

MARGARET M. MITCHELL

Playing with Fire

The Task of the Divinity School

A year and a half ago the Provost of the University, Tom Rosenbaum, asked me to participate in a panel on Free Speech on Campus. It was occasioned by several events at the University in that school year, surrounding controversies over guest speakers in the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (and whether both sides of the Palestinian/Israeli

conflict were adequately represented), on the one hand, and a pre-announced visit to campus by the Westboro Baptist Church (a church headed by Fred Phelps, known for its “God hates fags” signs and funeral protests “celebrating” the death of American military personnel as acts of vengeance against the nation for its immorality), on the other.

At this panel, the moderator, Dean Mark Hansen of Social Sciences, asked questions of us three panelists, hypothetical scenarios to which we were to respond, as a way to push and probe what are the limits of “free speech” on campus. Quite a few of the questions in one way or another had to do with religion. The first was, “What if a professor in a course lecture describes Christians as crusader baby-killers, or Muslims as bloodthirsty religious terrorists?” Another: “Can a staff member hang a poster behind her desk with a cruciform kitty and the legend, ‘hang in there, baby’”? And another: “What would you as a professor do if a student came into your class wearing a t-shirt with Matthew 27:25 on it: ‘His blood be on us and on our children,’” an apparent endorsement of the

polemical and deadly dangerous stereotype of Jews as ‘Christ-killers’?

When it was my turn to speak, (perhaps predictably) taking up the last example, I said that any student who wore such a shirt in my class would know that she or he was inviting a discussion on biblical interpretation, and that that discussion would in fact take place. In other words, I said, I would regard the wearing of that shirt as one of many public statements about religion — in this case of biblical interpretation — that we encounter everyday on campus and in American society that can and should be analyzed according to its multiple contexts: the shirt, the body and identity of the person wearing it, the late first-century Greek text we know as the Gospel of Matthew, and the placement of that sentence in the work, the meaning and narrative construction of the term *laos* (“the people”) who are said to utter it, the history of usage of that passage down through the years to excuse Christian anti-Judaism, the controversy around it in the Mel Gibson movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, (there in

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Aramaic, but not in the English subtitles), the printing shop and sponsor and marketing campaign of the 2009 t-shirt available for sale to this student, et cetera.

For all of these three examples, my answer was in the first place an emphatic yes. Any member of the University community has freedom of expression, and, no matter how offensive certain statements might be to some, *blasphemy is not a category that a University either recognizes or should be in the business of legislating or adjudicating*. Yes, you can say or do those three things here; absolutely yes.

But, I argued as well, freedom of speech on a University campus also involves accountability. Let me first say what I do not mean by this; by accountability I do not mean the need to shield possible or real listeners from something that will disturb or offend them. The hypothetical examples offered I think perhaps simplistically assume that some self-identified group would find themselves immediately targeted by presumed “outsiders” by such speech acts (i.e., all “Christians” would automatically be offended by a reference to Crusader baby-killers). But even this assumption can and should be questioned; for one thing, inner-religious, sectarian invective and accusation has nothing on the extra-mural in terms of its virulence or “scorched earth” politics. The statement also does not leave room for the possibility of self-critique, acknowledgement of harm done in one’s own name or in a name one now claims. But even more, the construction of religious identities and communities (either for valorization or accusation) needs itself to be an object of study. In any case, by accountability here I do not solely or even primarily have in mind the consideration that one should consider before speaking about a topic on religion who might be offended by it, though I do not think that is something we can or should avoid entirely. I am in favor of civility in conversation, and particularly in that form of conversation that we call formal education, but I do not think everyone must equally be, or must view civility in the same way.

But even more importantly, the accountability I emphasized then and would reiterate here is that all speech is accountable to the historical record, to standards for logical and evidentiary proof, to the community within which these speech acts occur, as representative of how it engages

in constructive conversation — because above all what the University stands for is that words and ideas seriously matter. While no statement should be censured, none likewise should go unchallenged. Free speech does not mean free to pontificate; it means free to converse — to speak with others — about things that matter. It also means being open to counter-statement, counter-argument, counter-evidence.

Now, another professor on the panel at which we faced these hypotheticals, from a different division of the University, who spoke next, began to cite statistics from a poll published in the noteworthy modern Almanac, *Newsweek*, about how many Americans believe in angels, in God or some higher spiritual power (81%), in miracles, an end-time event or future judgment. Given that, he intoned, you really should avoid talking about religion in the classroom, because, “*You’re playing with fire.*”

This was a good panel and set of exchanges, and I understood the point this professor was making; I want to acknowledge that his fear about religion creeping into the classroom (or, rather, his recognition that it was in fact already robustly in residence) was genuine and born of his own experience with class discussions going in directions he had not expected or wanted. He also relayed some personal experiences of his own religious history and recent encounters (such as the scholar of religion tends to hear unwittingly at 33,000 feet in an airplane when our seat-mate asks us what we do for a living: “I used to be religious...”). The effect was clear — religion is personal and strange, and talking about it made him uncomfortable and brought an implied threat — “playing with fire.” In that context, I kept my counsel, but what I thought inwardly then, and what I can now say openly here, is “*Come over to the Divinity School — this is where we play with fire for a living.*”

From the founding of the University of Chicago in 1891 the Divinity School has been a graduate professional school; in its former role it stands alongside Humanities, Social Sciences, Physical Sciences and Biological Sciences, Divisions of the University which award masters and doctoral degrees. In its latter designation it is in the company of the Law, Business, Medicine, Public Policy and Social

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Services Administration — schools that form students for distinct professions in society.

What is the “profession” of this Divinity School? The profession and graduate-level education that is the task of this Divinity School is learning how to think and talk (in that order!) about religion in a manner that is supremely well-informed, rigorously critical, and responsibly engaged. Playing with fire is not something to be avoided, but something to learn how to do with skill, competence, awareness of how things can go wrong, and boldness born of a conviction that it is worse to either avoid this fire or leave it to those who may not handle it in a responsible way. Those who are trained in the science and art of fire management know that fire avoided by the neglectful or fearful, or harnessed by the malevolent can do incalculable harm. They know one should not just play with fire, but work with fire, do so in an open field, put rocks around it, teach children how to do the same. They also know that fire, left unchecked or ignored, will carve its own, unregulated path; if it does go out (seemingly), it will likely go underground, to surface later in unexpected ways. As a practical matter, the fire will not die; as an evaluative one, many (though not all) would say that fire (appropriately harnessed) is essential to human flourishing — a source of warmth and light, and a locus of companionship. It is one of the four essential elements (*stoicheia*) of the cosmos for Plato and other ancient Greek philosophers (along with water, air and earth). The fire will be here and it will be a force to be reckoned with, a force located in that boundary territory between cosmos and civilization.

But let me be clear in what I mean and do not mean by this metaphor and the analogy it implies: the fire of which I speak when I say the Divinity School is a place where we play with fire *is not God* (despite fire theophanies — and anti-theophanies [1 Kings 19] — shared by the Torah, the Book of Revelation, the Hindu God Agni, et cetera). I am not saying that the Divinity School is the place where we play with God or gods, though we do interact on a daily basis with people (both living and dead), texts, rituals and communities (also living and dead) that engage in complex interactions with divine beings they believe exist and affect human life. *Nor is the fire we play with “religion”* — for a

fundamental presupposition of the academic study of religion is that there is a difference between studying religion and practicing religion (even as we struggle in various ways with the theoretical and practical issues this raises).

No, the fire with which we play in the Divinity School is *talking about religion*. This is not something our American culture or our world does very well. There is a lot of fire in the world — lots of people making claims about their religion, your religion, those crazy people over there’s religion, all religious lunatics who defy rationality, et cetera. But not much safe playing with fire, not many places where there are stones around the fire or a clearing with some established guidelines, a dialogue over the evidence and claims in which the conclusions that are not predetermined, places that do not accept violence, bigotry, virulence or dogmatism as means of argumentation. Not often enough is there conversation about religion that produces light and heat, but not compulsion, condescension or condemnation.

Playing with fire requires a few things:

1. a proper and prepared place.
2. people who both know where fire comes from, how it tends to react to local conditions (wind, oxygen, hills, dirt, et cetera), and who are aware of its immense and dangerous power. These people have also inherited both histories and lore, and must learn to differentiate the two (the great Chicago fire of course comes to mind), and, in addition to facts, have a set of tools for handling the fire.
3. Some publicly articulated and clear sense of purpose about why we play with fire. *This does not have to be the same for all* — some want to cultivate the fire in a quest for inter-religious understanding through dialogue; some want to cultivate the fire of talking about religion for the simple reason that they find it fascinating (and that is enough); some want to cultivate the fire of talking about religion because they feel that there are powers and principalities that must be unmasked (these can be of various types), and scholarship is a way to do it.

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That Swift Hall is host to scholars and students *who do not play with fire for the same reason* is one of its great historic strengths — we are not identified with a single school of thought, confessional stance or political/ideological agenda, but we host multiple allegiances, each of which accepts the challenge to argue for its point of view on a daily basis. Our three committees of study in their uneven alignment enshrine an ideal that we know is not real, of both heuristically separating historical, social-scientific and constructive studies of religion, and of tacitly acknowledging at every turn that this separation does not fully work, for the historian needs the tools of the social sciences, the constructive thinker the historical fine grain and the social scientist the analysis of the realia of the communities and discourses produced by the other two.

That said, I think that this Divinity School — the School for the academic study of religion at the University of Chicago — has some distinct ways of playing with fire, some consensual ground rules that both contribute substantively to how we think and talk about religion, and that mark the quality of conversation here and beyond it. So, what are these tools and techniques that govern the way we play with fire in the Divinity School? Before closing I shall name three (there are more, but this is a start up toward a fire-workers toolkit).

I. Philological Rigor

The man whose portrait stands in the middle of the west wall of Swift Commons is Edgar Johnson Goodspeed; he received the first Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1898, in New Testament studies. His earliest work was translating the papyri that were emerging from the garbage dumps of Oxyrynchus and other sites from Egypt. He went on to have the audacity to challenge the King James by producing “The New Testament: an American Translation.” This fresh translation into the American vernacular was, you may be surprised to hear, deeply controversial in his time — on both ends of the task, its critique of the Greek textual manuscript base on which the KJV was produced, and its (unthinkable!) assumption that American English was enough of an idiolect

to have its own vernacular translation. In Swift Hall now are eminent scholars who translate Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Persian, Norse, German, French, Spanish and other texts. Such work is an act of both philology and historical contextualization: we cannot understand the past or the present of the phenomenon religion without engaging, as closely as possible, the linguistic systems and literary forms in which communication about religion was fashioned. Learning a language is learning to think in a language; it also requires the reference point of one’s own language as a way to comprehend differences of cognition and signification (“English does it this way”). We who play with the fire of talking about religion need to be masters of words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, texts. We also need to be able to read and “translate” non-verbal artifacts and entities (images, rituals, human communities).

2. Hermeneutical Sophistication

When I arrived as an M.A. student in 1981 everyone in Swift was talking about hermeneutics; I did not know what they meant, but knew I needed to quickly if I wanted to join the discussion. A few years later, someone managed to get into the University Directory a putative faculty member named “Eutics, Herman.” University of Chicago Professor Eutics appropriately had his office in the Swift Basement (Swift is clear to me; why the basement less so!). Why is hermeneutics a critical tool in the study of religion? Religion as a human phenomenon is a cultural force that produces texts, artifacts, rituals and other creations that are richly and redolently symbolic. Symbolic language, even all language, is susceptible to multiple significations. *It is impossible “to lock-box meaning,”* as the history of scriptural reception empirically demonstrates, and the world’s religious traditions aggregate and recombine in creative ways their symbolic resources. However, it is indeed *possible to locate meanings* if one is clear enough about the delimited context, the evidence for this contextualization, and the superiority of one’s own proposal as a way to read the evidence over others that are on the table. Every act of interpretation is itself dependent upon assumptions about where meaning is to be found (in authors, in readers, in

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words, in actions), what the relationship is between the self who interprets (who is often already in some sense formed by the object of interpretation) and that upon which its gaze falls. Everyone in Swift Hall is engaged with the *praktike* and the *theoria* of interpretation (hermeneutics), and we are explicit about it, though we draw upon different cultural resources, past and present, in the quest (I just used the argot of the Greek Christian intellectuals of the third and fourth centuries, who in turn were naturally employing the Platonizing terminology in which they had been educated).

3. Appreciation for History and Tradition

The work of the Divinity School is based on the constantly reinforced assumption that religious traditions are complex, organic, developing and changing entities. Even those whose historical emergence we can plot (with any confidence) rely on historical, cultural and religious strains and pre-date them, and no religious tradition (Shintoism, Janism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, neopaganism, Hinduism) is either a static or a uniform thing in itself, or in itself as an object of study. That is the problem, of course, with the hypothetical professorial declaration that Christians are crusader baby-killers. The first question a Divinity School student or professor would ask is: which Christians, in what place, when, and how did their actions relate to their religious affiliation (claimed by or about them)? The same is true of the Muslim religious terrorists, the Sikh extremists, et cetera. Context matters — there can be no historical analysis without it — but the particular is also part of a continuum of some sort, of some construction. Everyone in Swift Hall is in time-capture mode — seeking the full reel through the freeze-frame of concrete expressions of religious traditions, while at the same time trying to move from traditional and venerable narratives to fresh options (or none at all). In my own field of study, ancient Christianity, the *historia ecclesiastica* of Eusebius of Caesarea is both a major source of primary source documents and itself a narrative construction of tremendous force that all subsequent interpreters must — in a quest that unites the philological, the hermeneuti-

cal and the historical — interrogate, question and interact with in its own attempts at historiographic work.

So, in the case of the statements about Christians or Muslims as murderers — whether in a hypothetical lecture or the Park51 controversy now consuming America and the world — the Divinity School's purpose is to resource and move the conversation from caricature to argument, from blanket group statements to articulations of what the label "Christian" or "Muslim" has and does and might mean, who falls under that category, what acts are in view, what the context, import and impact are of the statement made, and what it is that makes "religious" violence a special class of violence (if it is). Sweeping generalizations and slo-ganeering are not what we do in the University or in the Divinity School as a part of it — we are responsible to argument and evidence, and hence such statements must be the start and not the end of any conversation. As a panelist then (to return to our departure point), I could not offer a wholesale evaluation of such statements from the putative professorial lectern, because so much depends on who said it, where, when and why, and — and this is key — what happened next. The presupposition of the question cannot be that statements about religion (or anything else) merely hang in the air; they are already part of a conversation, and must be analyzed as such. That is why *we must learn to play with fire*. And if we teach and learn and model a way to do it well here, just maybe the world might be different. ✖