**Checking Our Baggage:**

**Reflective Primary Text Analysis for Religious Studies**

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**Summary**

This assignment 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.

The assignment addresses Research as Inquiry (ACRL Information Literacy Framework threshold concept), 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 helps students (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.

The assignment consists of two sequenced exercises:

**Part one.** In-class writing exercise analyzing an unidentified passage (1-2 pages)

**Part two.** Reflection and expanded analysis of the identified passage using scholarly sources (3-4 pages)

**Student Learning Objectives**

Students will:

* Build critical analytical skills for religious studies by using existing knowledge to analyze a primary text, then by incorporating secondary information with closer reading.
* Reflect on the utility, limits, and origins of their first observations and assumptions to cultivate intellectual humility and begin to develop an awareness of their own cultural and religious positionality.
* Find and use secondary/tertiary scholarly sources to contextualize their reading of the primary text, deepen their analysis, and learn to value their use when interpreting primary texts in religious studies.
* Begin to place religious expressions, traditions, dynamics and power structures in the context of historical, cultural, social, political, and/or economic phenomena.

**Assignment Description**

**A. Part one: In-class exercise.**

For part one, 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. The initial analysis should run roughly 1-2 pages. After students complete part one, disclose the source (author, title, genre, publication information, etc.) of the passage(s) and facilitate a group discussion so students may share their ideas and receive some feedback before proceeding to part two.

**B. Part two: Reflective analysis paper.**

**Due about 3 weeks after Part One.**

Provide students with the full primary source or instructions for finding it. Outside of class time, students will write 3-4 pages reflecting on their own initial observations or assumptions and reanalyzing the passage in the context of the entire primary document and secondary information. To accomplish this, they are asked to:

1. Reread the passage, and review their analyses from part one.
2. Identify their initial assumptions and conclusions and their bases. List information gaps or questions.
3. Find and read secondary/tertiary scholarly sources to help address questions and deepen understanding.
4. Reflect on their initial assumptions and conclusions.
5. Use the secondary/tertiary scholarly information, closer reading, context within the full primary source, and reflection to rewrite their initial interpretation of the passage in 3-4 pages.

**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
* Using and valuing outside scholarly information forcontextualizing primary texts and deepening your analysis in religious studies
* 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
* Begin to place religious expressions, traditions, dynamics and power structures in the context of historical, cultural, social, political, and/or economic phenomena.

**Task one: In-class exercise.**

In class, you will be given a short excerpt from an unidentified primary source relevant to religious studies and to our course themes. You will have 15 minutes to read the passage and write an initial analysis. Read the passage carefully, then write responses to at least 3 of the 7 questions below (about 1-2 pages 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, checklist, rubric, etc. if this section will be evaluated separately. Otherwise, students keep their composition and move on to task two. It is recommended that this exercise is followed by a class discussion as a means of assessment/feedback for students.]*

**Task two: Reflective analysis paper.**

The reflective analysis paper integrates reflection on your initial assumptions and conclusions with your revised analysis of the passage in a cohesive essay of 3-4 pages (double-spaced, in 12-point font, with 1-inch page margins).

**Steps to completion**

To formulate this paper, complete the following steps. Taking notes as you go and jotting down your answers to the reflection questions posed here will help prepare you to write your revised primary source analysis.

1. Re-read the passage carefully. Look at the full primary source the passage came from. Where does the passage occur? How does it relate to other parts of the text and to the whole text? What function does it serve?

*[Depending on the text and the course context, it may be appropriate to ask students to read the source in its entirety or to read significant sections of it.]*

1. Review your initial analysis (Task 1 in class). Take inventory of your initial assumptions and the conclusions you drew. Describe what led you to these assumptions and conclusions.

* 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.

While you do this, list any assumptions or conclusions you’d like to test further, gaps in the information you have, or other questions that come up for you.

1. Based on the assumptions, conclusions, information gaps, and/or questions you noted in 2) above, find and read secondary or tertiary scholarly sources\* that will help address these issues or questions. Aspects you may want to research this way 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 surrounding the text’s creation,
* Religious practice, ritual, belief, story, figure/character, etc. alluded to or mentioned.

You will be asked to cite at least two scholarly sources in your completed paper. If you have difficulty finding scholarly information to contextualize the source and address your questions, contact a campus librarian for a research consultation.

\* In the context of this assignment, scholarly books, book chapters, and journal articles count as “secondary scholarly sources.” Scholarly handbooks, companions, and encyclopedias count as “tertiary scholarly sources.” Oxford Handbooks Online and Cambridge Companions Online are both good places to look for (tertiary) scholarly information that is at the right level for this short paper.

*[Adjust recommendations for where to start research based on your local resources.]*

1. Revisit the primary source excerpt and your list of assumptions and conclusions from 1) above. Reflect further on how and why you made the assumptions and drew the conclusions you did. In light of what you have learned in class and through outside scholarly sources, consider whether or to what extent the assumptions or conclusions you named held up to this deeper scrutiny.
2. Rewrite the primary source analysis you did in class based on closer reading of the passage, its context within the whole source text, secondary/tertiary scholarly sources you read, and your own reflection. Make use of your answers to questions from steps 2) and 4) above.

You completed 3-4-page paper should:

* Name and reflect on at least 2 assumptions or conclusions connected to your revised analysis.
  + - Describe what led you to these initial assumptions and conclusions, e.g. prior knowledge, experience, etc.
    - Explain whether or to what extent your initial thinking helped or hindered your critical analysis of the passage.
* Reconsider the same questions posed during the initial analysis (see below). Address at least 5 of these 7 questions:
  + - How would you summarize the passage in your own words (1-2 sentences)?
    - What religious tradition(s) does it reference? How so?
    - When was this was written?
    - What kind of person wrote it (education, class, clergyperson or layperson, occupation, race/ethnicity, gender, religious tradition, etc.)?
    - What is the purpose of this text? Who is the intended audience?
    - What were the circumstances of the text’s creation? What was going on culturally, socially, politically, economically, and/or environmentally?
    - What cultural, social, political, economic, and/or religious dynamics are at work?
* Provide evidence or rationale to support each of your points.
  + - Cite the primary source text you are analyzing and at least 2 secondary or tertiary scholarly sources in your paper to support your arguments.
    - Use the Chicago/Turabian Notes and bibliography style to cite your sources. See the [Chicago Manual of Style Quick Guide](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html) (or consult the full 16th edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* or *A Manual for Writers* by K. Turabian).

**Criteria for Success**

This checklist summarizes the criteria for evaluating your paper. *[Insert your own criteria, checklist, rubric, etc. or adapt the following to fit your needs.]*

Length & formatting

* 3-4 pages
* Double-spaced
* 1-inch page margins
* 12-point font
* Chicago/Turabian Notes and bibliography style citations
* Bibliography at the end

Organization & mechanics

* Include introduction, body, and conclusion
* Logical organization and sequencing of ideas
* Clarity of expression
* Adhere to conventions of sentence structure, grammar, word usage, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling in English language

Reflection & analysis

* Describe at least 2 initial assumptions or conclusions that relate to your revised analysis
* Explain how your initial assumptions or conclusions helped or hindered your original analysis
* Address at least 5 of 7 text analysis questions
* Accuracy and depth of primary source analysis
* Evidence or rationale to support each point made
* Use at least 2 secondary/tertiary scholarly sources to advance your analysis
* Cite primary source text and at least 2 secondary/tertiary scholarly sources.

**Additional Questions for Discussion**

The following are additional questions connected to the assignment’s learning outcomes for further discussion or written reflection.

* 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 at first? 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?
* Did power structures or dynamics between religious traditions or within them play a role in the passage you analyzed? If so, how?
* Did cultural, social, economic, and/or political systems or dynamics play a role in the passage you analyzed? If so, which ones? How?
* Did the text reference or allude to specific religious language, practices, objects, stories, figures/characters, or beliefs? How do these references interact with the religious, cultural, social, economic, and/or political power structures or dynamics you identified?

**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.