper in a Ukrainian Greek Catholic home in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Photo by Thomas M. Landy/catholicsandcultures.org.

In a second step, students responded to photos that show devotees offering garlands and candles, among them women in sarees and shalwar kameez, but that don’t show clearly what the devotees are venerating.³¹ Here the students, most of them Catholic, started to echo another kind of response to “Nacirema”: the procession is *like* lighting candles in churches; flowers placed before a glass-encased statue are *like* offerings they’d seen placed before statues of Mary. Gradually, photos increased the sense of familiarity, culminating with an image of Mary draped in an orange saree and holding a baby in an ornate dress. When students learned that

31 When the images included captions, they were too small to be read when projected. Thomas M. Landy, “Shrine and Feast Honoring Mary Attract Indian Catholics and Hindus,” *Catholics & Cultures*, updated July 30, 2018, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/india/shrines-pilgrimage/our-lady-good-health>.



At St. Mary's Basilica, Banaglore, India, side arcade with a statue of the Virgin that is said to have miraculous qualities draws large crowds who leave flowers at the Virgin's feet and burn candles before her. A stand sells flowers and candles to be used as offerings at the shrine. Photos by Thomas M. Landy/ catholicsandcultures.org.



these images depicted practices not merely *like* offerings they knew of, that the statue was not merely *like* one of Mary and Jesus, there was none of the shock or laughter, and little of the embarrassment, of an encounter with the Nacirema. Perhaps this is largely because students' observations had been generous, so the transition was relatively painless. But the website still generated something of a gestalt shift and experience of humility, as students realized that they had assumed that the rituals they were analyzing—a procession undertaken by dark-skinned devotees, with many women in sarees or shalwar kameez; a ritual meal that includes warding off evil and predicting the future by flipping food at the ceiling—were not Catholic. As with Miner, too, the exercise produced enough of a shared class experience to create an inside joke that could be invoked against future statements about “Catholicism” as a monolithic tradition—and especially as just its Roman, Midwestern-U.S. incarnation.

To use material from the site out of context, admittedly, goes against the site's intent, which is not only “to provide insight into Catholic practices and beliefs as they are understood by those who live them,” but also “to understand those practices and beliefs in the context of the cultures they navigate and variously reflect, shape, and oppose.”³² More importantly, because the site depicts actual people living their faith, if students' reactions had been insensitive or critical, they would have had to reckon with the morality of dismissing actual people's religiosity; and their teacher, who had duped the students into those reactions, would surely have borne the greater guilt.

As an introduction to the site, though, the exercise may have done its job: it allowed us to observe difference together, and so to confront our ethnocentrism together.

32 “About This Site.”



The statue of Our Lady in a donated saree at St. Mary's Basilica. Photo by Thomas M. Landy/catholicsandcultures.org.

When the students went on to explore the site on their own, they encountered further surprises, but most of these were easily embraced with a straightforward “I didn’t know that. . . .”—a simple enough statement that nonetheless expresses the crucial disposition of humility. Moreover, because the site introduced students to real people with both real similarities to and real differences from them, it offered a virtual version of what Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell have called the “My Pal Al” effect: when I develop a relationship with someone from a religion different from mine, I’m likely to have more-favorable views of people from not only that religion, but from any religion different from mine. Such transformation may occur to some extent even without sustained personal relationship; Sydnor observes that even brief interfaith experience can be transformative, as when site visits in his introductory course “gave flesh to the skeleton of information my students got from their textbooks,”³³ and Eboo Patel links the “Pal Al” effect to Pew and Gallup research showing that merely gaining religious literacy about Islam leads to more-favorable views of Muslims.³⁴ Similarly, the initial exercise with, and later exploration of, *Catholics & Cultures* seemed to evoke dispositions needed for interfaith understanding and interfaith relationships, not only humility about initial judgments but also a sense of connection to Others and an awareness of similarity and difference. These dispositions are just as important for intrafaith encounter as for interfaith, and practicing them in an intrafaith context may make them more available in interfaith contexts.

While developing dispositions, the site also increased religious literacy, particularly about Eastern Catholic Churches and also to some extent about interreligious cooperation.³⁵ Teaching religious literacy is not the Naciremans’ strength; teachers and students have to do a good deal of unpacking to learn from Miner even about U.S. culture or anthropological methods. Consequently, for teachers scrambling

33 Sydnor, “Teaching World Theologies through Film,” 205-07.

34 Patel summarizes the “Pal Al” effect and the two studies in “The Interfaith Triangle” in *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*.

35 For instance, the site discusses Hindu participation in rituals at Our Lady of Good Health in Bengaluru, India (“Worshippers at the shrine include as many Hindus as Catholics, in part because Hindus tend to be comfortable drawing non-Hindu religious figures into their worship life”). Landy, “Shrine and Feast Honoring Mary Attract Indian Catholics and Hindus.”

to meet multiple learning goals in just 37.5 contact hours a semester,³⁶ Catholics & Cultures may win the day in terms of simple multi-tasking. More importantly, for students identifying as Catholic, the site can encourage a more expansive, less rigid—in short, a more accurate—sense of what that identity means. The process of encountering the complex diversity-in-unity of the Catholic Church parallels the process John Dunne famously called “passing over and coming back,”³⁷ learning from the unfamiliar and returning home with a renewed understanding of one’s own religiosity. That process gives students an opportunity to discover, as Francis X. Clooney puts it, that “‘here’ and ‘there’ are not stable referents, either in terms of fixed religions with clear boundaries or in terms of a pilgrim’s subjective sense that his or her home and destination are simple, simply demarcated.”³⁸ Whether presented through a trick or not, then, the site has the potential to foster knowledge and dispositions important in interfaith engagement.

In some ways, the site isn’t yet as useful as it could be for these endeavors. First, because the U.S. isn’t explored in any detail, the site may leave intact the view many U.S. students hold that their religiosity is in some way normative, natural, or univocal. One of the virtues Burde identifies in “Nacirema” is that it “temporarily inverts habitual power relationships, with the dominant Anglo-American culture being discussed in analytical terms ordinarily reserved for cultural Others such as aboriginal peoples.”³⁹ On the website, in contrast, the U.S. Church remains the tacitly non-Othered. To be sure, at this stage in the site’s development, the U.S. receives the same depth of treatment accorded the vast majority of nations: a page of demographic information and links to articles on other sites. But without visual representation and ethnographic description (beyond a pie chart of religious affiliations), these materials are unlikely to challenge U.S. students’ ethnocentrism.

36 Typically, three-credit courses meet 150 minutes (2.5 hours) a week for fifteen weeks.

37 For an analysis of Dunne’s oft-cited method, see Jon Nilson, “Doing Theology by Heart: John S. Dunne’s Theological Method.” *Theological Studies*, 48, no. 1 (Mar. 1987): 65–86.

38 Francis X. Clooney, “Afterword: Some Reflections in Response to Teaching Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, eds. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 228–29.

39 Burde, “Social-Science Fiction,” 551.

Another strength of Miner's piece is that it draws attention to the way religion is represented. Because it demonstrates (to adapt a line from Miner) the extremes to which anthropological description can go, a class that undertakes a study of the Nacirema can emerge fifty minutes later with a sense of how authorial choices shape how readers view a culture. Catholics & Cultures could help students gain similar insights by providing materials reflecting on the challenges involved in observing religion respectfully and representing it accurately. For instance, students who watched the video of the Ukrainian Catholic Christmas dinner shared my discomfort as a member of the family explained the meal at length. We knew that those assembled had already fasted all day, and we saw that the delay seemed to distress a young woman with developmental disabilities. During the 2019 conference on Catholics & Cultures in Chicago, Thomas Landy clarified that this explanation of the meal was an expected part of the dinner celebration, not something added for the benefit of the observer. A reflective note on the website would have educated viewers about this catechetical aspect of the celebration, while helping to explore questions of etic representation that Miner raises well but can't, in the end, fully address.

Finally, while the site depicts ritual in the context of other aspects of culture, it could do more to depict ritual in the context of other aspects of religion. The site endeavors to portray "the religious lives and practices of contemporary Catholics in countries around the globe,"⁴⁰ but the content is devoted almost exclusively to ritual. Rituals are a worthy focus, particularly because, in Miner's day as in ours, scholars and students influenced by the Christian tradition tend to see religion (as the quote from Yadlapati suggested earlier) primarily as a matter of orthodoxy, while downplaying or even being suspicious of practices.⁴¹ But an accurate depiction of "what it means to be Catholic today" could give more attention to other aspects of Catholicism, such as community engagement and social justice. Even the "Practices & Values" page of the website, which might be expected to refer

40 "About This Site."

41 She illustrates the point by observing that "Christian students do come to understand the ways in which asking people whether they are saved is a question that does not translate well to other traditions that emphasize orthopraxy over orthodoxy." Yadlapati, "Dharma and Moksha, Works and Faith," 188.

to such topics, emphasizes rituals (“In some places in the world, people practice Catholicism publicly, with religious displays in city squares, streets and even stores, while in other places, religious practice is considered private, and reserved for the home and sacred spaces”⁴²). Granted, ritual lends itself particularly well to visual representation. But community structures and social justice can also be portrayed through images, and in fact the site does venture into these areas in some of its articles, including pieces on lay organizations in Uganda⁴³ and Denmark⁴⁴ and social services in Tanzania.⁴⁵ More coverage of similar aspects of Church life would give a fuller picture of both the institutional Church and the daily experience of Catholics. It would also better fulfill the site’s intent to “provide teaching resources about Catholic life in all its richness and particularity—to explore what Pope Francis refers to as the ‘dialects’ of a global Church.” The reference is to Pope Francis’s 2019 Bangkok address to priests, religious, seminarians, and catechists, which certainly doesn’t discount ritual (“Prayer is the center of everything”), but which also puts ethics, community, and social justice at the heart of Catholic life: “As for the first stirrings of your vocation, many of you in your early years took part in the activities of young people who wanted to put the Gospel into practice and to go out into the cities to visit the needy, the neglected and even the despised, orphans and the elderly.”⁴⁶ Additional attention to social justice could also enhance the site’s value for interfaith studies, since social justice often provides common ground among religions and is the basis of many interfaith initiatives. From a pedagogical point

42 “Practices & Values,” Catholics & Cultures, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/practices-values>.

43 Thomas M. Landy, “Church Guilds in Uganda Active in Community Development,” Catholics & Cultures, updated August 10, 2018, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/uganda/lay-organizations>.

44 Thomas M. Landy, “Catholics in Denmark Identify with Coffee Hour and Charity,” Catholics & Cultures, updated July 27, 2018, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/denmark/lay-organizations>.

45 James Jay Carney and Krystina Kwizera-Masabo, “Catholic Schools, Medical and Social Services Serve Many in Tanzania,” Catholics & Cultures, updated April 27, 2020, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/tanzania-catholic-schools-medical-and-social-services-serve-many>.

46 Pope Francis, “Apostolic Journey to Thailand: Meeting with Priests, Religious, Seminarians and Catechists,” St. Peter’s Parish, Bangkok, 22 November 2019, accessed 14 May 2020, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191122_consacra-ti-thailandia.html.

of view, learning about similar commitments to social justice may create a bridge sturdy enough to support students as they grapple with differences in ritual practices and institutional structures.

THE FAMILY OF THE UNFAMILIAR: TOWARD MULTIPLICITY AND INCLUSION

Where Miner's article, as Burde says, is about "a familiar people unflatteringly depicted from an unfamiliar standpoint,"⁴⁷ *Catholics & Cultures* shows a variety of unfamiliar people respectfully depicted from a familiar standpoint—"familiar" read literally, as siblings within the Church. In presenting such variety with scholarly respect, the site can accomplish something of Miner's gestalt shift, challenging the assumption that my culture's Catholicism is the only Catholicism. That fuller understanding of Catholicism makes an important contribution to religious literacy, but it also provides a template for the study of other worldviews: the experience of seeing the complexity of Catholicism can translate to acknowledging complexity elsewhere. This move is important particularly since, in the process of working toward basic religious literacy, interfaith pedagogy can inadvertently encourage overgeneralizing. Overgeneralizations may be flattering (in the earlier example from *Little Mosque*, Rev. Magee's understanding of "Muslims pray five times a day") or unflattering (Joe's understanding of "Muslims pray five times a day"); either way, they are among the most important mental habits to interrogate. Dismantling overgeneralizations supports the realization that, in Yadlapati's words, "individual religious traditions are not monolithic wholes but are themselves living, dynamic processes of interpretation"⁴⁸ and thus opens up the way to the genuine listening needed for interfaith conversation.

This pedagogical potential, of course, comes with no guarantee. Sibling rivalries can be the most deeply felt and threatening, and interfaith skills are often hardest to deploy in intrafaith settings. It's not for nothing that the joke voted "the funniest religious joke of all time" takes as its target Christianity's often-violent internecine

47 Burde, "Social-Science Fiction," 556.

48 Yadlapati, "Dharma and Moksha, Works and Faith," 188.

intolerance.⁴⁹ Thus, there's sadly no surprise in hearing that viewers of Catholics & Cultures sometimes dismiss unfamiliar practices as heretical.

But the site's work is all the more important for that. Its portrayal of the diversity within the Church embodies the Catholic theological conviction that, as Stan Chu Ilo has put it, "Each culture carries the beauty of the seed of God's Word at its source"⁵⁰ and is a locus of the workings of the Holy Spirit. Chu Ilo argues, accordingly, for a "hermeneutics of multiplicity and inclusion," insisting on the importance of "the historically voiceless and marginalized groups and cultures within the one Catholic family."⁵¹ Such an approach promises to be destabilizing for those who have long rested in the center of a Eurocentric institution, since "*It is so easy to reaffirm what we have always professed, to profess what we have always believed, and to defend what we have always lived*" (italics in original).⁵² But moving beyond such ethnocentric distortion is a matter of theological urgency for the entire Church. Only thus, Chu Ilo argues, can the Church hear the guidance of the Spirit "who leads the Church and her faithful into the fullness of truth in order to meet the new challenges of the present."⁵³ That "fullness of truth" is essential for the Church's flourishing, and it cannot be perceived except through the Spirit's varied manifestations around the world. An awareness of those manifestations is also essential on a pedagogical

49 The joke's author, Emo Philips, quotes the joke in the brief news article announcing its victory (Emo Philips, "The Best God Joke Ever—and It's Mine!," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>): Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!" "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

50 Stan Chu Ilo, "Contested Moral Issues in Contemporary African Catholicism: Theological Proposals for a Hermeneutics of Multiplicity and Inclusion," *Journal of Global Catholicism* 1, no. 2 (2017): 55, doi: 10.32436/2475-6423.1015.

51 Chu Ilo, 59-60.

52 Chu Ilo, 70.

53 Chu Ilo, 64.

level, so that students who identify as Catholic can come to the interfaith table with an accurate understanding of their tradition, and thus of their identity.

Among the gestalt-shifts that 101 students encounter in the textbook we use is the revelation that “yoga” is not the domain of Lululemon but a word applied to a diverse set of Hindu spiritual practices. The book, *World Religions in Dialogue: A Comparative Theological Approach*, includes Yadlapati’s observation that “The Bhagavad Gita’s teaching on the four *margas* [raja yoga, jnana yoga, karma yoga, and bhakti yoga] is often cited as support for the Hindu view that there are many paths to salvation or enlightenment. Today, it serves as a traditional theological motif for affirming the value of different religious traditions and teachings for different cultures and different individual temperaments.”⁵⁴ Catholics & Cultures, in its portrayal of the multiplicity and inclusiveness of the Church, may suggest a similar “theological motif” for Catholicism. This diversity-in-unity is an image that arises from the very nature of what Chu Ilo calls “the one Catholic family”; it can also, like the *margas* in Yadlapati’s comment, invite appreciation for the religious variety throughout the one human family. In interfaith studies, the dialogue circles back around, as the diversity of worldviews sheds light on the possibilities within Christianity. As David L. Gitomer writes, “the study of non-Christian religions opens up ways of thinking about the gospel implicit but not yet emerged within Christian communities.”⁵⁵ Catholics & Cultures has a part in this dialogue. It invites students and their teachers to gain knowledge about the sometimes-surprising diversity of human religious life. Perhaps even more importantly, it also invites them to practice the humility, empathy, and sense of connection that can make understanding across difference possible.

54 Madhuri M. Yadlapati, “Hinduism: An Insider’s Perspective,” in *World Religions in Dialogue: A Comparative Theological Approach*, ed. Pim Valkenberg (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2013), 151. David L. Gitomer makes a similar point, while acknowledging that the increasing potency of Hindu nationalism limits the conviction of his proposal: “it could still be said that Hindus have a head start on pluralistic thinking, since they grow up with Hindu neighbors who worship different gods, or because they learn theistic monism almost as early as they learn theistic pluralism. It is an experience that feels very different than the ideas expressed in the generous but still limited inclusivism of the Vatican II declaration on non-Christian faiths.” “Tell Me One Thing, Krishna. . . : A Personal Reflection on Catholic Faith and Religious Pluralism,” in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocation, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas M. Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 69-70.

55 Gitomer, “Tell Me One Thing, Krishna. . .,” 70.



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