

Spirit of the Antipodes:
Religion and the Study of Religion in Australia and Aotearoa
New Zealand

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Student Resistance, Misrecognition, and Transformation: Religious Studies at the University of Sydney, 1999-2002

Roland Clark

One effective way of starting a classroom discussion about a difficult reading is to ask everyone in the class to write down what they thought the book was about. Invariably, most people will have understood the author's main point in different ways, and several will have missed the central argument altogether, focusing on subplots or minor questions instead. Every teacher knows the frustration of having taught something again and again, then discovering at the end of the semester that some students have no idea about core concepts that had structured the course. Students seem to misinterpret professorial intention so often in fact, that writing about a program in which one was a student is nothing short of terrifying. Laziness is probably to blame for some of these apparent failures to learn, but scholars are increasingly coming to appreciate that effective learning and teaching involves engaging with the material from a specific subject position, and that student positionalities are often different from those of the teacher or author. Deborah Britzman argues that being confronted with a text should shift the epistemological assumptions of the questioning subject, causing us to return from the encounter with the Other changed and wiser than before.¹ Not all students are willing or able to renegotiate their subject positions, however; the result is that we as teachers often face resistance in the classroom.

The Religious Studies program at the University of Sydney was one of several uniquely formative influences that I encountered for the first time in 1999. Over the next four years, my studies evolved together with my religious identity in a spiralling dialectic of encounter with Otherness.² As a young and obnoxious Evangelical Christian, I was uncomfortable with the regimes of truth promoted in the academy and struggled to find ways to authentically overcome them. Negotiating the epistemological assumptions of the discipline while simultaneously discovering new forms of Christianity meant that my education was characterised as much by resistance and scepticism as it was by enlightenment. Empowerment, in my case, came not by receiving wisdom from the university, but by challenging it and repositioning myself in the process.³

What follows is thus an analytic autoethnography in the tradition of Rachael Gunn and other eminent Australian cultural commentators.⁴ The ethical challenges involved in autoethnography, such as accurately remembering events, not misrepresenting one's research

¹ Deborah P. Britzman, 'Queer Pedagogy and its Strange Techniques', in *Sexualities in Education: A Reader*, edited by Erica R. Meiners and Therese Quinn (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 292-308.

² Brock Bahler, *Childlike Peace in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas: Intersubjectivity as Dialectical Spiral* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).

³ Jennifer Gore, 'What We Can Do for You! What Can "We" Do For "You"? Struggling over Empowerment in Critical and Feminist Pedagogy', in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, edited by Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54-73.

⁴ Rachael Gunn, 'The 'Systems of Relay' in Doing Cultural Studies: Experimenting with the 'Body without Organs' in B-Girling Practice', *Continuum* 30/2 (2016): 1-12.

subjects in ways that may be harmful to their reputations and careers, and protecting identity and confidentiality, are complicated when one was an ‘opportunistic’ participant in the events being discussed and had no intention of analysing the situation at the time.⁵ Moreover, most autoethnography assumes that the researcher is a trained adult, autonomous and able to engage with the research subjects as equals. Writing about one’s time as a student exposes exactly how problematic such assumptions are, because students are still at a very formative point in their lives and do not always fully understand what is happening around them. They are thus particularly vulnerable to misinterpreting pedagogical intentions and consequently misrepresenting the past in their accounts.

I graduated from a selective high school in western Sydney in 1998 and immediately began a Bachelor of Arts in History and Religious Studies at the University of Sydney. I had decided I wanted to become an historian a couple of years earlier, and took classes in Anthropology, French, and Religious Studies, as well as in History. Learning French in a classroom setting was an uninspiring undertaking, but I struggled through three long years of it and emerged with an invaluable research tool. The first-year program in Anthropology introduced the discipline through Bronisław Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and several important functionalists, as well as with debates over the ethical dilemmas created when anthropologists became involved in legal and advocacy work. I left with the impression that Anthropology was a paternalistic, colonial project with serious methodological flaws; a conclusion that took me years to abandon.

Religious Studies and History, on the other hand, quickly became my passions. The first-year Religious Studies program was structured around a comparative world religions paradigm heavily influenced by Ninian Smart.⁶ Our lecturers also discussed Animist religions and new religious movements, but the potential of these subjects to de-centre the hegemony of monolithic ‘world religions’ was lost on me at the time.⁷ The first semester explored religions in Australia and Melanesia, as well as major Asian religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Confucianism. It frequently emphasised historical and textual approaches, meaning that I came to think of the *Sangha* as ‘something like the church’ and of the *Mahabharata* as a text like the Bible.’ Despite stressing that Hinduism as a category was a European invention, my impression was that these were coherent, homogenous faith traditions existing alongside one another in a pluralistic world. At the same time that I approached comparative religion through Judeo-Christian categories, I also discovered Animist and Asian religions as exotic, strange, and intrinsically fascinating. My second semester opened up a whole new world of ideas, practices, and societies that I had never imagined. This semester focused on the monotheistic traditions of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, approaching them once again through historical

⁵ Jillian A. Tullis, ‘Self and Others: Ethics in Autoethnographic Research’, in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, edited by Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones and Carolyn Ellis, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2021), 101-13.

⁶ Suzanne Owen, ‘The World Religions Paradigm: Time for a Change’, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 10/3 (2011): 253-68.

⁷ Carole M. Cusack, ‘Archaeology and the ‘World Religions’ Paradigm: The European Neolithic, Religion, and Cultural Imperialism’, in *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, edited by Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson (London: Routledge, 2016), 153-67.

and textual lenses. I was fascinated by those traditions which I had no prior knowledge of, but also deeply disturbed by the fact that my teachers interpreted Judaism and Christianity in ways that did not resonate with my personal experiences of these Scriptures and traditions.

While my lecturers wanted to make these religions strange by emphasising the thousands of years that separated us from Abraham and Moses, I wanted to discover how these writings could guide religious practices at the end of the twentieth century.⁸ I knew the content of the Bible quite well, which made me uncomfortable with new and unfamiliar interpretations. As Britzman argues, having been schooled in one tradition—in my case, that of conservative Evangelicalism—‘permeates our meanings of education and learning; it lends commotion to our anticipations for and judgments toward the self and our relations with others. It makes us suspicious of what we have not experienced and lends nostalgia to what has been missed.’⁹ Tony Swain endeavoured to critically deconstruct the Bible in his lectures, but he did not explain his goals or methodology, leaving my friends and I confused and defensive.¹⁰ Where he was trying to teach how to contextualise an ancient text, I heard a different interpretation of scripture. We thought he was presenting himself as an ‘expert’ whose interpretation was supposed to be more valid than others, and were puzzled when he wouldn’t provide chapter and verse citations to the passages he discussed.

My encounter with Religious Studies at the University of Sydney was shaped by my previous experiences of evangelical Protestantism. Throughout my life, Christianity has been an important part of my identity and the major paradigm through which I have made sense of the world. I attended suburban Baptist churches throughout my childhood and teenage years. They promoted a pietism of personal Bible study, evangelism, individual prayer, and community singing, but failed to engage with the historical dimensions of the Christian faith or with Christian intellectual culture.¹¹ As a teenager I also joined a Pentecostal youth group affiliated with the Hillsong Christian Life Centre churches. It introduced me to ecstatic, emotional worship coupled with a desire to see miracles and to hear the voice of God.¹²

⁸ Jon Bialecki, ‘The Bones Restored to Life: Dialogue and Dissemination in the Vineyard’s Dialectic of Text and Presence’, in *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism*, edited by James S. Bielo (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 136-56; James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁹ Deborah P. Britzman, *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Professions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 28.

¹⁰ Steven W. Ramey, ‘The Critical Embrace: Teaching the World Religion Paradigm as Data’, in *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, edited by Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson (London: Routledge, 2016); Dominic Corrywright, ‘Complex Learning and the World Religions Paradigm: Teaching Religion in a Shifting Subject Landscape’, in *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, edited by Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson (London: Routledge, 2016), 168-82.

¹¹ Stuart Piggins, *Evangelical Christianity in Australia: Spirit, Word, and World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ken R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to Eternity: A History of Australian Baptists*, 2 vols. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006).

¹² Tanya Riches, ‘‘The Work of the Spirit’’: Hillsong Church and a Spiritual Formation for the Marketplace’, in *Australasian Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements: Arguments from the Margins*, edited by Christina Rocha, Mark Hutchinson and Kathleen Openshaw (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 171-93.

Attending university altered my faith profoundly. To begin with, I discovered a vibrant Sydney Anglicanism through the Sydney University Evangelical Union (SUEU).¹³ Having only belonged to small churches and attending a school where very few students were willing to identify as Christians, I had known religion to be a sectarian, intergenerational experience that few of my peers embraced. The SUEU, on the other hand, was a large student organisation with hundreds of active members. It introduced me to scores of dedicated, sincere, smart young people who loved God and wanted to transform the world. More than anything else, it was friendships with Evangelical students that defined my undergraduate experience. The SUEU engaged with intellectual and existential questions that leaders in my churches had ignored, dismissed, or been unable to answer. It was in this context that I read Christian scholarship by writers such as NT Wright, Oliver O'Donovan, and Alister McGrath, who taught me to value Biblical criticism and historical theology for the first time. I also boarded at Moore Theological College during my first year of university, which gave me easy access to a high-quality theological library and well-educated people to discuss religion with, as well as an intimate experience of one of the Church of England's most energetic and controversial dioceses.¹⁴ Through Sydney Anglicanism, Christianity for me became something that one did with one's head as well as one's heart.

I soon began attending Newtown Mission Uniting Church, an eclectic inner-city congregation with a Methodist heritage and strong charismatic and social justice influences.¹⁵ A number of people at Newtown Mission were or had been students at the University of Sydney, and the congregation approached Christianity with the same evangelical fervour that animated the SUEU. It was at Newtown Mission that I first spoke in tongues and prophesied, and also where I first became good friends with people who were sleeping rough and/or reliant on government welfare. None of this endeared me to the elite values of the secular university.

My Christian upbringing and my involvement in the SUEU and Newtown Mission meant that I encountered Religious Studies from a distinctively confessional subject position and resisted the discipline's ideological presuppositions as different from my own. There are several different ways that students resist knowledge. Drawing on Lacan, Shoshana Felman writes that 'ignorance ... is nothing other than a desire to ignore: its nature is less cognitive than performative ... It is not a simple lack of information but the incapacity – or the refusal – to acknowledge one's own implication in the information.'¹⁶ This was not my experience at all. Intensely aware of the information's potential implications for my spirituality and by extension, my social identity, I engaged with the material with every fibre of my being. Ignoring the wise advice of my teachers not to study my own faith tradition, I wrote an essay that year on the Historical Jesus. The essay argued that,

¹³ Meredith Lake, *Proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord: A History of the Sydney University Evangelical Union* (Sydney: EU Graduates Fund, 2005).

¹⁴ Muriel Porter, *Sydney Anglicans and the Threat to World Anglicanism: The Sydney Experiment* (London: Routledge, 2011); Michael P. Jensen, *Sydney Anglicanism: An Apology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

¹⁵ Peter Bentley and Philip J. Hughes, *The Uniting Church in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publication Service, 1996).

¹⁶ Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 79.

Due to the nature of the sources, no reliable picture can be developed of Jesus other than that based upon faith and presented by the Apostles. Nonetheless, many details may reliably be adduced, both with regards to biographical information and to his message. To claim with Bultmann that ‘we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus’ is clearly wrong, and modern scholarship confirms rather than denies the Jesus of the Bible.

I understood that the preaching of the early Church had shaped the Gospel accounts, but still believed that the lived reality of someone who lived 2,000 years ago could somehow be reliably reconstructed. It was only during my fourth year that an extended engagement with Derrida’s corpus led me to doubt the utility of that approach. As a first-year student I lacked an epistemology that would let me think beyond Cartesian realism, but I believed that I had no right to disagree with alternative interpretations until I understood them on their own terms. In the words of Lisa Delpit, I acquired literate discourse in order not to have to ‘bow before the master.’¹⁷

Academics act as role models for students not only by modelling critical analysis, but also—for better or for worse—through our public personas.¹⁸ That Garry Trompf was able to combine his Christian convictions with a fruitful career as a scholar of comparative religion gave me hope that it was indeed possible to be both an academic and a believer. His example inspired me to keep studying despite my doubts about the presuppositions behind Religious Studies, trusting that these questions would be resolved once I mastered the discipline. I ended up taking three of my four upper-level Religious Studies classes with Trompf, as well as the core Honours courses.¹⁹ The ease with which he moved from European intellectual traditions to Melanesian religions and the religious dimensions of political crises convinced me of the importance of thinking theoretically about religion while relating microhistorical case studies to broad macrohistorical trends.²⁰ Trompf revelled in the surprising and foreign aspects of lived religions, and showed me how to use religion as a window to explore societies and cultures very different from our own.

Trompf gave us freedom to explore topics that interested us in our essays, and consequently played a pivotal role in helping me resolve the tension between my Christian commitments and the secular academy. As John Milbank and others have shown, Religious Studies more than most disciplines is premised on modern notions of secularity and relies on the marginalisation of the

¹⁷ Lisa D. Delpit, ‘Acquisition of Literate Discourse: Bowing before the Master?’, *Theory into Practice* 31/4 (1992): 296–302.

¹⁸ Janet Pollak, ‘Lesbian/Gay Role Models in the Classroom: Where Are They When You Need Them?’ in *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians, Teaching, Queer Subjects*, edited by Linda Garber (London: Routledge, 1994), 131–34.

¹⁹ In Australia, an Honours programme constitutes an additional year of studying following completion of an undergraduate degree with proven success. The programme generally consists of advanced coursework and the completion of a research thesis. An Honours degree is considered to be equivalent to a master’s degree.

²⁰ Garry W. Trompf, *Friedrich Max Mueller as a Theorist of Comparative Religion* (Bombay: Shakuntala Publishing House, 1978); Garry W. Trompf (editor), *Islands and Enclaves: Nationalisms and Separatist Pressures in Island and Littoral Contexts* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1993); Garry W. Trompf, *Payback: The Logic of Retribution in Melanesian Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

sacred within intellectual life.²¹ From an Evangelical perspective, the ideology of Religious Studies is coercive and polemical, which is to say that its analysis is rarely innocent.²² I read the Evangelical critique of the discipline of Religious Studies carefully, only to conclude that the critique was premised upon a modern paradigm that privileges ‘facts’ and metanarratives while ignoring questions of language, power, and discourse.²³ Following Robert Frykenberg’s distinction, whereas Evangelical historians see history as ‘events in the past,’ the cultural historians around me approached it as ‘explanations of perceptions of events.’²⁴ As my encounter with Derrida rendered the former paradigm increasingly untenable, the writings of Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo on deconstruction and religion revealed new hermeneutic possibilities that neither marginalised the sacred, nor bound Christianity to a rigid and outdated epistemology.²⁵ All of the problems about the possibilities of divine intervention that arise when one asks about causality in history disappear upon the integration of cultural histories of experience and everyday life. The problem was definitively resolved for me when Trompf recommended Van Harvey’s *The Historian and the Believer*, which examines the limits of historical inquiry into sacred figures and texts. Harvey concludes that, ‘Faith has no clear relation to any particular set of historical beliefs at all. Faith has to do with one’s confidence in God, which is to say, with one’s surrender of his attempts to establish his own righteousness and his acceptance of his life and creation as a gift and a responsibility. It is trust and commitment.’²⁶ As a student for whom intellectual life and religious identity were inextricably bound together, Harvey’s conclusions were liberating. I became a scholar by reading and writing history, and matured into an adult once I was able to ground my research in a personal identity I was comfortable with. What had changed was not my religious practices or beliefs, but the limiting epistemologies that I had inadvertently incorporated into them.

Similarly, my Honours dissertation on the Russian-Jewish philosopher Lev Shestov introduced me to the rich intellectual traditions of Russian Orthodoxy, which further fed both my head and my heart. Emerging out of nineteenth-century Slavophile traditions surrounding Vladimir Solov’iev, Shestov pioneered a philosophy of religious existentialism that became extremely popular with modernist youth in the 1920s and 1930s, and had an immense formative impact on

²¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).

²² George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²³ Some of the most prominent examples of this literature include Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: Fontana Books, 1957); Roger Shinn, *Christianity and the Problem of History* (St. Louis: Bethany, 1964); George M. Marsden, *A Christian View of History?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975); Ronald Wells, *History and the Christian Historian* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Jay D. Green, *Christian Historiography: Five Rival Versions* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015).

²⁴ Robert Frykenberg, *History and Belief: The Foundations of Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 36-7.

²⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988); John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

²⁶ Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 280.

Albert Camus and others.²⁷ For me, Shestov undermined Cartesian philosophy as an epistemological basis for faith. More importantly, situating Shestov in his intellectual context forced me to wrestle with a number of other philosophers and religious thinkers who have shaped my readings of European modernism and Eastern Orthodoxy ever since.

The Religious Studies department was a small, closely-knit community during my time at the University of Sydney, and this significantly shaped my learning. First Trompf, then Carole Cusack, encouraged me to publish writing that I had produced during my coursework. Trompf helped me revise an essay on the Baptism of Rus' in 988 for publication in *Phronema*, the journal of St Andrews' Greek Orthodox Theological College.²⁸ He also suggested I publish an essay on the career of Father Jeremiah O'Flynn, a Catholic priest who was expelled from the colonies in 1818 for promoting Catholicism without permission from the authorities. I submitted this to a journal specialising in the history of Australian Catholicism. Although it was roundly rejected following peer review, the experience helped me to see myself as a researcher while also pointing in no uncertain terms to the limitations of my scholarship. Cusack ran a conference on 'The Dark Side' during my final year and invited me to present my research on a nineteenth-century Montenegrin poet named Petar Petrović Njegoš.²⁹ Participating in an academic conference as an undergraduate student, and then publishing the paper as part of the conference proceedings, was a privilege that not many university departments are able to offer their students. Scholarship suggests that involving undergraduates in research and publishing is invaluable for their professionalisation, which was certainly my experience.³⁰ Having already published two articles and presented at a conference considerably strengthened my applications to graduate programs abroad, and gave me a taste of what a career in academia might involve.

I became intrigued with a Romanian fascist movement known as the Legion of the Archangel Michael during my third year at Sydney, which seemed to offer an ideal case study on the intersection between religion and extremist politics. The secondary literature available to me in 2001 presented the Legion as a millenarian cult, a topic that Trompf's work on cargo cults had made particularly fascinating for me.³¹ In the words of an essay I wrote at the time, 'to see Romanian fascism simply as a political movement that adopted religious symbolism and ideology

²⁷ Roland Clark, 'Lev Shestov and the Crisis of Modernity', *Arhaeus* 11-12 (2007-08): 233-48; Roland Clark, 'Repositioning Russia: Romanian Orthodoxism's Appropriation of the Russian Silver Age', *Landschaft* 3 (2009): 1-30.

²⁸ Roland Clark, 'Did Baptism Change the Rus'?' *Phronema* 18 (2003): 91-108.

²⁹ Roland Clark, 'The Dark Side in Milton and Njegoš', *The Dark Side: Proceedings of the VIIth International Conference for Religion, Literature and the Arts 2002*, edited by Christopher Hartney and Andrew McGarrity, (Sydney: RLA Press, 2004): 102-19.

³⁰ Anne-Barrie Hunter, Sandra L. Laursen, and Elaine Seymour, 'Becoming a Scientist: The Role of Undergraduate Research in Students' Cognitive, Personal, and Professional Development', *Science Education* 91/1 (2006): 36-74.

³¹ Garry W. Trompf (editor), *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements: Transoceanic Comparisons of New Religious Movements* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990). On the Anglophone historiography of the Legion at the time, see Nicholas M. Nagy-Talavera, *The Green Shirts and Others: A History of Fascism in Hungary and Rumania* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 1970); Bela Vago, *The Shadow of the Swastika: The Rise of Fascism and Anti-Semitism in the Danube Basin, 1936-1939* (London: Saxon House, 1975); and Eugen Weber, 'The Men of the Archangel', in *International Fascism: New Thoughts and New Approaches*, edited by George L. Mosse (London: SAGE Publications, 1979), 317-44.

is to miss the crucial importance of pietistic revivalism, which is what gave the Legion its strength. As soon as it ceased to be characterized by religious revival under the auspices of a charismatic leader, the Iron Guard lost its *raison d'être* and disintegrated into hooliganism and anarchy.' I discovered the concept of civic religion in a seminar taught by Cusack and immediately decided that I wanted to apply Robert Bellah's notion of civic religion to the history of the Legion as part of a PhD dissertation. Judith Keene, the History department's expert on fascism, refused to supervise such a dissertation on the grounds that it was methodologically unsound. Over the next couple of years, the idea that fascism was a 'political religion' became the dominant paradigm within fascist studies.³² Undaunted, I applied to graduate programs in the United States, which were much more open to such an approach. I taught high school in Australia for a year after graduation, then for another eighteen months in Romania, where I learned the language in order to study the Legion. After another seven years of full-time study I concluded that Keene was right, and my monograph on the Legion comprehensively rejected the fascism-as-a-political-religion paradigm.³³ Despite being mistaken, in the process I gained a deeper understanding of how to relate sociological theory to empirical case studies and of the humility that historians need when arguing their ideas.

I taught a number of classes on the history of religions during my graduate studies at the University of Pittsburgh, and taught on religious topics again at Eastern Connecticut State University, then at the University of Liverpool. My experiences as an undergraduate prepared me well for teaching my own students, but the contrast of all three of these places with the University of Sydney was striking. Whereas the Religious Studies program at Sydney was strongly comparative, with an impressive focus on Asian and Animist religions, most Religious Studies programs that I encountered in the US were permeated by Christian presuppositions and focused primarily on monotheistic traditions. Pittsburgh is a largely secular city, but the university draws students from a strong Evangelical hinterland. Teaching Biblical criticism and the histories of Christianity and Islam here reminded me of my own resistance to this material as an undergraduate. Many of these students knew their scriptures well, but found it difficult to appreciate how diverse these traditions have been in different times and places. Haunted by memories of my own intransigence, I tried to present the material in ways that helped rather than hindered students encountering it for the first time. Students in Connecticut were religiously illiterate in comparison to their colleagues in Pennsylvania. Second year students wrote essays on the English Reformation that included references to 'the Christians persecuting the Catholics' and found it difficult to grasp the theological issues involved. It was only when I began teaching Eastern European religions through a Lived Religions paradigm and encouraged students to construct their own understandings of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam by analysing everyday religious practices, that

³² Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Roger Griffin, 'Introduction: God's Counterfeiters? Investigating the Triad of Fascism, Totalitarianism and (Political) Religion', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5/3 (2004): 291-325; Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

³³ Roland Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth: Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

they began to grasp what was involved in doing the sociology of religion. In Liverpool I again taught undergraduate and graduate seminars on peasant mystics, visionaries, pilgrimage and ‘the Unbelieved’ to students who also had little prior experience of organised religion.³⁴ Most of them find the material deeply disturbing because it problematises their pre-existing opinions on religion and religious practitioners. The more I teach these sorts of classes alongside more traditional courses in social and cultural history, the more I return to the comparative approaches I learned as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney.

My personal experiences as both a student and a teacher confirm the pivotal role that student resistance plays in Religious Studies education. Anyone who has spent enough time in a Religious Studies classroom will be able to attest that fundamentalist students who are deeply uncomfortable with the core methodologies of the discipline are all too common, and there is an urgent pedagogical need to understand how to communicate with them effectively and sympathetically, in a way that facilitates learning rather than driving them away from the academy. As Elizabeth Ellsworth writes, ‘the pedagogical relationship itself is unpredictable, incorrigible, uncontrollable, unmanageable, disobedient.’³⁵ We cannot predict how our students will react to the material, nor can we impose our own interpretations on them. What we can do, and what the Religious Studies program at Sydney did for me in an exemplary manner, is to inspire our students to learn more, to penetrate more deeply into the material, and to give them the freedom to learn to think critically in their own time and in their own ways.

³⁴ On the notion of ‘the Unbelieved’, see Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriott, Andrew Redden and Karin Vélez, ‘The Unbelieved and Historians, Part I: A Challenge’, *History Compass* 14/12 (2016): 594–602.

³⁵ Elizabeth Ellsworth, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address* (New York: Teachers College Press), 8-9.