**Checking Our Baggage: In-Class Primary Text Analysis Exercise for Religious Studies**

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**II. Description**

This writing exercise is designed to encourage students in introductory-level religious studies classes to check the assumptions they bring to the subject matter and to develop their critical inquiry skills in this area through close examination of primary text passages. The primary textual sources used may be contemporary or historical, depending on the course context.

Students should be given about 15 minutes in class to read and perform an initial analysis of a brief passage from an unidentified primary text with significance for religious studies. The instructor may give students a choice of passages to examine (3 options are given at the end of this document) or assign a single passage to the class. Students choose from among the short-answer questions provided and write their responses in roughly 1-2 pages total. After students the writing exercise, the instructor discloses the source (author, title, genre, publication information, etc.) of the passage(s). A follow-up discussion in pairs or as a group is highly recommended.

This exercise addresses Research as Inquiry (ACRL Information Literacy Framework threshold concept) by demonstrating two hallmarks of research— its iterative nature and spiral of deepening questions. By prompting students to articulate, reflect on, then refine their initial observations, this assignment encourages students to (1) embrace intellectual humility and flexibility, and (2) practice drawing reasonable conclusions based on their examinations of primary sources and those sources’ religious resonances in light of secondary evidence.

**III. Student Learning Objectives**

Students will:

* Build critical analytical skills for religious studies by using existing knowledge to analyze a primary text.
* Encounter the utility and limits of their first observations and assumptions to cultivate intellectual humility and begin to develop an awareness of their own cultural and religious positionality.
* Value the use of secondary/tertiary scholarly sources for contextualizing and interpreting primary texts in religious studies.
* Begin to consider religious expressions, traditions, dynamics and power structures in the context of historical, cultural, social, political, and/or economic phenomena.

**IV. Assignment Instructions**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this assignment is for you to develop critical analytical skills for religious studies by:

* Analyzing a primary text using your existing knowledge
* Developing intellectual humility and an awareness of your own cultural and religious positionality by reflecting on the experiences and assumptions you bring to the text
* Considering the value of outside scholarly information forcontextualizing and interpreting primary texts
* Starting to consider religious expressions, traditions, dynamics and power structures in the context of historical, cultural, social, political, and/or economic phenomena.

**Directions**

In class, you will be given a short excerpt from an unidentified primary source. You will have 15 minutes to read the passage and write responses to at least 3 of the 7 questions below (about 1-2 pages of writing total). Provide some rationale or evidence for each point you make.

* How would you summarize the passage in your own words (1-2 sentences)?
* What religious tradition(s) do you think it references?
* When do you think this was written?
* What kind of person do you think wrote it (education, class, clergyperson or layperson, occupation, race/ethnicity, gender, religious tradition, etc.)?
* What do you think the purpose of this text might be? Who do you think is the intended audience?
* What do you think the circumstances of the text’s creation were, i.e. what is going on culturally, socially, politically, economically, and/or environmentally?
* What cultural, social, political, economic, or religious dynamics do you think may be at work?

**Criteria for Success**

*[Insert your own criteria or adapt the following to fit your needs. It is recommended that this exercise be followed by a class discussion as a means of assessment and feedback for students.]*

Length:

* 1-2 pages total (short-answer responses)

Mechanics & Organization:

* Adheres to conventions of sentence structure, grammar, word usage, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling in English language
* Clarity of expression

Reflection & analysis

* Address at least 3 of 7 text analysis questions provided
* Evidence or rationale to support each point made
* Quality of primary text analysis and observations based on available information

**V. Discussion Questions**

The following questions are intended to facilitate further discussion or written reflection of the exercise.

* Name and reflect on your initial assumptions and the conclusions you drew. Describe what led you to them. Was it prior knowledge from another class you took, your own experiences or background, or something else? What was your line of reasoning? Be specific.
* Initially, you were asked to analyze a primary source without much context. How confident were you in the assumptions you made and the conclusion you drew? Do you think your initial assumptions and conclusions were justified based on the information available?
* Did your prior knowledge, prior experiences, background, and/or social/cultural/political/economic standpoint color how you interpreted the text initially? Was this helpful or harmful for your critical analysis? How so?
* Would you approach primary sources you don’t have a lot of context for differently after finishing this assignment? Why or not why? If so, how?
* Which aspects do you feel you would need to research further in order to write a good analysis of this passage? Examples include:
* Author(s) of the text (if known),
* Unfamiliar terminology or concepts,
* Religious tradition or group involved,
* Historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and/or environmental circumstances of text’s creation,
* Religious practice, ritual, belief, story, figure/character, etc. alluded to or mentioned.

**VI. Primary Source Passage Examples**

**Passage 1**

“Our religion is knowledge, work, and good intent.

So let us learn good knowledge and let us have wisdom:

Let’s mend our ways, and

Let’s set our intentions straight, and

May God bless us with success.

God keep our religion pure for us, for that’s what holds us together, and set our lives straight in this life we live, and mend our ways to be ready for heaven to which we will eventually return.”

Source:Osama Bin Laden, “Dear Muslim Brothers and Sisters,” n.d. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*: *Declassified Material – March 1, 2016*. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2016/english/Dear%20Muslim%20brothers%20and%20sisters.pdf> (accessed June 9, 2017).

**Passage 2**

“We are in need of making major efforts in our relief work, as those victimized by the current climate change is a very large number, expected to rise. According to the studies, this number is higher than the number of people victimized by wars, for which the states recruit their strongest men, offer their best training and slash major portions of their budgets. …

You have seen one of your Muslim brothers in Pakistan, covered in water up to his chest while trying with both hands to hold two of his five or six year old children above water. So, have you wondered what might have happened to the rest of his children, or haven’t you heard about the women who are imploring you by Allah, the Glorious and Almighty, divine right to come to their rescue.”

Source:Osama Bin Laden, “Letter: Implications of Climate Change,” n.d. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Bin Laden’s Bookshelf*: *Declassified Material – May 20, 2015*. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20Implications%20of%20Climate%20Change.pdf> (accessed June 9, 2017).

**Passage 3**

“Whether Every Act of Lust Is a Sin:

It seems that it is not, for the following reasons.

To know a woman sexually is a natural act, therefore considered in itself it is not a sin, just as neither is it a sin to look at her since each of them is the act of a natural power. But to look at a woman who is not one’s wife is not a sin. Therefore neither is it a sin to know a woman sexually who is not one’s wife.”

Source: Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, translated by Jean Oesterle (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1993). Section 1.15.A.