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Religious Cultural Artifacts

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Describe a successful classroom teaching tactic that could be replicated by other instructors.

Religious Cultural Artifacts

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The context: I have used this exercise with nontraditional students in my undergraduate World Religions course. This exercise can be easily adapted for online, face-to-face, or hybrid classrooms.

The pedagogical purpose: To help students identify concrete ways in which religion is present in the culture around them.

Description of the strategy: Students identify a physical cultural artifact that is a byproduct of religious influence. They write a two-page paper that answers the following five questions (taken from *Culture Making* by Andy Crouch, [Intervarsity Press, 2008], which is not a text associated with the course):

1. What does the artifact assume about the way the world is?
2. What does the artifact assume about the way the world should be?
3. What does the artifact make possible?
4. What does the artifact make impossible (or at least more difficult)?
5. What new culture is created in response?

The students then give a brief multimedia presentation in class about their religious cultural artifact, covering the answers to the five questions. The presentations average seven to ten minutes each, which makes this exercise ideal for longer class formats. They could easily be adapted for use in an online learning environment, utilizing Prezi or Google Presentation. Students come up with all sorts of great artifacts for exploration: Buddhist prayer flags hanging from porch eaves, disposable communion cups, a Jesus-shaped lawn sprinkler, even a jelly-filled donut shaped like a voodoo doll. The students have fun with the research and are engaged in their colleagues' presentations.

Why it is effective: The exercise takes abstract concepts and makes them concrete through identifying tangible objects that demonstrate different ways in which religions form culture. It opens their eyes to both the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which religion is present around them in their everyday lives. I assign this exercise twice during a term. By the second attempt, the students' biggest complaint is choosing just one artifact to explore. Having to go through the process of finding and analyzing artifacts themselves, the students make connections between the course material and their everyday lives, they engage in practically-oriented critical thinking, and they further reinforce the abstract concepts they are exposed to in readings and lectures.