TO ASK WHAT IT MEANS to be a world citizen is to ask a profound ethical question about how one should live with and for others whose worldviews are (sometimes radically) different from one’s own. It is a question that has been asked for many centuries, but perhaps never with such urgency as in our contemporary context, in which grappling with difference, directly or indirectly, has become a part of daily life for a great many people.

To the surprise of many secular scholars who predicted in the mid-twentieth century that the religious life of human beings was moving swiftly along a trajectory toward privatization, if not elimination, religion has reemerged as one of the most critical and threatening markers of difference, as the rise of religiously motivated conflict globally and the deep entrenchment of the “culture wars” in the U.S. amply attest. Discussions of world citizenship (or even U.S. citizenship) that elide the challenge of grappling with religious worldviews expose a covert intolerance at the very core of secularism, calling into question the “liberality” of liberal education. Indeed, the ethical imperative of engaging with different worldviews not only demands that religious traditions be taught, but also raises some trenchant and controversial questions regarding how religious worldviews should be taught.

As a secular teacher of religion at a sometimes fervently secular small liberal arts college, I have had occasion to consider such questions and their implications in concrete as well as abstract terms. The traditional approach to the academic study of religion has most frequently entailed approaching religious traditions as static and discrete entities, “isms” that could be studied objectively through a secular-rational lens. The traditional religious studies curriculum is a smorgasbord of these “isms,” perhaps with a few thematic courses thrown in for dessert. The “isms” examined are, for the most part, limited to those traditions deemed to be “world religions,” and their classroom contours are usually doctrinal, as dictated by the Christocentric model that shaped the field of religious studies. An alternative approach, often combined with the first, grows out of area studies and introduces religious traditions as components of cultural, geographical, and linguistic contexts; students study religions of the Middle East or East Asia—or, far less frequently, religions of Africa or South America.

Students can and do learn about religious traditions through such rubrics, of course, and they might come to comprehend, at least to some extent, the ways in which others view the world differently from themselves. But if we hold the teaching of world citizenship to be a central goal in our courses, the traditional curriculum has some notable weaknesses. First and foremost, the truth claims of religious worldviews are examined, but the truth claims of secular-rationalist worldviews are seldom challenged or even recognized as such. Religious traditions remain “other,” as do the people who view the world through various religious perspectives. Secular worldviews are implicitly privileged as truth; religious worldviews

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are implicitly treated as misapprehensions of reality. Such an approach might teach a degree of tolerance, but it does not challenge students or teachers to question their own perceptions and assumptions. And, in our contemporary global context, that questioning lies at the heart of the liberal education of ethical world citizens. The serious dialogue that world citizenship demands is impossible if the citizen enters discussion convinced of the truth—or even just the superiority—of his or her own perspective. That is why religious perspectives were excluded from the secular academy to begin with, after all. When secularism becomes an exclusivist worldview, it ceases to be liberal in the sense that “liberal education” implies. Perhaps it even ceases to be secular.

I am not questioning the validity or the value of a secular worldview; the separation of church and state that underlies the secular orientation of liberal education is both necessary and efficacious in our pluralistic society. Secular rationalism is, moreover, the very foundation of the method of inquiry that I am advocating. Rather, I am questioning those secularists who (implicitly or explicitly) claim to have determined the truth prior to inquiry and dialogue—secularists who set their own truth claims against those of religious traditions and thus become precisely what they oppose. Perhaps because secularism is increasingly felt to be under siege from the “religious right,” some secularists have dug in their heels, insisting on their privileged claim to truth rather than affirming and enacting the liberal commitment to inquiry and dialogue. The ethical challenge of world citizenship—that is, how we situate ourselves in a world where the overwhelming majority of others view the world through religious lenses—and the fundamental commitments of liberal education demand that religious worldviews be
recognized as having a legitimate voice in the ongoing exchange of ideas.

**The disposition of unknowing**

Studying religious worldviews can present a provocative and potentially illuminating challenge to secular worldviews—if religions are studied in such a way that students and teachers confront the existence and limitations of their own assumptions. But this kind of teaching is exceedingly difficult; once we question whether secular rationalism does in fact provide the clear lens through which the cloudy lenses of other worldviews can be understood, from what position do we begin? Frankly, I don’t know—and it is from that disposition that I try to teach.

To illustrate this disposition of uncertainty, let me explain how I teach Understanding Religious Traditions in a Global Context, the introductory course that replaced World Religions in our recent curricular revisions in the religious studies program at Beloit College. The students and I begin by exploring the ethics of studying others in our global context. As a starting point, I draw a simple distinction between “comprehension” and “understanding” that effectively introduces the disposition of questioning oneself as well as others. “Comprehension” implies a comprehensive grasp of the object of study, a complete and totalizing form of knowledge in which the limitations and assumptions of the knower are not acknowledged. By contrast, the etymology of “understanding” suggests a very different disposition in relation to the unknown: one stands beneath what one does not know. The unknown becomes our teacher.

Understanding entails recognizing one’s own very limited angle of vision and the ways in which it shapes what and how we come to know. It also entails engaging imaginatively with the perspectives of others, trying on, in a necessarily flawed and incomplete manner, different angles of vision. Understanding is a dialogical process of questioning oneself and the other that is guided by the (endless) search for truth. Understanding requires that we learn from, as well as about, the others that we study—others that seek to make sense of their lives and their worlds through the angles of vision they inherit and encounter, just as we ourselves do. At the same time, the ethical disposition of understanding also demands that we recognize both the necessity and the complexity of making ethical judgments and taking ethical action in the world, because it is founded on a responsibility to others that renders an easy “live and let live” form of cultural relativism inadequate.

For most students, the implications of this orientation toward the study of religion do not become evident until we begin to explore particular religious worldviews. Initially, we study the major religious traditions as represented in a “world religions” textbook; since these representations have taken on a life of their own, it is important that students be familiar with them even as we question how they came into being and what effects they have had on the lives of religious people. We start with Christianity so as to understand more deeply how our contemporary conceptions of both secularism and religion are deeply rooted in Christian worldviews, the European Enlightenment, and the legacy of colonialism, then shift to consider in turn Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam.

For each tradition, however, we not only examine the textbook account, but also read a novel or memoir and view a film. It is much more difficult to objectify, essentialize, or dismiss the worldviews of others when one is moved by personal narratives that make vivid the ways in which religious worldviews shape and are shaped by the lives of individuals and their communities. The narratives also present encounters among different worldviews, religious and secular, demonstrating both the possibility and the difficulty of the dialogical model of understanding that we ourselves are trying to cultivate. Finally, examining personal narratives also counteracts the tendencies we might have to fall into extremes of absolutism or relativism (both of which render different worldviews incomensurable and thus effectively shut down dialogue) by fostering some level of identification with the persons whose lives are represented.

Throughout our explorations, I try to resist our desire to come to a conclusion, to teach instead the questions themselves and the act of questioning. As a result of this approach, students frequently find themselves becoming uncertain of their prior assumptions about the world. One first-year student wrote of his experience in the course,

All of these new ideas and feelings left me not knowing what to think. I had always
felt sorry for religious people. It was almost as if I thought I knew better. Seeing people worship made me feel bad that they still had such primitive ideas in such a scientific world. As we progressed in our studies I saw how very wrong I was. The beauty of many of these religions was astounding to me. For once I felt that I was the one that was left out, that they had something I didn’t understand (Robinson 2004).

These words provide a powerful indication of the kind of impoverished perspective that can accompany the belief that one’s own worldview—whatever it may be—is correct or superior to the worldviews of others. They also point to the ways in which the study of religious worldviews can enrich our perspectives on life, the world, and relationships with others. According to the same student, “the most important lesson I have learned in this class is how little I know. That seems like a simple statement, but really realizing that you do not know as much as you think you do is incredibly humbling. I have gone from thinking that I have it all figured out, to wanting to try to see how others have figured it out.”

**Acting without knowing**

In light of the ethical question that underlies the notion of world citizenship—how should we live with and for others who hold worldviews different from our own?—this increased propensity for self-doubt and for learning from others would appear to be a positive development. At the same time, world citizenship demands not only reflective thought, but also effective action. One of the undeniable dangers of teaching questions rather than answers is that students will be immobilized by doubt. How does one ground ethical actions in a disposition of unknowing?

Again, my only answer is to teach the question, both through concrete examples and abstract inquiry. We do not simply focus
A position that rejects deep liberal inquiry into religious worldviews simply because they are “religious” is a much greater threat to liberal learning, especially in light of globalization.

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