

From “Folk Religion” to the “Search for Meaning” Teaching Folklore Outside the Discipline

Leonard Norman Primiano

Volume 23, Number 2, 2001

Regards sur l'avenir
Looking Forward

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087934ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087934ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Primiano, L. N. (2001). From “Folk Religion” to the “Search for Meaning”: Teaching Folklore Outside the Discipline. *Ethnologies*, 23(2), 35–59.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087934ar>

Article abstract

This article discusses the challenges of assembling and teaching a course on vernacular religion in an Institute of Religious Studies. The interface of folklore and folklife studies with religious studies in the classroom offers rich opportunities for students to learn about the lived religion of others as well as themselves.

FROM “FOLK RELIGION” TO THE “SEARCH FOR MEANING”

Teaching Folklore Outside the Discipline¹

Leonard Norman Primiano

Religious Studies, Cabrini College, Radnor, Pennsylvania

In the mid-1980s, while working on a doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania where I combined both Folklore and Folklife and Religious Studies, Folklore Department chair Kenneth S. Goldstein asked me to create an undergraduate course with the title, “Introduction to Folk Religion”. I envisioned a course with many objectives: I wanted the students to become sensitive to the public and private expressions of religion, including religious experience; I desired them to be aware of the vitality of the study of belief and belief systems; and I sought to sensitize them to the individual negotiations of religion apparent even within powerful religious institutions. The summary of this offering, as I now list it in the course guide of Cabrini College, the Roman Catholic liberal arts college in the suburbs of Philadelphia where I currently teach, reads as follows:

This course will introduce the study of religion through the exploration of the search for meaning among religious people, with the emphasis placed on Christian “folk” religion in Europe and America. Among the topics to be discussed are the Holy Shroud of Turin, stigmata, incorruptibility of holy persons, relics of the saints, demonic possession, healing miracles, magic, divination, historical witchcraft and contemporary Goddess Religion, as well as apparitions of the Virgin Mary.

While a folklorist may not be surprised by this subject matter, it has been my experience that this is not a typical course in a department of

-
1. I wish to thank Michael Robidoux, Deborah Bailey, Elizabeth McAlister, Charlie McCormick, Michael L. Murray, and Kathleen Malone O'Connor for their thoughtful assistance in the production of this essay.

religious studies or theology, whether in a secular or religious context. In fact, I find myself in the position of being possibly the only folklorist teaching in a department of religious studies in a Catholic college or university in the United States.

The roots of the study of folk religion in European ethnology grew out of the concerns of the German Lutheran minister Paul Drews to instruct or, perhaps it is more accurate to say, support young pastors as they encountered the personal understandings and interpretations of religion by their congregants (Yoder 1990: 67; Primiano 1997: 711-712). I share Drews's interest in the religion of the people, and certainly find it necessary to clarify points of student misunderstanding concerning Christian tradition. I, however, am careful not to use this course as a corrective of what is wrong with the students' beliefs, but as an encouragement for them to appreciate the variety and creativity of people's religion.

My original "Introduction to Folk Religion" course complemented a graduate level offering on "Folk Religion" by my mentor, Don Yoder, who created the first course in America on Folk Religion at the University of Pennsylvania in 1957 while he was a member of the Department of Religious Thought, as it was then called. I offered the introductory course several times at Penn as a College of General Studies class open to undergraduates and adult education students; I taught it again at the undergraduate and graduate level as a visiting professor of folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland; and I am currently teaching a version of it at my current post at Cabrini College, where it is now entitled: "The Search For Meaning". In fact, when I arrived at Cabrini in the fall of 1993, I took that title from my former colleague, Margaret Reher, to name my course on "religion as it is lived... as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it" (Primiano 1995: 44).

I owe a special debt to the father of American folklife studies, Don Yoder, as many North American folklorists do, not only for influencing me to study religion as it is lived and expressed, but for showing me a way to teach people's religion which made the subject matter vital. Like Jean Simard at Laval University, Yoder dedicated his career to the study of religious folklife. Simard gave particular attention to Roman Catholics and their religious beliefs and practices; Yoder, while quite catholic in his interests and teaching, concentrated his work on Pennsylvania as a religious landscape and Protestant expressive region.

Originally published in a special issue of *Western Folklore* in 1974, Yoder's general definition of folk religion was "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion" (1990: 80). Yoder's approach to "folk religion" in Christian cultures, while firmly rooted in the appreciation of texts, added a dimension that no other class on religion ever gave me; he emphasized the entire life and environment of the religious person: clothing, food, music, narratives, the church edifice and its appointments; the domestic environment with its home shrines, outdoor altars, statues, candles, and word-centred blessings on birth and death certificates; home and shrine paintings on tin, canvas, cardboard, brick and stone; medals and stones to be bought, worn, and rubbed by the faithful; and paper ephemera such as Roman Catholic holy cards, letters from heaven, or edible Pennsylvania German charms for good fortune.²

His graduate class was a testament to Yoder's interest in the European folklife approach. This course celebrated religion as it is lived. He did all this through a wonderfully Yoder-esque use of tape-recorded material and slides to illustrate his lectures. Yoder did not just tell us that costume and dress were important indicators of religious belief and traditional religious expression or have us read his essay on this topic (Yoder 1969), he would teach with slides showing us objects in context. Or he would bring in examples from his own collection of religious materials and let us come in contact with the actual objects. Not only did Yoder tell us that nineteenth-century women's bonnets were important signs of social status among the "Plain Sects" of the Pennsylvania Dutch including the Mennonites, Amish, and Moravians in conjunction with their belief system, he brought in any number of examples to show us their colors, textures, and sizes. He also had female students model them to show the class how they were worn and what they actually looked like. And in the ultimate example of Yoder's pedagogy of contagion, it was not enough to hear about scholarly studies and see them in bibliographies, he would show slides of the actual books to his students.

I may not show slides of books in class, but this appreciation for religious material culture made such a lasting impression on me that I

2. Yoder's research into religious material culture can be found throughout the pages of the journal *Pennsylvania Folklife* which he co-founded and co-edited with Alfred Shoemaker in 1949, and which he edited from 1961-1978. See also his analysis of the Pennsylvania Pietist *Picture-Bible* of Ludwig Denig (1990).

also try to bring a piece of religion into every religion class that I teach. I am constantly in search of such examples. They can be the latest *Sun* tabloid proclaiming that the "Holy Shroud Sheds Tears"; large bus stop posters asking commuters to call 1-800-MARY; Vodou bottles with their syncretistic images of Christian saints; neolithic goddess kitchen magnets; Sunday school medallions; St. Christopher — patron of safe travel — pins for your pet's collar; Virgin of Guadalupe gear shift knobs; or laminated plaques of Jesus on skates enjoying a zesty game of hockey. All of these objects now complement my own collections of slides including everything from partially white-washed images of saints in the Zürich Grossmünster to the bleeding stigmata wounds of Padre Pio.³

Yoder taught me three special lessons about the classroom. The first was to appreciate the historical and contemporary expression of religion in everyday life. The second was to feel free to reconceptualize his understandings of folk and popular religion. And the third was to be courageous and experiment in my classes with methods of teaching religious folklife. Working with Yoder also empowered me to attempt something that he never succeeded in doing: getting religious studies scholars — in my case, scholars of American religion — to notice folklore and folklife scholarship and to work to achieve a mutually cross-pollinating theoretical and methodological approach to lived religion applicable to scholarly and classroom work. I have called this approach the study of "vernacular religion" (1995; 1997).

The introductory sections of my course are designed to establish, for the students, my theory of vernacular religion as the methodological foundation that the rest of the course will follow. Specific issues defined and discussed in the course are religious belief systems, the historical and contemporary expression of religious culture, and the importance of supernatural experience to the formation and communication of religious belief. I have my students read everything from historian Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1982) and Peter Brown's *The Cult of the Saints* (1981) to social scientist Felicitas Goodman's world survey of possession states, *How About Demons?* (1988) and journalist Margot Adler's participant observation of the subculture of contemporary Wicca and Paganism, *Drawing Down the Moon* (1986/

3. For an analysis of how such objects relate to the Roman Catholic idea of "sacramentality", as well as their presence within the context of post-modern Catholicism, see Primiano (1999). See also Barna (1994).

1997). A recent outstanding addition to available resources is Kay Turner's beautifully illustrated, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars* (1999) which draws upon careful historical study and sensitive ethnographic work to illuminate the vital ritual world of women.⁴

I also use video-taped materials extensively, drawn from a wide range of popular media representations of American religion, such as the talk shows of Oprah, Phil, Sally Jesse, and Geraldo, as well as appropriate documentaries drawn from network or cable productions (for example the newsmagazine "20/20's" televised exorcism or the Arts and Entertainment Network's broadcast on Vodou). Historical treatments of lived religion are also noteworthy, as are occasional films germane to course themes. I have used everything from *The Song of Bernadette* (1943) to *Resurrection* (1980).⁵ In their presentation of a plurality of perspectives, television talk shows and newsmagazines, especially those from the 1980s and early 1990s, become forums for the expression of both institutionalized American religion and the variety of belief systems best described as "contemporary spiritualities" (See Wuthnow 1998; Roof 1993, 1999).⁶ Religion presented on such programs can be perceived as organized, established forms of religious belief and practice, that is, religious traditions that have taken institutional form. Spirituality, however, can be understood as more multilayered belief and practice, representing the core truths of one or several religious traditions, contributing to the creation and nurturing of a private (and sometimes community) belief system.

The benefit of such media materials lies in their ability to express the religious beliefs of ordinary people, as well as to inform the students

-
4. A number of useful books on vernacular religion from historical and contemporary perspectives have appeared in recent years, and could also be used in such a course: for example, Orsi (1985, 1996, 1999); Badone (1990); Hall (1997).
 5. College and university courses concentrating exclusively on the topic of film and religion have become quite common in the last decade. Two books suitable for class texts are Martin and Ostwalt (1995) and Mills (1996).
 6. This spirituality of seeking has been especially associated with the American "baby boomer" generation, who were born over the span of years from 1946 to 1964, and represent a population of 76 million men and women (Roof 1993: 1). See also Beaudoin's analysis of the spiritual journey of the children of the subsequent generation, the so-called "Generation X" (1998).

about the religious beliefs of the viewing public and the creative choices of television producers and executives. I, especially, have required my students in weekly journals to analyze and reflect on the interactive dynamics of belief between the media and the viewing audience.

I have learned from using video materials that students begin this course with an intrinsic deficit concerning television. They absorb television content, but do not critically assess what they view. They especially perceive television talk shows as a lightweight diversion, and their contents not a subject fit for serious reflection, especially in the college classroom. I was therefore forced to develop a pedagogical method for using televised examples of spirituality in the contemporary classroom. First, I introduce the importance of critical reflection on cultural products such as television.⁷ Second, I ask the students to view these particular programs with critical perspective as televised occasions of the expression of religious belief. They are to look for the beliefs expressed in these episodes, no matter how controlled these representations may be by hosts or producers. Third, I remind them that they need to be open minded about spiritual subjects, even controversial or unusual ones, since thinking critically does not imply losing respect for a belief system or acting in a disrespectful way to its believers. Fourth, I encourage them to realize that these cultural products are enormously important media texts for understanding contemporary vernacular religion. Finally, I allow enough time for any personal narratives of the supernatural from the students to emerge for class consideration and discussion. The act of watching and listening to these televised belief stories often triggers storytelling about the supernatural from the students themselves, a veritable return to story recitation around the campfire but now with a more critical perspective on the tales and tellers. The use of popular culture examples makes these classes particularly successful as they unify the teacher with the students in considering materials with which they are all familiar. The students soon realize that there is substance behind the sensationalism, which usually relates to their own beliefs and experiences.⁸

I strongly believe it is necessary to balance relevant guests with the use of video examples, displays of religious material culture, music,

7. Bourdieu (1998) has recently produced an especially helpful short text for such discussions.

8. See Primiano (2001a) for a discussion of the significance of such media examples of the supernatural on American television.

and scholarly and devotional course readings. The orchestration of appropriate guests for my course is a delicate alignment of local resources, personal contacts, and luck. When my plans fall into place, I am able to retain the most remarkable roster of speakers; when they do not, I only have a few. Appropriate honoraria, proper meeting rooms, convenient and flexible scheduling, and committed, courteous, and inquisitive students are all important factors in the success of this component of the course. My guests are drawn from both the scholarly community and the believing community. Guest scholars have been graduate students who did fieldwork about religious people, such as Bill Westerman (1995), who explored Latin American liberation theology and its impact within North America, or Margaret Kruesi (1995), who studied the healing narratives of the pilgrims at the Philadelphia shrine of St. John Neumann. Guest believers who are kind enough to give their time and relate experiences from their personal religious lives to the class have included an osteopathic resident who has had mystical experiences at the Marian apparition of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, devotees of Catholic holy people such as Padre Pio, a priest who wrote the position paper for the canonization of Mother Katherine Drexel, and a United Church of Christ minister speaking about the religious lives of her congregants. Two of my favorite and most useful guests have been a Wiccan priestess who lectured and then ritualized with the class, and a Vodou priestess or mambo who invited the class to her weekly worship services.

The saga, for example, of establishing contact with Gro Mambo Angela Novanyon Idizol, Vodou priestess, who eventually became a regular guest, is a story in several chapters. I had been trying for the first four years of the course at Penn to invite a Vodou practitioner to the class. My first effort ended in failure which, as it turned out, was almost as insightful as her appearance would have been. The Wiccan priestess, who is a colleague and has been a regular guest, was able to contact through a friend a member of a local Vodou *humfor*, or temple. Through this third-party introduction, the invitation to speak to the class was extended and cautiously accepted, after a personal meeting between the witch and the *ounsi*, or initiated member, at her place of employment. I prepared my students for her appearance, only to be called by my witch friend at the very last minute, within two hours of the class, saying that the guest had communicated with her and felt unable to attend. With no time to arrange an alternate guest and no lecture prepared to fill the time adequately, I was at a bit of a loss. This is the chance that

one has to take whenever attempting to bring guests and students together in the environment of the classroom.

My witch friend did communicate to me a complex and disturbing chain of events leading up to the refusal of this guest to appear. I decided that the story behind her nonappearance was just as instructive about contemporary religious belief as the intended classroom appearance. I, therefore, invited the witch to come and speak about the Vodou practitioner who would not come. She narrated a sequence of events relating to her friend who had arranged the original introduction to this Vodou practitioner.

The witch noted that her friend, who was also her neighbour, had been experiencing for some time a strange emotional and spiritual *malaise*, and a growing sense of disquiet and anxiety centred in her apartment. She described her friend's feelings as an overwhelming impression of coldness inside her home that was not related to any physical condition. The witch offered her neighbor spiritual assistance in the form of a ritual cleansing of her apartment, an exorcism of any negative energies within the space, and a spell of warding to protect her from any personal malevolence. At the peak moment of performing these rituals, the Vodou practitioner called on the telephone and abruptly demanded that these activities be stopped immediately. This uncanny communication was followed on the day of the class by her call refusing to appear. Her refusal was accompanied by a not very veiled threat to the witch of spiritual harm. "Be careful", she said. That evening the witch, after taking what she felt were necessary ritual precautions, was my guest and she narrated this series of disquieting events.

I approached these experiences as an opportunity to explore with the amazed students the dark side of belief systems such as Vodou which often concentrate so strongly on the struggle between forces of good and evil that the individual awareness of believers can become obsessed with perceptions of spiritual danger. Such perceptions may cause fearful or negative perspectives within their daily lives and present obstacles to communication with nonbelievers.⁹

9. These encounters with Vodou were taking place at a time in the mid to late 1980s when practitioners were hesitant to speak openly about this belief system and before such useful texts on African-based religion as Murphy (1988), Brown (1991), Desmangles (1992), Hurbon (1995), and Galembo (1998) were available for classroom use.

Happily, my recent experiences with the Vodou community have been more uplifting. After shying away from the subject, I was told by a former student that the husband of a local Vodou Gro Mambo or high priestess was working with him at a nearby bookstore. That information started a series of informal and formal meetings with the husband to arrange Mambo's visit to the class.

It has been my custom to arrange with my guests to take them to dinner before evening classes. When possible, I liked to patronize my favorite restaurant, the Keyflower Dining Room, adjacent to the University of Pennsylvania campus and until 2001 a business managed and staffed by members of Father and Mother Divine's International Peace Mission Movement. This meal often provided a context for interesting and unusual interfaith communication. When I called the husband to arrange the meal, I was told that Mambo could not accept my offer to dine there because of dietary restrictions and possible unsettling spiritual vibrations. These same vibrations could, in fact, also prevent Mambo from even entering the classroom building where our sessions were being held. To say the least, I was a bit nervous until I had her safely in the room. Her vivacious and open personality, however, made these occasions among the most stimulating evenings in my teaching life and have certainly made up for the loss of my dinner with Mambo Angela. The benefit of these guests lies in their ability to communicate far better than any book, lecture, or slide, the *affective* quality of religion because religion as it is lived can only be discovered by talking to actual believers.

This course does not try to achieve full closure. I provide no answers, only more questions. I try to build a tolerance for religious diversity and a curiosity for what that diversity is. All religion, no matter what its historical or contemporary context, is living, is a process of interpretation, is creatively expressed, and is vernacular. In the end, I do not consider the topics of this course to be fringe elements of religion, but an introduction to the universal elements of religion, from which every undergraduate can further explore other religious traditions and their own religious lives.

"The Search For Meaning" is an appropriate name for a course on vernacular religion. While the content may concern beliefs and practices found throughout world religion, the course must, at the same time, engage the students in the exploration of their own spiritual lives. This result is achievable at the secular University of Pennsylvania, as it is at

the Catholic Cabrini College. My students feel that these classes are actually relevant to their lives and their innermost thoughts, unlike many courses that they take in college. This feeling arises not because they are all incipient stigmatics or have been possessed, but because such a course acts as the occasion to apply traditional religious subject matter to their spiritual interests and existential concerns. Their interests and concerns stimulate the students to apply the materials of the course to questions of practical utility in everyday life. What do post-industrial apparitions of the Virgin Mary tell us about life in the last 200 years? Are women more “religious” or “spiritual” than men? Why are women often found at the centre of vernacular religious belief and practice? What do contemporary earth religions teach us about nurturing our planet and ourselves? What does intercessory prayer to the saints indicate to us about the need for alternate forms of medical treatment? What can an openness to vernacular religious expressions teach us about other cultures existing within our own society, including that of our own family? And how can an appreciation of religion as it is lived bring us closer to an appreciation of what we feel is the sacred?

Don Yoder has noted that “the term [folk religion]... moved out of religion proper into the general academic world, where it... created a strong sub-category in the European discipline of folk-cultural studies” (1990: 67-68). Religion has also been of interest to American folklorists, but certainly not a priority for contemporary folklore departments. Many papers address topics in religious belief and practice at American Folklore Society meetings. But there are no folklore programs whose priority is to prepare religious studies students to teach about the culture of religious belief — either in confessional institutions of religious training like Christian seminaries, divinity schools, and rabbinical colleges, or in secular departments of religion. In a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* (Feintuch 1995) addressing “Common Ground: Keywords for the Study of Expressive Culture”, astonishingly, the word “belief” was not one of them.

How does the interface of religion and religious studies apply to the concerns and work of folklore and folklorists? Does it represent an untapped resource of scholarly and employment opportunities still waiting to be explored? Beyond creating relevant college or university courses on folk or vernacular religion that challenge students to be knowledgeable about their own religious traditions as well as curious and open to the religious belief systems of others, folklorists can show

valuable concern about the way religion is perceived in the larger context of North American society.

For example, competently trained religious folklife scholars can, within public school systems and local and federal law enforcement agencies, dispel rumours about Satanism, or the ever-present confusion of any number of forms of Satanism with Vodou and contemporary Witchcraft. I have been told that my small article on Halloween (1987) has been helpful in Midwestern school systems by assisting those individuals who are battling against conservative Christians' notions that Halloween is a demonic feast that should not be celebrated by children or even expressed in the school building through parties, costuming, or decoration. Police forces certainly need the expert opinion of folklorists trained in religion and contemporary legend when they have to deal with Satanic panics within their communities, the dabbling of teenagers who think they are a part of some young Satanism league, or the plethora of illusory cases reporting Satanic ritual abuse and murder.

On a more positive note, folklorists in the schools could also contribute to cross-cultural understanding in the exploration of religion as a part of our multicultural North American heritage, thus leading to greater tolerance and an improved sense of identity in young people. Additionally, folklorists must be available to give something back to the communities and individuals who are consultants for their research or teaching. In both 1999 and 2000, Mambo Angela asked me to address plenary sessions of her newly formed National African Religion Congress, meeting in Philadelphia. My first presentation noted the significance of this first meeting of African-based religions within American religious history and urged the assembled to take great care to preserve and archive materials relating to their development and activities. My second occasion addressed how significant it has been to teach about African-based religions to my students, how my knowledge and ability to teach about such religions has evolved, and how practitioners must remain open to appearing as guests to explain their beliefs in educational contexts (see Primiano 2001b).

The methods and approaches I have developed and detailed in this paper are not the only folkloristic ways to convey religion in the classroom, nor the only applications that could be made of such knowledge. But they are grounded in folklore's chief contribution to the study of religion, which is attention to the emic parameters of religion in people's everyday lives, in their oral and material culture, and in

their vernacular systems of belief. I invite readers to develop their own sensibilities and methods which can convey this unique folkloristic appreciation of religion as they listen to actual believers and engage with them in the classroom, in the home, and in the public sector, always working to achieve that dinner with a mambo.

Commentary/Commentaire : Marcel Bénéteau, Michael Robidoux

Marcel Bénéteau : Merci, M. Primiano, pour cette communication très intéressante. Comme vous le savez, Leonard Primiano enseigne un cours de religion populaire au Collège Cabrini à Philadelphie. La religion populaire, comme le nom anglais du champ d'étude l'indique très clairement, « folk religion », aurait un lien direct avec le folklore et l'ethnologie. Ce qui nous intéresse surtout ici, je crois, c'est le fait que le cours en question est enseigné dans le cadre d'un programme d'études religieuses et non dans un programme de folklore et d'ethnologie.

L'enseignement à l'extérieur de la discipline... Je pense que cela vaut la peine de se pencher sur ce phénomène, d'abord pour ce que le processus peut amener à la discipline de l'ethnologie, et aussi pour ce qu'il peut amener aux autres disciplines qui accueillent l'ethnologue. Dans le cas des études religieuses, peut-être pourrait-on dire qu'il y a une sorte de rapprochement naturel à faire, mais je crois qu'il sera intéressant aujourd'hui de pousser la discussion un peu plus loin, de considérer des croisements ou des greffes un peu moins évidents... comme l'exemple dont M. Robidoux va nous parler dans les jours à venir, au sujet du folklore et du sport.

M. Primiano a d'abord décrit le développement et l'évolution de son cours, « The Search for Meaning / A la recherche de signification ». Nous voyons bien le but du cours... Ce n'est pas une étude de dogme ou de théologie ou de liturgie. Il s'agit plutôt d'un examen des expressions populaires du spirituel dans la vie quotidienne à travers les objets, les pratiques, les croyances des adhérents. C'est donc exactement l'approche ethnologique, une approche qui tient compte de la vie et de l'environnement des témoins.

M. Primiano souligne son emploi de sources diverses, artefacts, objets religieux plutôt traditionnels, comme des images, des statues, des objets de culte, mais aussi d'éléments qui élargissent, sans doute, notre notion, notre définition du fait folklorique... des émissions de télévision, des manchettes de journaux tabloïds, ceux qu'on lit seulement

en attendant de payer pour nos épiceries... Et puis toutes sortes d'autres exemples que, normalement, on classerait comme « quétaineries » peut-être, mais ce sont tous des objets intéressants, ainsi que l'importance de témoins pour parler aux étudiants. Tout cela pour bien situer l'objet d'étude dans la vie et l'expérience quotidienne des étudiants, afin de les encourager à confronter leurs propres attitudes et croyances.

Je crois que c'est comme cela que nous aimerions tous enseigner, en tout temps. J'ai beaucoup aimé ce terme, si je peux le traduire ainsi, la « pédagogie de la contagion »... Mais je crois que dans le cadre de la discussion d'aujourd'hui, on pourrait tenter de voir comment ces méthodes d'enseignement ethnologique pourraient aussi se jumeler avec des disciplines autres que les études religieuses.

M. Primiano conclut sa communication en offrant quelques observations sur les conséquences que pourrait avoir cette approche ethnologique à l'extérieur de la discipline. Je crois que ce serait une piste intéressante à suivre dans la discussion, et d'abord le fait que la possibilité de la pratiquer pourrait créer de nombreux postes pour les ethnologues n'est sûrement pas un point à négliger. J'ai enseigné moi-même un cours de littérature orale dans le cadre d'un département de français qui n'était pas du tout ouvert au folklore et à l'ethnologie. C'est un faux pas que le département en question n'a jamais répété. Mais de mon point de vue, les étudiants y ont gagné, en acquérant une bonne appréciation du parler d'histoires régionales, de termes traditionnels qui reviennent dans la littérature écrite, du recyclage d'éléments légendaires qu'on retrouve dans la culture populaire aujourd'hui. Bref, cela a peut-être élargi leur notion de la littérature et de son lien avec la vie réelle. De mon côté, j'ai profité d'une nouvelle perspective en approchant le matériel d'une façon plus littéraire.

Mais j'ai retenu aussi que ce n'est pas seulement une question de postes académiques. M. Primiano suggère d'autres possibilités découlant d'une formation en ethnologie / études religieuses, comme par exemple, dans les conseils scolaires qui desservent une population multiculturelle avec toute sa diversité de coutumes, croyances, pratiques religieuses, ou bien, au service d'une agence de police qui doit examiner des accusations de rites sataniques.

Je crois que la discussion pourrait être étendue pour inclure d'autres disciplines et domaines d'activité. Est-ce que les étudiants en droit ne pourraient pas profiter d'une certaine connaissance de l'approche

méthodologique pour ce qui est, par exemple, de la relation entre la transmission orale et les récits de témoins ou les attitudes des personnes envers la loi, les avocats et les juges ? Est-ce qu'un étudiant en médecine ne devrait pas au moins être au courant des attitudes et des croyances populaires concernant les nouveaux traitements et médicaments, la nutrition, les remèdes populaires ? Serait-ce là un rôle pour un ethnologue ? Je pose la question. Ce sont deux exemples. Je suis certain que, dans la salle ici, il y a une grande variété d'expériences. Par exemple, Pauline Greenhill pourrait nous parler des échanges qui se produisent entre l'ethnologie et Women's Studies. Donc, je vous invite à partager vos réflexions là-dessus, et je pose la question aux membres de l'auditoire aujourd'hui.

Michael A. Robidoux: I have always enjoyed listening to Dr. Primiano speak at academic conferences because of the questions that I am left with following his presentations. The case is no different today. However, the task I've been assigned as discussant requires that I address these questions myself rather than simply directing them privately to our speaker. Therefore I shall attempt to consider various points that have been brought up, in hope that further questions will be generated, rather than trying to attempt a closure that I don't believe is ever Leonard's intention.

I will begin with an issue that I believe will be thematically consistent throughout our meetings this weekend; the tremendous value we, as folklorists/ethnologists, have in post-secondary pedagogical settings. Leonard says that he brings "a piece of religion into every vernacular religion class" he teaches. Without ever having taken a course from Leonard I can attest to this by the fact that those artifacts with a sport theme are later sent to me in the mail. I brought one such example: a pewter key-chain that is made up of a hockey skate with a cross built into its heel. Aesthetics aside, the significance of these gestures is important; it is part of a larger dynamic of learning that informs who we are as scholars and our appeal as educators.

If we consider how we as researchers learn about our subject matter, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Don Yoder, Leonard and likely most of us here move beyond the limits of text book/professorial learning methods and try to bring our students into contact with the very things we study as folklorists/ethnologists. This exceeds providing physical evidence in an empirical way; instead, it is providing first hand

experience with culture as it is lived. Which is, I believe, what draws us to this style of research in the first place.

Leonard emphasizes the role of guest speakers in his classroom; it is interesting that he does not focus on the experts — in an academic sense — who speak to a specific area of study. Instead, he provides guest speakers who are members of religious communities, speaking about their own involvement within them. In other words, through guest speakers, Leonard provides a literal expression of vernacular knowledge, or as he states is his own scholarly objective, to understand "religion as it is lived and expressed". These learning methods are not necessarily profound, but simply an extension of how we as folklorists/ethnologists come to know — or perhaps claim to know. Folkloristic epistemology is based in materialism, in that we claim knowledge is achieved by documenting physical manifestations of culture. Without these physical expressions we would be something else — perhaps cultural studies scholars. It would therefore be an epistemological contradiction if we attempted to teach without sharing in some shape or form those physical expressions — be they musical, architectural, oral, or in some other form — with our students. This mode of teaching has tremendous ramifications for us as educators, and for our students. From a pedagogical point of view, it is a real challenge to convince students of the intellectual potential of everyday reality. Leonard addresses this conundrum in describing his attempts to get students to look critically at television talk shows. What impressed me most about his strategies was that he incorporates the students' responses into the narratives communicated through the programs. Reminiscent of Peter Narváez and Martin Laba's (1986) notion of the folklore continuum, Leonard points out how stories expressed on the television "trigger storytelling about the supernatural from the students themselves". By sharing in the television narratives the students become actively involved in the learning process, and are able to process information in relation to their own experience. In essence, they are thinking critically; they are learning from the experience of others by recognizing themselves within this cultural dynamic.

It is this sense of immediacy which brings real benefits to our students, who are then able to relate to the course material by becoming participants within it. Leonard states at one point that by examining popular culture texts, students and teachers are unified. Perhaps he overstates, but there are at least moments of sharing that occur by bringing attention to popular discourse that is generally situated as

lowbrow and unworthy of academic scrutiny. This focus temporarily removes the educator from a superficially elevated position, but more importantly adds credence to the students' own situations; their experiences are the subject matter of university analysis, and are presented as meaningful and worthy of intellectual exploration.

In this regard I disagree somewhat with Leonard's following point that such media materials — talks show, etc. — are useful because they express the religious beliefs of ordinary people. I don't admit to being a talk show aficionado, nevertheless, the content presented in these shows is all but ordinary — to borrow a phrase from the *Simpsons*, perhaps "trans-mundane" (a term employed by a freakshow operator in a *Simpsons* episode to describe his extraordinary personnel) would be more accurate. The students' ability to extract aspects of these extreme events and make sense out of them through their own experience becomes, in my opinion, an intellectual challenge. It requires that students engage in what the course title suggests, "the search for meaning".

What I find most intriguing about Leonard's talk is the great emphasis he places on areas of belief that lie on the margins, and at times, outside mainstream Judeo-Christian belief systems. The fact that these perspectives are receiving rightful academic attention is not unusual, but it at first struck me as odd that a course based in real lived experience would not focus on dominant expressions of faith. At one point Leonard states that he does not "consider the topics of this course to be fringe"; yet in reference to one of his guest speakers, he says: "My witch friend did communicate to me a complex and disturbing chain of events..." Perhaps the students I work with in southern Alberta are more conservative than most, but I would expect that even in Philadelphia few students could so easily open a phrase with "My witch friend". Leonard, as well as other folklorists/ethnologists, work from perspectives that are shared by their students, and hence are of great relevance and value. Yet when we consider the gnostic perspectives that make up much of Leonard's courses, my assertion can certainly be challenged.

After considering this further, however, it would seem that by introducing students to religious traditions that are not their own, Leonard is *re-introducing* students to their own spiritual and intellectual positions. I would risk arguing that by considering exoteric, subaltern, or residual knowledge, students are forced to grapple and make sense

of their own religiosity. What serves as the basis — and what is then commonly experienced here — is what Leonard describes as “the universal elements of religion” that are merely housed in multifarious domains. There is an important duality taking place here: the common and everyday experiences of belief, of faith, of devotion are defamiliarized for students, helping them realize how these are experienced in their own lives. At the same time, seemingly exotic religious traditions are presented in a way that enables students to appreciate them as meaningful and legitimate expressions of faith. What remains constant is the focus on physical manifestations of religious being, which the students identify with and relate to their own experience.

I will conclude by turning to Leonard's final point regarding the pragmatics of a folklore/ethnology education and its applicability to various professional and community settings. This seems to be the constant struggle for folklorists/ethnologists; that is, the work of convincing others of our value that appears so obvious to ourselves. Our quest to gain greater awareness of life as it is experienced and lived in everyday contexts suggests endless possibilities where our perspectives and knowledge might be applied. For years folklorists/ethnologists have been suggesting areas that would benefit from our disciplinary training — e.g., Michael Owen Jones (1988) who sees us working in organizational/corporate culture; Mary Hufford (1994) and others see us in the area of cultural tourism and conservation. And as Leonard points out today, we could provide much in the areas of law enforcement and primary and secondary education. And while I believe these directions are positive, to a certain extent we may simply be preaching to the converted.

I would argue that of greater consequence is what *we do* as folklorists/ethnologists entering our communities and applying our expertise to those areas already identified. The work Leonard has done in terms of research on angels in America has not only brought about international academic acclaim, but his views continue to be sought after by American national network television and the popular press. Leonard has served as Specialist in Folk and Popular Religion for the exhibit, *Angels From the Vatican: The Invisible Made Visible*, 1998-1999. He has also published an article “On Angels and Americans” in the Jesuit publication, *America*, and has been interviewed on such media broadcasts as CBS *Sunday Morning*, CNN, CBS *Touched By An Angel Special*, and National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation*.

Diane Goldstein's work in the areas of health and AIDS education continues to have real, tangible effects on local communities, as well as contributing to health related research. And these are just two examples of the pragmatics of folklore/ethnology education put to use. It is this pragmatic quality of our work that makes us appealing to our students in that they recognize and appreciate the relevancy of what a folklore/ethnology education brings them. Extending this beyond the classroom, our involvement in the larger community will be of benefit to those with whom we work, but it will also pave the way for our students wishing to gain employment applying what they have learned in the classroom, and thus increasing even further the pragmatics of folklore/ethnology education.

Holly Everett: This is a question for all four of you. I was interested in what you said, Leonard, about the way that the students respond to some discussions by talking about their own experiences with the supernatural. And, Michael, you also mentioned how sometimes people teaching folklore are put in an unusual sort of pedagogical role because of the nature of the subject matter. I was wondering, for any of you to respond to, is how do you, in your own classes, go about creating a space that is safe for talking about these kinds of controversial subject matter in a university setting, so that people will feel comfortable talking about supernatural experiences?

Leonard Primiano: It is a difficult job creating a space so that students can feel safe speaking about subjects relating to religion and spirituality. And I know that this statement is not news to those of you who teach. Of course, you do have to maintain a set of standards in any classroom for student behaviour, demeanour, and level of intellectual work. That includes the necessity for critical reading, critical writing, and critical thinking. I do not show films, for example, simply to take up class time, but because they are significant occasions for observation, critique, and learning. Often that standard means you have to take the first two weeks of the course to refocus the students in terms of the quality of their work, and teach them to problematize media presentations.

I also expect in class participation a serious demeanour and thoughtful remarks. Speaking is equally as important as listening — not only to me, but to each other. The best folklorist is one who listens well. When you have those sorts of standards established, I feel you can have an open enough class environment for students to express their

ideas and experiences freely. This is important for me whether I am teaching *The Search For Meaning*, or *Introduction to Christianity*, or *Contemporary Moral Problems*. I teach all of these courses. These are serious subjects. And the classroom discussions relevant to these courses all need to be treated with equal respect and seriousness.

Michael Robidoux: Maybe I'll just comment further. I actually work a little differently, in the sense that I try to get my students speaking a lot and laughing, and I think, to a certain degree, having a good sense of humour about some of the more sensitive material has worked for me, in terms of getting students to respond in a way that they can feel comfortable enough to talk and think critically. At the same time, just the fact that we're working in the university classroom, for the most part, the students are immediately, or I hope that they think there's a serious nature to it. I do think that it's really important that we have a lighthearted way of dealing with the material as well. For me, generally, a sense of humour — and I know Leonard does the same — really helps as well.

Marcel Bénéteau: If I could just add a little bit. In folklore, being that the whole discipline is based so much on individual experiences of people, you get the point across to the students that their own personal experiences are just as important as the archival material, as the recorded material, that they're listening to, and just because they're not a 95-year-old woman that they might have something important to share, too. And I know that I taught a class on rites of passage and it just amazed me, everybody coming out with their own stories of funerals in their family, and stuff like that. And that's the only way I can explain it, is that they just wanted to add their experience to what we'd been studying.

Diane Goldstein (session president): It is really important to keep in mind that you can't create a safe space for students to talk about those kinds of things in the classroom unless the classroom genuinely is a safe space. That's really worth keeping in mind because sometimes it's not. And your job, as the instructor in that class, is to be able to recognise the difference. Saying it is safe does not necessarily make it so.

Leonard Primiano: The ecology of the classroom is most intriguing. I certainly like to have the students laugh as well. And, at times, you as the teacher can have a lighthearted nature, but you also always have to have some sense of control in the classroom.

Peter Narváez: I loved the presentation and I really liked the responses. It's terrific that a folklore/ethnological perspective can contribute so much to something like religious studies. However, a realistic assessment of the position of folklore studies in the academy means that one has to realize that what you are teaching is, in fact, a threat to the traditional disciplines. As far as I'm concerned, the subject matter of folkloristics in a folklore department at a university represents a threat to the literature department. In terms of music, and I teach music courses, it's been a threat to the music school until we reached some kind of rapprochement and it's because of the breaking down of cultural hierarchy. It seems to me that you represent, by speaking about folk religion in this manner, to most departments of religious studies, a threat to what is actually conceived of as religion itself, because in fact what you're doing is deconstructing the formal boundaries of religious studies.

So, how do you accommodate that reading of your situation in terms of traditional disciplinary perspectives?

Leonard Primiano: Well, I am happy to report that there actually is some change in the field of Religious Studies. We're seeing more books written about people and fewer books written solely using textual resources. I would point to Professor Robert A. Orsi, formerly from the Indiana University Religious Studies department, who has written books on Italian-American Catholicism, one called *The Madonna of 115th Street*, and another called *Thank You, Saint Jude*, on the patron saint of hopeless causes and women's devotion to this saint. Both were published by Yale University Press. These volumes really have opened up the interest in "popular" religion, or "people's" religion, or as I call it vernacular religion. And I am happy to report that Professor Orsi has been appointed to a chair in American Religious History at Harvard Divinity School. I think his appointment signals an important change in attitude, both because he does what he calls "popular religion" and because he works on the history of Roman Catholics in America. So there are some changes to report, as in the field of medicine where lectures and courses on alternative medicine are finding their way into the curricula of some medical schools.

I also wanted to make a few comments on some of Michael Robidoux's points. On the use of media materials such as the television talk show, the issue-oriented daytime talk shows dating from before 1994 were more useful for pedagogical purposes than the confrontational

hybrid that has developed in the last few years. In the 1980s, the four highest rated talk shows according to the A. C. Nielsen ratings were *Geraldo* (1986-Syndicated), the *Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986-Syndicated), the *Phil Donahue Show* (1969-1996 Syndicated), and *Sally Jessy Raphael* (1984-Syndicated). It is this first generation of daytime talk shows that I actively taped to integrate into my course. The talk shows in the years 1980-1995 (specifically the four cited above) became important venues for average stay-at-home Americans, especially the disenfranchised such as lower and middle-class women, to debate a variety of social issues that affected their everyday lives. These daytime talk shows functioned to assist individual needs of viewers, but they also worked to gather together the collective consciousness of their female audience.

In 1994 the talk show form started to change direction. Significant changes in the themes and guests of the programs hosted by Rivera, Winfrey, Donahue, and Raphael started in 1994-1995, especially because of conservative political pressures and other reasons such as a renewed interest in the youth demographic by television executives and advertisers. The 1990s saw a profound shift in talk shows, especially with the development of confrontational panel shows such as the *Jerry Springer Show*, which began in 1991. These programs, while scripted by their producers, can reveal popular sensibilities about violence and voyeurism present in American life which also make them useful in the classroom.

I think that Michael would be very surprised about the eclectic spirituality of college students ages 18 through 21, and beyond these years as well. I have learned from experience that the topics of my course are exactly the focus of student interest, whether we look at magic and witchcraft, experiences with angels and ghosts, or abductions by UFOs. These subjects are dominant expressions of the spirituality of my students. In fact, such beliefs are endemic to all strata of North American life, not simply to members of Christian denominations of all sorts, but also to non-Christian religious communities in America, of which there are many. Colleagues, for example, have related to me that Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus are just as fascinated with these topics as are other Americans. Finally, I believe that there is no more profound method of exploring vernacular religion than direct engagement with an individual's beliefs in the classroom, a method still novel to the field of religious studies. This method is an essential

component of belief studies, and I am hesitant to describe the growing parameters of such studies as being purely based in materialism. The possible contribution that religious studies and folklore can make to each other may be to materialize religious studies and to de-materialize folklore. Religious studies searches for the unquantifiable, the ultimate, the other, that which so exceeds our understanding that it is beyond a material expression. However, folklore and folklife, when it studies religion, offers material vehicles of expression which illuminate both the individual and communal search for meaning.

In the end, the Search For Meaning is expressed in the material, but it is not found there.

References

- Adler, Margot. 1986. *Drawing Down The Moon*. Boston: Beacon Press; New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1997.
- Badone, Ellen (ed.) 1990. *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Barna, Gabor. 1994. Objects of Devotion or Decoration? The role of religious objects in everyday life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Religion in Everyday Life*. In Nils-Arvid Bringeus (ed.) Stockholm: Royal Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities. Konferenser 31, 105-120.
- Beaudoin, Tom. 1998. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *On Television*. New York: New Press.
- Brown, Karen McCarthy. 1991. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Brown, Peter. 1981. *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Desmenges, Leslie G. 1992. *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Feintuch, Burt. (ed.) 1995. Common Ground: Keywords for the Study of Expressive Culture. *Journal of American Folklore*. 108(430).
- Galembo, Phyllis. 1998. *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Ginzburg, Carlo. 1982. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Goldstein, Diane. (ed.) 1991. *Talking AIDS: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*. ISER Research and Policy Papers 12. St. John's: Institute For Social and Economic Research.
- . 2000. When Ovaries Retire: Contrasting Women's Experiences with Feminist and Medical Models of Menopause. *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*. 4.3. 309-23.
- Goodman, Felicitas D. 1988. *How About Demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hall, David. 1997. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hufford, Mary. (ed.) 1994. *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

- Hurbon, Laënnec. 1995. *Voodoo: Search for the Spirit*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- Jones, Michael Owen, D. M. Moore, & R. C. Snyder eds. 1988. *Inside Organizations: Understanding the Human Dimension*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Kruesi, Margaret. 1995. *Symptoms, Signs, and Miracles: Narratives of Illness and Healing at the St. John Neumann Shrine, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*. Ph.D. diss., Department of Folklore and Folklife, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Martin, Joel W. & Conrad Eugene Ostwalt eds. 1995. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- McDannell, Colleen. 1995. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture In America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mills, Margaret. 1996. *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Murphy, Joseph M. 1988. *Santeria: An African Religion In America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Narváez, Peter and Martin Laba 1986. Introduction: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum. In *Media Sense: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum*, 1-8. eds. Peter Narváez and Martin Laba. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Orsi, Robert A. 1985. *The Madonna of 115th Street, Faith and Community in Italian Harlem*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . 1996. *Thank You, Saint Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- . (ed.) 1999. *Gods of the City*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Primiano, Leonard Norman. 1987. Halloween. In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed. Vol. 6: 176-177. New York: Macmillan.
- . 1988. On Angels and Americans. *America* 179.10, 15-17.
- . 1995. Vernacular Religion and the Search For Method in Religious Folklife. *Western Folklore* 54: 37-56.
- . 1997. Folk Religion. In *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*, ed. Thomas A. Green, 710-717. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- . 1999. Post-Modern Sites Of Catholic Sacred Materiality. In *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*, ed. Peter W. Williams, 187-202. Malden, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell.

- . 2001a. Oprah, Phil, Geraldo, Barbara, and Things That Go Bump In The Night: Religion, the Supernatural, and American Television. In *God In The Details: American Religion In Popular Culture*, eds. Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, 47-63. New York: Routledge.
- . 2001b. The Importance and Challenges of Teaching About African-Based Religions. In *The National African Religion Congress Directory of Priests and Priestesses, 2001-2002*, 2nd Edition, ed. Gro Mambo Angela Novanyon Idizol, 195-198. Philadelphia: Le Peristyle Haitian Sanctuary.
- Roof, Wade Clark. 1993. *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- . 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers & the Remaking of American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Turner, Kay. 1999. *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars*. New York: Thames & Hudson.
- Westerman, Harry William. 1995. *Folklife, Bread And Roses: The Moral Economy Of Cultural Work, Political Belief, And Social Justice*. Ph.D. diss., Department of Folklore and Folklife, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 1998. *After Heaven: Spirituality In America Since the 1950s*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yoder, Don. 1969. Sectarian Costume Research in the United States. In *Forms Upon the Frontier: Folklife and Folk Arts in the United States*. eds. Austin and Alta Fife and Henry H. Glassie, 41-75. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.
- . 1974. Toward A Definition of Folk Religion. *Western Folklore* 33(1): 1-15.
- . (trans. and ed.) 1990. *The Picture-Bible of Ludwig Denig: A Pennsylvania German Emblem Book*. Volume I. New York: Hudson Hills Press.