

Religion Teacher Update

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RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS OF RELIGIONS AND ETHICS IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Literature for the Religion Classroom

Life of Pi

by John Bellaimey

“What? Do you mean it isn’t TRUE? That’s so unfair!” I must admit that when I first read *The Life of Pi*, I had the same reaction. The Canadian author Yann Martel spins a yarn of a shipwrecked, orphan boy drifting across the Pacific, finally washed up on a Mexican beach nearly dead. His family’s small zoo, not to mention his parents and brother, perished when their ship exploded, and Pi ended up in a lifeboat with a hyena, a zebra, an orangutan, and a tiger named Richard Parker. So we asked each other, “what appeals to us about stories of orphans? And shipwrecks?”

My students first hear about his childhood life in a zoo-keeper’s household. The boy is a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu simultaneously, which my students do not find as hard to imagine as I thought they would. Many of my kids have pretty, um, diverse religious backgrounds. I asked, “what parts of your own spirituality would your organized religion discourage or even denounce?”

Like most high school kids, Pi believes you can pick all the nice things about a religion and throw the rest overboard, but instead of calling this naïve, Martel presents it as a living reality. Pi’s priest, guru, and imam all have a lot to teach him, but as the fable progresses and they all meet one another, they begin fighting for ownership of this soulful little boy. Organized religion looks foolish and possessive. I asked such things as, “What makes something a religion? A belief? A community? A tradition? An enemy? A code of ethics?”

In the Ten Oxherding Paintings of Zen Buddhism, a boy has to learn how to tame a fierce beast. Pi also has to learn to live with the immense and frightening tiger. It’s a rich metaphor. We discussed what the biggest threats are to our lives during these teenage years. Answers: overwhelming emotions, sin, family collapse, prejudice, mean girls, the fear of poverty, and disappointment in love. Our hero does tame the tiger, however, and his education and family have everything to do with his success, which is something that students can relate to.

In fact, I find this generation of students (I’ve been at it since 1975) is the most grateful to family and teachers of any I have taught. Certainly we baby boomers blamed “anyone

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Distant Danish Mirror

by Dan Kasten

Like many of the young people I teach, Shakespeare’s Hamlet has entirely negative associations with religion. Clearly a Christian, the sad Prince of Denmark believes in a god who will send him to hell for sin, not one who can soothe his troubled soul or teach him to love his enemies. He makes an ideal vehicle for discussing the role of faith in confronting tough questions.

“Who’s there?” With the very first line of the play, we enter a world of questions familiar to any confused adolescent. Who, indeed, is there—in the darkness, under the mask, behind the curtain? The question applies to all of the major characters, but only Hamlet cannot put it aside. He is the proxy for puzzled humanity. His struggle for understanding is the one we might undertake if self-knowledge were as important to us as maintaining our comforts and relationships.

Musing aloud to his traitorous “friends” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet paraphrases the Eighth Psalm, “What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite

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About Religion Teacher Update

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RTU is edited by Sher Sweet, who taught Religious Studies at Northfield Mount Hermon School for 31 years, and David Streight at CSEE. Submissions regarding innovative programs, good resources, interesting assignments and other ideas are both welcome and invited.

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Teaching *Ironweed*

by Bill Brown

Twice now, in an upper level course called “Literature of Forgiveness,” students and I have studied William Kennedy’s novel, *Ironweed*. The curriculum of our new independent high school has been built on four pillars, two of which are ethics and world religions. Kennedy’s novel fits the school’s mission, and students seem to enjoy the challenging reading.

In terms of plot, character, setting and theme, the book offers a variety of timely and timeless food for thought. The story is set in Albany, New York in 1938. It opens in a cemetery on the day before All Saint’s Day. In this cemetery, the main character, Francis Phelan, confronts the spirit of his 13-day-old son, whom he accidentally killed twenty years earlier with his own shameful hands. As this son tells him in the opening scene, Phelan must perform certain acts of expiation before he can forgive himself. Nothing is purely solved by story’s end, but along the path, Phelan and readers learn the courage required to struggle against the impulse to blame. While tempted to live in constant shame, Phelan begins to understand that doing so means death.

The initial scene in the cemetery underscores this major theme of the work—the difference between life and death. As on All Hallow’s Eve, and the Celtic Samhain, a thin line separates these two states. For example, when Phelan’s sidekick, Rudy, claims that he falls on the floor about twice a day and he “ain’t dead,” Phelan replies, “That’s what you think” (20). The thin line forces us to ask when someone is living, or when his soul has died. Throughout the story, set during the Great Depression, Phelan and friends live in the streets fighting alcohol addiction, cold nights and sometimes each other; they struggle to stay alive. Phelan says of his fellow drunks, “They don’t believe in nothin’” (22). At the same time, though, we meet Helen —“magical Helen” (126), who reminds us that “We got to find something” (85). Helen loves to sing. In songs like “Ode to Joy” we see the “sanctuaries of Helen’s spirit” (54). For me, a primary value of the novel lies in the description of how such songs speak to Helen: “not abstractly of the aesthetic peaks of the art she had once hoped to master, but directly, simply, about the everyday currency of the heart and soul” (54).

The novel is full of struggle towards a fuller life. It uses Catholic language and imagery as reference points. For example, a final backyard chorus of spirits sings a requiem mass. The book invites students to explore the relationship between forgiving oneself and forgiving others. Today’s economics add

The Life of Pi

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over 30” as tainted with insincerity and greed. Pi’s affection for mom, dad, and his wise teachers does not strike my students as contrived at all.

Nor does the magical realism; an island that seems green and full of life by day but turns carnivorous at night is a rich metaphor, in which my students find echoes of dictatorship, sexual violence, genocide, and personal terror at being alone. The form this fiction takes allows us to discuss whether religion is better explained through myth or lists of rules (myths won). We also debated whether scriptures are really true or not, and if so, in what way we mean the word “true.”

By the end, when we hear Pi tell a much more prosaic, unmiraculous version of the story, we ache for the “one with animals” to be the true version. In the same way, my agnostic and atheistic students talked about wishing there could be something as cool as a “god.” Even if some scientist could prove that there was no divine being, the stories about him would still grab our imaginations: in the long run, love is stronger than hate, life is stronger than death, and good is stronger than evil.

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resonance to the souls who struggle through nights on the street and look for warmth. Today’s American political climate allows students to consider the costs of rushing to blame, or staying there. By the end of the novel, Francis Phelan, with the help of his family, and especially his wife, understands that living requires courageous struggle. This struggle can bring one back from the land of the dead.

Work Cited

Kennedy, William. *Ironweed*. New York: Penguin, 1984.

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At Exeter, we teach all our religion courses using what is called the Harkness method, a pedagogy employing seminar-type discussion of about twelve students and one teacher seated at a round table. As much as the Harkness method looks like Socratic style teaching, and even our own school literature sometimes makes that comparison, Socratic teaching is still a variant of the “sage on the stage” pedagogy, with the sage in this case sitting at the table asking questions of the students, with the conversation flowing to and from the students to the teacher/sage. A diagram of a Socratic-style class has most lines proceeding to and from the teacher. Harkness teaching is quite different, and has the teacher as conversation facilitator, with the teacher only entering the conversation every now and then as the students converse with each other. In the back and forth across and around the table the student becomes both learner from and teacher to his/her classmates. Yes, the teacher guides, encourages, and supervises the conversation, but in the end it is a conversation among the students, not a conversation between the teacher and the students.

The best description of the teacher's role is to say that every so often the teacher asks what we call a “Harkness question,” that is, an open-ended question where there is no specific right or wrong answer. Class often starts with one of these questions, something as simple and innocuous as “What did you think of the reading last night?”, but for this article I am focusing on what one might do with Kafka's short story “The Metamorphosis,” with some references to his other short stories. Note that the general method can be applied to any piece of literature, or, as we would contend, to any religion or other discipline's classes.

Once the first half of “The Metamorphosis” has been read as homework, I start class not with an oral question but with a five minute writing assignment; the prompt is a Harkness question: “Given the first sentence of the story (‘As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect’), try to reconstruct Gregor's life up to the evening before his transformation, highlighting the possible reasons behind the change.” With the papers collected, I ask the students how they answered the question; usually, however, the conversation starts spontaneously. Now, as the class unfolds, I have my lesson plan in my head, and in no particular order (but following up on whatever the students choose to discuss) I will ask such questions as: “How do you explain the fact that this first and most famous sentence is in the passive voice, i.e., ‘...he found himself transformed;’ Who did it to him? Why?” “Is his transformation liberation? Reward? Punishment? Punishment for what?” Later in the

class I might raise the question of whether Gregor's life is like ours, namely fairly routinized, and, therefore, should I worry when I go to sleep at night (that I too might awake as a gigantic insect)? And at some point I might raise the issue of the meaning of the title of the short story, “Metamorphosis,” and ask to what it refers? After some conversation on the topic, usually focusing on Gregor's change, I point out that his transformation occurred before the story opened, so perhaps the title refers to something else?

This story is read in the course “religion and the literature of existentialism.” For comparison sake, we read a number of Kafka short stories, and when we read, for example, “A Hunger Artist,” I ask the students to analyze the first sentence of the story, image by image: “During these last decades the interest in professional fasting has markedly diminished,” and some fascinating conversations ensue when they discuss the issues embedded in that one sentence alone. Or when we read “Hunter Gracchus,” my writing prompt is: “Is the main character of this story dead or alive? Explain.” We then go on to discuss why so many of Kafka's characters seem to be caught betwixt and between.

The issues Kafka is raising in “The Metamorphosis” are fundamentally issues of meaning and purpose. All good literature raises such questions, but Kafka's short stories are little gems for focusing student attention, in an easily assessable way, on just such “religious” issues.

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in faculties,... and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (2.2.309-14). Trapped between perceived godlike potential and dusty reality, Hamlet can only despair. Life should be more. He senses its possibilities, hovering just out of reach. He imagines that if he could only be the kind of take-charge man he so admires, he could fulfill his god-given promise. But for him, the divine plan is stuck in neutral. Filled with listless grief and fantasies of revenge, he seems utterly incapable of expunging the rotteness that has festered in Denmark since the murder of his father.

What's a sensitive young fellow to do? Not very surprisingly, the dark prince's thoughts turn to suicide. In fact, his first unguarded words in the play express his fervent desire for extinction: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt," he cries (1.2.131). From first to last, his fondest wish is to die. The most famous line of the play, and of the English stage, is a meditation on the merits of suicide: "To be or not to be: that is the question" (3.1.62). Only his fear of God, of "something after death, the undiscovered country" (3.1.85) holds him back. Thus, incapable of living by the standards he finds honorable and afraid of dying, he writhes in self-inflicted torment. He is the original disaffected youth, though he has more reason for despair than most of his modern protégés.

Hamlet wants to matter, to live for something more significant than mere breathing. He yearns to respect himself but knows he cannot. His soul-searching leads him to bitter self-definition. "What is a man," he demands of himself, "if his chief good and market of his time/be but to sleep and feed?" And in the same line, he provides the answer: "A beast, no more" (4.4.35-37).

Like all of the important questions of the play, this one focuses on being, not doing. Hamlet's obsession with action is almost an evasion, an attempt to shift the subject from what he knows matters most. His subtle, sensitive mind endlessly returns to the big questions: "Who's there? ... What is this quintessence of dust? ... To be or not to be? ... What is a man?" He cannot escape the demand that he define himself by uncovering his essence.

Like many a troubled youth, Hamlet identifies problems more readily than solutions. He can recognize and value Horatio's calm, introspective, deliberation, but in seeking resolution to the ills that beset him, he feels compelled to imitate the rapierwielding antics of Laertes and Fortinbras. While Hamlet achieves a kind of spiritual "readiness" in his private moments with Horatio, he still feels an adolescent need to find justice with his sword.

The pile of bodies littering the stage at the final curtain offers a kind of satisfaction. No one can mourn the well-deserved death of King Claudius; Gertrude and Laertes, to the extent that they supported the corrupt usurper, have chosen their poison, and Hamlet has achieved his long-held desire for a purposeful death. Buoyed by Horatio's benediction, Hamlet may, indeed, feel that this is a "good night" (5.2.369).

Yet, this splashy conflagration seems uncomfortably like the bloody climaxes so readily dispensed on modern movie screens by Rambo, Dirty Harry, and Jason Bourne. With his penetrating intelligence, his backing from the masses, and his invaluable support from peerless Horatio, Hamlet could have aimed higher. Time is on his side. Evil has a way of exposing and consuming itself. With a clearer strategy and with greater equanimity, Hamlet might have answered his questions more effectively.

Perhaps a better understanding of his faith might have helped him. In eulogizing the fallen prince, Fortinbras says that Hamlet would "have proved most royal" if he had lived to ascend the throne. Maybe. He had prodigious potential. Yet anyone searching for nobility in Elsinore might wish that instead of merely fearing the wrath of his god, Hamlet had considered the power of non-violence to change the world. Could he have somehow saved both Denmark and himself by leading a peaceful revolution? Could he have ended a reign of terror without succumbing to its methods? Might the Way of the Prince of Peace have triumphed? Those are the questions I invite my students to struggle with as they consider the options of literature's most troubled adolescent.

"Perhaps a better understanding of his faith might have helped him."

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Topics for upcoming issues?

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upcoming issue topics,
let us know!
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Naguib Mahfouz, winner of the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature, was a native Cairene, born in 1911. He combined careers as an official in the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and a prolific author, writing screenplays, short stories, and more than thirty novels. After a life of controversy, he received a state funeral, attended by the President and Prime Minister of Egypt, in 2006. Among the novels, the most provocative was 1959's *Awlad Haratina* ("Children of our Quarter"), translated first as *Children of Gebelaawi*¹ and then as *Children of the Alley*.² Originally serialized in the newspaper Al-Ahram, *Children* has a Prologue and five sections ("Adham," "Gebel," "Rifaa," "Qaasim," and "Arafa"), named after their respective main characters, all descendants of the mysterious patriarch Gebelaawi, whose mansion and family trust dominate life in their suburb of Cairo.

The controversy comes from the fact the novel is a sort of religious roman à clef in which events of the fictional Cairo correspond to actual ones in the Qur'an and Hadith: Gebelaawi stands in for, not God-in-godself, but God as popularly conceived; Adham is a version of Adam, Gebel of Moses, Rifaa of Jesus, Qaasim of Mohammed, and Arafa of the modern person of science. Thus, for example, after Gebelaawi passes over his four older sons to make Adham manager of the Trust, the firstborn Idrees (the Iblis/Satan character) rebels, is thrown out of the Great House, and eventually persuades Adham to break their father's rules by sneaking a look at the governing deeds of the Trust. When Gebelaawi catches him in the act, Adham is also expelled. This sometimes-unflattering depiction of religious personages provoked widespread reaction when the novel appeared: it was banned in Egypt from 1959 to 1994. Indeed, when Salman Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, comparisons between his novel and Mahfouz's were so widespread that the older author was himself the subject of death threats and, in 1994, of an attempted assassination.

While the novel is lengthy, it is possible to read even selections profitably. At The Hill, I use the book as one component of our honors-level Religion and Literature course, reading relevant suras from the Qur'an alongside "Adham," "Quassim," and "Arafa." Other pairings of texts for the term are Genesis 1:1-3:24 with Books I, VII and IX of *Paradise Lost* and C. S. Lewis's *Perelandra*; Job with Archibald MacLeish's J.B.; and *The Bhagavad-Gita* with Steven Pressfield's *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. Pressfield and Mahfouz (and their associated scriptures) were somewhat

exotic for this audience; they were intrigued by both, but not entirely satisfied, feeling that Mahfouz dealt with his subject more seriously, but wondering how much was gained by his retelling of the stories. Certainly, the book accomplished my purpose of provoking intelligent discussion on the overarching question of what happens when literature attempts to exploit religious texts for its own purposes.

As we read *Children* relatively late in the school year, students were generally able to discuss and write about it with some sophistication. A post-grad looked at Mahfouz's version of the Cain and Abel story, analyzing the way the material the author adds to what he found in the Qur'an and the Bible (e.g., the fact that Adham, rather than Gebelaawi, punishes Qadri, the Cain character) not only fills in details to the level required by the novelistic form but also supports continuing themes of divine detachment and human suffering. One sixth former's essay compared Iblis/Idrees, from the Qur'an and *Children*, to Satan as pictured in Genesis and *Perelandra*, noting that in the Christian accounts, Satan works indirectly (through the serpent or through Weston/the Un-man) whereas in the Islamic accounts, the fallen angel seems to attack humankind without intermediaries. Another student, having surveyed a number of possible interpretations of the death of Gebelaawi (A message about atheism? About a religionless future for Islam? [the student would have mentioned Bonhoeffer had he read him]? About the Bomb?) ruefully concluded, "The most successful attribute of Mahfouz's work is that it forces the reader to think."

1 Trans. Philip Stewart (1962; rev. ed., Pueblo, Colorado: Passaggiata, 2000).

2 Trans. Peter Theroux (New York: Anchor, 1996).

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