

How We Talk about Jewish Art in World Religions: A Pedagogical Perspective from a Small Liberal Arts College

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Religious Studies educators have an obligation to expose students to inconsistencies in the definition of the word “religion.” By debunking popular myths like “religions need a god/gods” or “religions need a text or canon” students can begin to unlearn long-held ideologies. My introductory-level World Religions class has a thematic focus on art and material culture that becomes the lens trained on each religious tradition studied over the term. The Judaism unit is one in which my students struggle to separate Judaism from Christianity and think critically about their differences.

Teaching Jewish art and material culture allows me to further explain the problem of definitions, categories, and identification of “Jewishness.” Scholars like Samantha Baskind, Larry Silver, Kalman Bland, and Ben Schachter have wrestled with the complex definitions of Jewish art and the definitional necessity of this category. My pedagogical reflection will be about my experience teaching Jewish art as a frame for teaching Judaism in a World Religions class in the Appalachian South. The challenges and pitfalls that come with defining Jewish art, I believe, are a microcosm for the challenges we face when trying to define “Jewishness,” and even further, the challenges we face when trying to define “religion.”ⁱ

For our Judaism unit, my students read from Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver’s *Jewish Art: A Modern History*. As they read, I relate the problem of defining Jewish art to a problem within Jewish Studies and Religious Studies more broadly: Who and what defines Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewish experiences? Students, specifically those raised in the Appalachian South and American Midwest who have been exposed to cultural Christianity, do not understand how to talk about religion—let alone art—that is not overtly devotional, symbolic, or “religiously meaningful.” In their introduction, Baskind and Silver ask two very important

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questions that guide the students: What is Jewish Art?ⁱⁱ And, is it the artist or the art (content) that makes their art Jewish?ⁱⁱⁱ

To practically apply these questions, students search through the Bezalel Narkiss Index of Jewish Art, and look through the Modern Jewish Art database. Students have to select one image (a painting, an installation, a sculpture, etc.) and try to answer three questions: (1) Is the artist of this piece Jewish? (2) How do you think this image, object, or artifact reflects an important part of Judaism or Jewish culture? and (3) Does the content of the piece make it “Jewish” or does the artist’s Jewishness make it “Jewish?”

These questions are raised specifically to create discomfort around defining a person or a religion with ease. The Jewishness of a person or a piece of art is more than just a Google search, as most of my students discovered. In the same way that Baskind and Silver wrestle with the idea of Jewishness in identity and in art, I use this to demonstrate to my students the complexities of defining someone’s religiousness when the category itself is undefinable. Christianity, for many of my students, has been presented as a religious category with definable features, measurable variables, and distinguishing characteristics that make it Christianity and not “something else.” This meant I was likely going to challenge their very idea of religion.

By learning about Jewish art in a World Religions course, students are able to unpack the complexities of strict definitions and categories. Jewish art may represent the history of Jews without mandating a predetermined

definition of Judaism or Jewish experiences. Jewish art exists on a spectrum that considers the artist's experience, positionality, and relationship to the religion. Religions are often defined by the communities they encounter and how those communities encounter religious practices and rituals. Religious Studies scholars have debated the definitions and categorizations of religion for decades. The relationship a person has to a specific religion is dependent on their history, experiences, and once again, their positionality.

In their assignments about Jewish art, students had a range of responses similar to these:

"I truly only had no idea of what Judaism really was."
(Student A)

"Regarding the Silver and Baskind reading, while it is about Jewish art, I think that questions about religious identity and what it means to be Jewish can be answered." (Student B)

"The main thing that I have learned about this religion is the art that makes it so different." (Student C)

Using the Modern Jewish Art database allowed students to see the far-reaching edges of the category of Jewish art. Some students picked pieces by Mark Podwal. Many of his colorful pieces include symbols of Judaism—menorahs, seder plates, even lions. However, some students chose more abstract pieces like sculptures of an *eruv*, European cityscapes, or pieces that reflected parts of Jewish life and not necessarily religious law or practice. As the students reflected on the pieces they chose as well as those chosen by their classmates, they were able to more effectively articulate the ambiguities and challenges of defining Jewish art. In these articulations, they began to struggle with how they could place Judaism in a categorical and allegorical religious box:

"Based on all the readings from this class, to me, having a religious identity, or being able to believe in something that is difficult to see, is very important because having a strong sense of religious identity seems to bring you comfort and security in your life." (Student D)

My students ranged in age, race, religious background, and geographical location. Some of my students were born and raised in the Appalachian South and some were there only for school. I had students from South America, Europe, and the American Southeast. Each student brought their own learned ideas about religion but many ideologies were colored by a cultural Christianity that exists in the United

States, and specifically in regions of the Appalachian South. Their responses ranged in depth, engagement, and provocation. What this assignment made me aware of is the rampant Judeo-Christian myth in America that has failed our students. The myth of the Judeo-Christian "lump" has reinforced that Judaism and Christianity are more alike than they are different. I found this to be especially prevalent with my students who grew up in the Appalachian South. Most students assumed sameness and similarity between Judaism and Christianity, and teaching Jewish art as a way to teach about Judaism helped students disconnect the two religious traditions. Jewish art is different from Christian art because Judaism is different from Christianity. Jewish art does not always reflect Bible stories or prayers. It ranges from religious expression to lived experiences, to modern and abstract artistic expression. By exposing my students to the way that Jewish art is different from the stained-glass windows of the churches they grew up in, they were able to understand and unpack the differences between the two religious traditions.

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i The idea of defining religion has been debated for several decades by Religious Studies scholars. This also extends into the reaches of Judaism. How, if at all, do scholars define something that is religious while also incorporating aspects of race, ethnicity, culture, history, geographic location, and lived experience? For the duration of this piece, I will be thinking about Judaism as a religious category and community that creates space for those who align with humanistic ideologies and more theologically conservative ideologies. With such a short time to teach Judaism in a World Religions course, I often tell my students that most religions outside of Christianity have a lived cultural component that is inaccessible to most American Christians. Judaism, in the way that I discussed with my students, is defined by its communal experience, social network, practice, and ritual, and the lived component—how people live out Judaism.

ii Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver, *Introduction to Jewish Art: A Modern History* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 8.

iii Ibid.