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The Value of Online Resources: Reflections on Teaching an Introduction to Global Christianity

Hillary Kaell

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CATHOLICS & CULTURES

Scholarship for the Pedagogy of Global Catholicism

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HILLARY KAEEL

The Value of Online Resources: Reflections on Teaching an Introduction to Global Christianity

Hillary Kaell is author of *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (New York University Press, 2014) and editor of *Everyday Sacred: Religion in Contemporary Quebec* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2017). Her newest book, *Christian Globalism at Home* (Princeton University Press, 2020) explores the development of a global Christian imaginary through the lens of child sponsorship programs. She is co-editor of the Society for the Anthropology of Religion's book series at Palgrave Macmillan Press and Associate Professor of Anthropology and Religion at McGill University in Montreal. Prior to starting at McGill, she was a faculty member in Religious Studies at Concordia University, where she remains co-convenor of the Material Region Initiative and a faculty fellow in the Centre for Sensory Studies. Follow her [@hillarykaell](#) and learn more on her [website](#).

Ten years ago, I first stepped into a large undergraduate classroom with my newly minted Ph.D. and my carefully chosen ‘professional’ attire. Since then, one key lesson I have learned is that my classroom style can be a reflection of me. I like to chat. I like informality. I don’t like wearing heels. My older, wiser self wears whatever shoes she wants and opens up lots of room for informal discussion and questions. I have also learned that the majority of students take my courses on modern and contemporary Christianity as electives, often in order to reflect on their own Christian upbringing or heritage—and that’s okay. In fact, it is more than okay: it’s a precious opportunity for students to become more self-aware and thoughtful human beings. As many of my students have shown me, it is a mode of reflection that they want and that may be absent in their core classes in, say, Accounting, Political Science, or Engineering.

For these reasons, I wasn’t too surprised when, the week before going to Chicago for a symposium on the Catholics & Cultures website, a student in my Introduction to Global Christianity class raised her hand and asked a question unrelated to that day’s course content. “I’m Ukrainian Catholic,” she said, “is that more like Catholic or more like Orthodox? My mother says it’s Greek.” The question was clear and succinct; it was something that had likely been on her mind for a while. I briefly responded that some Eastern—or “Greek”—churches were in communion with the Roman Catholic Church, though the rituals and celebrations were culturally specific. “But I’m not an expert in Ukrainian Catholicism,” I said (admitting you don’t know everything is also okay—another key lesson I’ve gleaned during my decade in the classroom). Then I continued, “Let’s pause for a moment and see if we can find anything more on Catholics & Cultures.” I pulled up the site on the screen in front of the class. Sure enough, there was an article, colorful images, and links to multiple other sections of the site with information about rituals and foods—two things that interest my students greatly when it comes to their own heritage traditions because it allows them to speak from a place of expertise.

We didn’t go through all those articles in class, but navigating through the site on the screen in front of them was valuable in itself: I was pointing students to a reputable online source where they could turn for more information, which would

Articles

Introduction: Ukrainian Greek Catholics in their "borderland" homeland

Христос Родився! Christ is Born! Ukrainian Catholic Christmas in Ontario

Holy Week in Ukraine: Willow Sunday, liturgies, Easter basket blessings and Bright Week

Fasting and feasting help define Greek Catholic practice in Ukraine

'Jordan' in Ukraine caps Christmas season with water, ice and festive family meals

Ukrainian Greek Catholic liturgy envisions heaven on earth

Ukrainian Catholic churches at crossroads of Baroque and Byzantine styles

Ukrainian Greek Catholic numbers shrinking in once strong diaspora

Screenshot of menu options on the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church at catholicsandcultures.org.

remain accessible to them after our semester together ended. "Digital natives" they may be, but my students, at least, are often (and quite understandably) chary of web-based sources or stumped about how to navigate the amount of potential information online. Scrolling down through the Catholics & Cultures pages, I showed them the endnotes after each one. On the site's introductory page, I reminded them to check if scholars have contributed and helped to vet the materials. Yes, we concluded, this is a good website from which to get factual material and it could be cited in their final papers.

That short pause in my preplanned lecture speaks to a general concern for any undergraduate teacher. How can we encourage students to selectively utilize online sources? How can we empower them to seek out answers to their questions? In my Religious Studies classes, which take an anthropological approach to the study of Christianity, a further concern of mine is to clarify how scholars go about studying religion to begin with—the comparative approach, the emphasis on culture and practice, the focus on observation. I also try to impress upon my students that scholars often sound "objective"—perhaps because, unlike one's cranky relatives, they rarely state that this religion is "right" and that one is "wrong." Yet they also

make choices about what to include and exclude when they weave together comparative points. The Catholics & Cultures website is a brilliant teaching tool for a basic analysis of methodology: it is a clear and colorful way to show undergraduate students how this kind of Religious Studies scholarship gets done. Navigating through the site, I can show my students how its authors discuss discrete examples, which they have then chosen to link to other examples with a common theme. It exemplifies how scholarship is crafted, which also helps me explain the process of writing a final paper for my course.

The place where I teach leads me to focus on more particular objectives as well. Concordia is one of three English-language universities in Quebec and, like many of the province's premier universities, it has a Catholic heritage (one of its two campuses, Loyola, recalls that past). In my classroom, the majority of students are local to Montreal and the surrounding areas. A bit more than a third come from families of 'allophone' descent (neither English- nor French-speaking) that are mainly Italian, Portuguese, Greek, and Lebanese. A quarter or so are first-generation immigrants, usually from places like Haiti or Cameroun (not surprising since Quebec favors immigrants from francophone countries). Most of the other students represent the historic English and French Canadian majority.

Whether students' families are new to Montreal or have been settled for generations, a large number of them have Catholic roots. They also live in a province where Catholic names and iconography are ubiquitous. For example, I live on a street named for a bishop across from a hospital named for the Virgin Mary and a public school named for an early Quebecois saint. There is a large stone cross in front of the school and the spires of an enormous mid-nineteenth century church are also visible from my window. My students live in this Catholic-saturated cityscape too, yet most of them arrive in my classroom repeating a historical myth gleaned from Quebecois politics and media (and much debunked by historians, to little avail). [This myth](#) views Catholicism as singular, constitutionally anti-modern, and controlling of all facets of people's lives. It represents Catholicism—which my Catholic heritage students often call “the Church”—as utterly dominant in Quebec until the 1960s when “the people” overthrew it and, suddenly, became secular and free.

Students from historic Quebecois families tend to take this narrative largely for granted, especially if they are of French Canadian descent. Students from recently immigrated or practicing Catholic families tend to repeat it as a facet of Quebec's history, while acknowledging that this singular vision of "the Church" does not reflect their own experiences of actually being Catholic. So where does it leave us in my Introduction to Global Christianity course? As with students everywhere, some of mine are smart and subtle thinkers. Others, with spotty attendance and other things on their minds, pick up only the most basic of points. For the first group, my goal is to nudge them towards understanding that many aspects of Quebecois society they think of as 'secular' (and, often, 'moral' or 'ethical') reflect a still-present Catholic sensibility—as do the communitarian politics that have led to laws like Bill 101 (enforcing French in the public sphere) and Bill 21 (enacting certain bans on religious clothing). Such conceptions of the social good are deeply rooted in two centuries of Catholicized governance linking language, nation, and (a certain kind of) religion. While I have not used the Catholics & Cultures site to address this issue, I have found it extremely useful in addressing students in the second group—those who pick up the basic points. For those students, I aim to impart just three things about contemporary Catholicism: 1. Catholics are diverse, with significant variation across the world 2. Catholics do not simply obey "the Church" 3. Catholics do have many rituals but these do not make them incapable of "rational" thinking.

To cover these points, I use three sections of the Catholics & Cultures site most often. The first is "Catholics by Country." My students' own Catholicism (practiced or heritage) is usually intermeshed within a specific national context, though they may never have thought about it as such. Toward the beginning of the semester, for example, we talk about food and memory. It invariably prompts a conversation in which students talk about the 'taste' of rituals—the kind of foods their grandmothers make at particular holidays, saint's feasts, or confirmations and funerals. For many students, these are 'national' foods, rather than Catholic ones per se, and it opens up a discussion about the nuances of these categories. The "Catholics by Country" section is a place where I can send students to contextualize these experiences within their families and communities. At another moment in the course,

Catholics by Country

Featured Countries

All Countries

Afghanistan		Kiribati	Portugal
Albania	Ethiopia	Kosovo	Puerto Rico
Algeria	Faeroe Islands	Kuwait	Qatar
American Samoa	Falkland Islands (Malvinas)	Kyrgyzstan	Réunion
Andorra	Fiji	Laos
Angola	Finland	Latvia	Romania
Anguilla		Lebanon	Russia
Antigua and Barbuda		Lesotho	Rwanda
Liberia	Saint Helena
Argentina		Libya	Saint Kitts and Nevis
		Liechtenstein	
		Lithuania	
		Luxembourg	

Screenshot of Catholics by Country at catholicsandcultures.org.

I also assign sections of it as background reading when I divide them into small groups to research different Marian apparitions. I use “Catholics by Country” for my own lectures too, and to provide visuals when I am introducing a new topic. As students are mulling over possible topics for their independent final papers, I again send them to this section of the site to see if a country description sparks their interest.

The section of the site that I use most, however, is Practices & Values. I mine these pages for photos and videos that populate my lectures with specific examples from specific locations. This visual media is especially useful to clarify what I mean when we discuss inculturated rituals. I also draw on these resources when we compare multiple iterations of a global phenomenon, for example, in our classes about Marian apparitions or pilgrimages. The short videos, which are housed in the Educator section, are a particularly welcome resource since we have ample time to contextualize and discuss each one, which is not the case when I show full-length films.

Catholics & Cultures

About This Site

Catholics by Country

Feasts & Holy Days

Practices & Values

- Charismatic Practice
- Childhood & Coming of Age
- Dance
- Death, Mourning & the Afterlife
- Family, Marriage & Gender Roles
- Food & Fasting
- Home Practice
- Lay Organizations
- Mary and the Saints
- Migration & Immigration
- Music
- Shrines & Pilgrimage
- Visual Culture
- Worship

Eastern Catholic Churches

Educator Resources

News & Events

Current & Upcoming Events

Deaf Catholics Shaping the Church Today
February 24, 2021 - 4:00pm

Featured Articles

Ethiopia: Popular Meskel feast a time for dancing and celebration

Above: Screenshot of Practices & Values.
Above right: Screenshot of Videos at catholicsandcultures.org.

Videos

Use this tool to search and browse all the videos available on Catholics & Cultures and to find related articles and media that may offer more context.

Displaying 1 - 22 of 22

Video Name	Country	Church	Practices & Values
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="- Any -"/>	<input type="text" value="- Any -"/>	<input type="text" value="- Any -"/>
<input type="button" value="Apply"/>			
	Posted Date	Title
03/10/2015 - 9:41am	Holy Oil at St. Mary's Forane Church in Kuravilangad, Kerala, India Syro-Malabar churches adorned with feast flags and oil lamps Visual Culture India Syro-Malabar Catholic Church
10/24/2014 - 11:06am	Highlights of Catholic Liturgy in Greek Melkite Church, Jordan Greek Melkite worship weaves chanting, movement, and iconography Worship Jordan Melkite Greek Catholic Church
10/24/2014 - 11:06am	Highlights of Catholic Liturgy in Greek Melkite Church, Jordan Greek Melkite worship weaves chanting, movement, and iconography Music Jordan Melkite Greek Catholic Church
06/24/2014 - 2:18pm	Catholic Wedding in Alqosh, Iraq Marriage a family affair in Chaldean Church Family, Marriage & Gender Roles Iraq Chaldean Catholic Church
06/24/2014 - 2:18pm	Catholic Wedding in Alqosh, Iraq Marriage a family affair in Chaldean Church Family, Marriage & Gender Roles Jordan	

The videos allow me to show students the diversity among Catholics, including in places that I may know little about (but that may be familiar to some of my Catholic heritage students). These detailed examples often prompt students to ask questions that might not have occurred to them when reading a description of the same kind of event.

The Practices & Values section also sometimes flags key issues for me that I would have otherwise neglected to include in my lectures. For example, I was perusing the site before beginning a cycle of classes on migration. Although I was planning to mention remittance payments, the site noted the importance of this money for building projects, including churches. It was a helpful reminder not to neglect the role that migration can play in changing built environments. Another issue I planned to raise was the role of returned migrants who bring new religious ideas and practices; I had not considered internal migrations within a single country. After reading through sections of the Catholics & Cultures site, I opted to assign the post on China and internal migration, juxtaposed with a newspaper

Migration & Immigration

A Sunday afternoon English speaking Mass at St. Anne's Church in Copenhagen attracts a largely Filipino community..

More than 200 million people were born in a country different from their current country of residence. If these people were all aggregated into a single country, "they would constitute the fifth most populous country on the globe, just behind Indonesia and ahead of Brazil."¹

article on Quebec's urban migrations in the 1960s and 1970s and the resulting closure or amalgamation of rural parishes.

The Educator section is the third part of the site I have used—and it is the one I would like most to see expanded. I have found Marc Loustau's blog particularly helpful. We have so few examples of professors writing a play-by-play of a course in real time, including what did or did not work. Instead, most sites provide syllabi—a useful resource, of course, but it is akin to providing the plans of a building whereas Loustau offers valuable details about how he shifts around the furniture after moving in. The blog is especially pertinent to my Global Christianity course. In his very first post, Loustau notes that he asked his students to brainstorm words in answer to a question: What do you think of when you hear "global" and "the globe"? It seemed like the perfect way to begin the semester, since I had been trying to think

Chinese migration to urban areas may erode Catholic villages

China • Migration & Immigration

Palm Sunday procession and blessing at Xujiahui - St. Ignace Cathedral, Shanghai, 2014.

1 2 3 4 5 6

By: Thomas M. Landy

Catholics number among the many Chinese who have migrated to many parts of the world and established local communities and parishes. Expatriate Chinese Catholics are said to have been generous funders of church building projects in China, and often seek to influence global

Screenshots of pages on Migration & Immigration and Chinese Migration at catholicsandcultures.org.

of how to introduce the idea that ideological assumptions factor into our imagined connections with others.

Inspired by that post, I asked students to bring in world maps on the first day of class—anything they found online, but ideally something creative—and we discussed how the world could be imagined in multiple ways. It worked reasonably well, but was a bit too conceptual for some of them on the first day. At our next meeting that week, I reformulated it and tried Loustau’s brainstorming exercise where he asked students to think of words associated with “the global” generally and vis-à-vis Christianity. The discussion proved much more successful, since students contributed as a group to fleshing out the idea. However, they also found it much harder to brainstorm words associated with Christianity than seems to have been the case in Loustau’s class. This difficulty likely reflects our different environments. Whereas Loustau’s class was taught in a Catholic college setting, my students may know little about Christianity at the beginning of the semester or may hesitate about talking ‘religion’ in a public university where they are unused to doing so. Perhaps they were also concerned about finding the ‘right’ words (in English, no less) for ideas and rituals they know from home, especially among Catholic immigrant and Catholic heritage students. Whatever the case, next time I teach the course I will refine the first week further by assigning an easy-to-read introduction to Christianity in preparation to our brainstorm so students can refer to ‘expert’ descriptors if they choose.

Loustau's blog has prompted me to assign new activities too. For example, I was aware that he included a chapter from my book about [Holy Land pilgrimage](#) in his course and that, in advance of the class discussion, Loustau asked a student to speak with his uncle about a comparable trip. In the blog, Loustau reports that it went very well, with the student speaking for ten minutes about his uncle's experience. It inspired me to create a new assignment for Global Christianity during our cycle of classes on immigration. In previous years, I had assigned two sociological articles: one argues that religion is "good" for immigrants and another argues that it isn't. My goal was to encourage students to think about how these scholars define the terms of debate. Is assimilation "good"? Are there benefits to retaining

Week 10: Vatican II's grassroots

Part of: [Contemporary Global Catholicism](#)

The takeaway message from this week's classes is that the theological and liturgical situation induced by the Second Vatican Council's reforms now appears to be second-nature. It is just the way things are, at least for young people in Catholic higher education. In Chapter 4 of her book, *Walking Where Jesus Walked*, Hillary Kaell says that American Catholics were "the most affected by changes wrought in Rome." Commentators call the reforms of Vatican II "a spiritual earthquake." The "middle-old" Catholic pilgrims with whom Kaell traveled to the Holy Land had lived through these changes firsthand, and their faith lives reflect their attempts to grapple with the psychological and theological effects of this earthquake.

In contrast, the college students in my classroom have

Age Level: Undergraduate College

Resources:

Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (2014), Introduction, Chapter 4

Screenshot of Marc Loustau's blog on Vatican II's grassroots at catholicsandcultures.org.

ties with your community of origin and how can it be empirically tested? After reading Loustau's post, I realized that my students had other resources upon which to draw—namely, the people around them. I created a complementary assignment where each student was tasked with interviewing someone who had immigrated, which in practice usually meant older relatives. It brought an element of 'real' experience that greatly enriched our classroom discussion, especially because it led students to dissect how race, class, education, luck, and variety of other factors were integral to how immigrants talked about "religion," and whether they assessed it to have been a positive or negative force in their lives.

At the seminar in Chicago, we were asked to reflect on whether as educators we felt the Catholics & Cultures site could be improved. My answer was yes, but largely by doing more of the same. I would like more questions at the bottom of posts for provoking discussion in the classroom and among readers. I would like to hear more about teaching activities that are feasible for a public university classroom, which could be scaled large or small depending on enrollment. I would love to see more videos, including those that feature aspects of everyday life. As it stands, many videos highlight liturgy, priests, and church interiors and, while they are enormously useful in my lectures on the inculturated Mass, they are less helpful for other parts of my syllabus. For most of my students, going to Mass monthly—now down to less than 10% of Catholics in Quebec—is not the only, or even primary, kind of ritualization in which they participate. This diversification of materials is hardly outside of the Catholics & Cultures mandate—indeed, it speaks to the very ethos the site already so ably promotes.