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The traditional World Religions construct instantiates a nineteenth-century, Christian, male, Western worldview. Despite its apparent objectivity, it catalogues the peoples of the world according to extrinsic values and descriptors, and parades them in a pageant for the gaze of students. The valorization of historical origins, texts, and doctrines leads students to frame religions as static, logical, and intellectual, leaving them none the wiser as to the lives and feelings and motivations of those around them. This dissertation will situate World Religions in its historical background and critique the worldview it promotes as both misrepresenting contemporary religious experience and simultaneously privileging and repressing students. I will propose instead a World Religions course based on cosmopolitanism, care, and postmodern pedagogy that embeds the students in lived experiences, honors their humanity, and engages them in the worldwide human enterprise.

WORLD RELIGIONS: SEEING WITH, NOT LOOKING AT

by

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## CHAPTER I

### THE ORIGINS OF WORLD RELIGIONS

In this dissertation, my research topic is the traditional academic concept of World Religions, its origins in a nineteenth-century, European, male, Christian worldview, and its status in the academy and in the culture today, with a view to analyzing the implications of the standard construct for students' understanding of and relationship to the world and to discovering support for a different pedagogical model. Despite its apparent neutrality, the World Religions paradigm catalogues the peoples of the world according to extrinsic values and descriptors, and parades them in a pageant for the gaze of students. The valorization of historical origins, texts, and doctrines leads students to frame religions as static, logical, and intellectual, leaving them none the wiser as to the lives and feelings and motivations of those around them. In contemporary American culture, where religious issues constantly drive national policies, shape elections, rend communities, and fuel hostilities, students are helped not in the least in their interpersonal and civic interactions by an introduction to World Religions that neither illuminates the modern lived reality of religion nor positions the student within that reality.

The research problem that brings me to this topic is my perception that the standard World Religions construct (five or six "great" religions siloed in space and time reinscribes the worldview of the nineteenth-century university that created the academic

discipline of religion and reinforces in students an essentialized and othered view of the peoples of the world, but that apparent specialist indifference to a low-level introductory course has ensured the robust continued use of that construct in textbooks and classes.

The specific question that I will answer is: Does the conventional introductory World Religions curriculum provide an authentic and meaningful encounter between students and the religions of the world; if not, what might be the principles and practices of a curriculum that would offer greater integrity and meaning?

In the following chapters, this overarching question will be explored through four smaller and more specific questions. After this brief introduction, Chapter One will address the question: How did the World Religions paradigm commonly referred to as the Big Five, that we now take for granted as an obviously true representation of the world, originate and take its present shape? To answer this, I will present research about the historical construction in the nineteenth century of the seemingly natural World Religions paradigm we have today. Against this background, I will also highlight some contemporary critiques of the academic study of religion, which are pertinent to concerns about an introductory World Religions course because they focus on matters of the devotional versus the academic teaching of religion and on the reification of religion.

The guiding question in Chapter Two is: Is there a critical academic conversation today that troubles the Big Five and that elucidates specific questions and/or strategies for making a more fair, effective, and humane use of an introductory religion course? In order to understand how the world of academia views this course—offered to teenagers in high school and, primarily, in college—and to discover what problems instructors have

identified and brought into a larger discussion, I will review the academic literature, analyzing the significance and implications of the tactics a few instructors are employing to transform course content, approach, and student engagement. Taken together, the aspects of the course that these instructors focus on as being in need of change provide some insight into specifically how the standard World Religions paradigm is pedagogically counterproductive.

In searching for a path to a different type of introductory religion course, I next ask: What pedagogical principles provide solid ground for a radical shift in both the structure and the goals of a World Religions course? In Chapter Three, I will answer this by grounding educational priorities in theories pertaining to citizenship and cosmopolitanism, peace education, pedagogy of caring, critical pedagogy, and postmodern pedagogy. Since I will be advocating for priorities and methods that differ significantly from those of the traditional course, it will be important to understand on what basis we can make those decisions.

Chapter Four asks: Can there be a World Religions curriculum that introduces students to the religions of the world with content and methods that make imaginary strangers present in the classroom in their own terms, that acknowledge multiplicity and uncertainty, and that welcome the students' full intellectual and emotional humanity? In answer, I will present an alternative curriculum for World Religions, giving an overview of its components and attaching a detailed view of one component, with commentary linking it to its theoretical grounds. This curriculum will give concrete form to the theoretical arguments propounded in the previous chapters and will make plain what

prioritizing the practitioners of the religions of the world and the people learning about them over texts, histories, and doctrines could look like—not incidentally embodying my argument that experiencing something is a necessary dimension beyond simply hearing it described.

In Chapter Five, I will conclude by briefly exploring some of the institutional, cultural and pedagogic challenges in implementing this curriculum. I have a special interest in the potential for enacting this at the high school level, and so the church/state implications become of particular note. At all levels, implementation is shaped the most powerfully by teacher training, and so I will comment on that at some length. Finally, I will address concerns about how we represent religion and religions and their complicated and contradictory characteristics in ways that are fair and to the purpose.

### **I. The Origins of World Religions**

World Religions, an introductory survey of the religions of the world usually intended for non-majors, is widely taught, and “the odds are rather high that if a student ever takes a course in the study of religion—whether the student majors in the field or not—it will be an introduction to world religions” (McCutcheon, 1997, p. 103). The standard “Big Five” paradigm represents the world by dividing it into Hinduism, Buddhism (within which are included Taoism, Confucianism, and Shinto), Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, plus a section on primitive/tribal/nature religions. Within these chapters, each religion is described in terms of its founder, texts, doctrines, rituals, and practices. Looked at with a critical eye, this paradigm raises many questions. There is the curriculum-as-text problem: this course is saying that these are the religions worthy of

study, apparently the only ones that qualify as “real” religions and not folk practices or superstitions. We learn that the continents of Africa and Australia contain no human beings worth studying, unless they have taken up the practice of Christianity or Islam (although that would require some perspicacity, as the text likely positions Christianity within Europe and Islam as Arabian). Women must not be actual practitioners of religion but are merely ancillary features, we deduce from the presence of “Women in Judaism” sidebars or the fact that, for example, they “rarely appear in essays on Chinese religions in textbooks, and when they do, they often are confined to the fashionable ‘boxes’ at the margins of pages” (Sommer, 2005, p. 5). In the categories into which phenomena are divided and the order in which they are presented, there is also the implication that religion is a systematic, intellectual process of founders receiving revelations, clergy deriving doctrines from texts, and people choosing to believe and to take up practices. The impression is that religions result from a giant committee meeting and function from the top down, like a well-organized corporation.

However, that critical eye—which has certainly revolutionized the way Religious Studies as a discipline thinks and talks over the past century—generally passes over World Religions. This standard approach “has become so prevalent, so naturalized in our discourse that it seems as though it were no logic, no ideology at all, but a mere reflection of the way things are” (Masuzawa, 2005, p. 6). As a high school instructor with a master’s degree in religion, I had not thought to interrogate the history and the validity of this paradigm until I launched a World Religions survey course for seniors. It was then that I saw how, and how uniformly, World Religions textbooks parcel out the peoples of

the world into clearly describable and delimited groups that each have their own correct answers to the same checklist of characteristics that define what religion itself is. The peoples of the world become imaginary figures enacting their own versions—perhaps quaint, perhaps simply wrong—of religion as the students know it, and the students finish the course acquainted with some facts about those enactments and with their privilege intact to see the human enterprise in terms of their own unmarked norm and variations on it performed by essentialized others. Puzzlement over the standard use of such a flawed paradigm drove my inquiry into the origins of World Religions within the academic study of religion.

What exactly is implied by the existence in a university of a Religion Department? What would a student expect enrolling in a religion class in college? The existence of a Religion or Religious Studies Department within a university's college of arts and sciences (wherein one might major in religion in pursuit of a BA, or earn an MA or PhD in religion as a graduate student), as opposed to its Divinity School (wherein one might earn an MDiv or DMin), seems to be a statement that the university distinguishes between the *academic* study of religion as a human phenomenon and the *devotional* study of religion from a faithful point of view. However, the distinction is far from clear, when viewed either by way of an examination of historical origins or by way of contemporary critiques of these disciplines' outlooks and functions.

From the outside, one could imagine that the discipline of Religious Studies is in fact very like anthropology and sociology, perhaps a specialized branch of them. Surely

the inductive historian of religion arrives on the scene free of predetermined theories and definitions, assesses the factual data (e.g., religions in the plural) and describes it faithfully, picks out the appropriate method to ascertain their shared deep essence, and only then draws conclusions about religion in the singular. (McCutcheon, 2001, p. 86)

Perhaps the secular study of religion developed in the Western academy as anthropologists recorded data about what they observed people around the world doing, and a systematic descriptive discipline was built up in which the religious practices of different cultures are recorded and systematized by means of a combination of their own reportage of their praxis and an analytic comparison across cultures. This seems like sound academic practice for the collection of information about the religious practices of humanity and the development of legitimate theories about religion in general.

In fact, as we might guess from McCutcheon's trenchant remarks above about what *ought* to be the case, the academic study of religion in the West has a far different history. Religious Studies emerged from the devotional, theological study of Christianity not as an alternative but as an extension, and the causes and effects of that process continue to be part of the DNA of Religious Studies and of World Religions. The most important quality of this process for a consideration of the origins of World Religions is the nineteenth-century sense that a comparison of data about similar subjects would reveal an overarching evolutionary development from the primitive to the perfected:

Between 1870 and the end of the century it came to be more and more widely accepted that quite apart from the individual's personal beliefs, to understand religion inevitably involved comparison—of material from different traditions, different parts of the world and different periods of human history. To this end the religious traditions of the world, past and present, were scoured for every scrap of

evidence that might throw light on the origin and evolutionary development of religion as an apparently universal human activity. (Sharpe, 2003, p. xii)

Recounting the entire history of the academic study of religion is beyond the purview of this dissertation; however, there are three aspects of the process that will illuminate my central point that, far from being objective reportage, *World Religions* is the product of a Christian worldview and religious belief, heavily influenced by this perception of evolutionary development. Below, we will examine the construction of Hinduism and Buddhism within the Western academy from ancient texts, the pressure put on the European academy by the new science of philology to defend the Hellenic credentials of Western Christianity in the context of its Semitic origins, and the evangelizing purposes of comparative theology in categorizing “world religions” amidst anxieties about the universality of Christianity on the world stage.

The arrival of Sanskrit texts and the new scientific taxonomy of languages created problems for a Europe that had for centuries understood religion in all places and times as Christianity, Judaism, Mohammedanism, or paganism (Masuzawa, 2005, p. 59). The implication of those categories is that a people or a culture could be saved by the one true Christian religion, could belong to its errant ancestor or cousin, or could be hopelessly engaged in idolatry. What is important about this religious worldview is that it is theological: the religious beliefs and practices of others are of interest, or even comprehensible, only vis-à-vis their acceptance of Jesus and the Christian God. Jews and Muslims (the older term reveals the mistaken Christian understanding of Mohammed’s place in Islam as equivalent to Christ’s place in Christianity) were not only historically

familiar to Western Christendom and therefore more present to them, but they also were theologically close enough to Christianity that their non-acceptance of Christ made them a matter of concern. In any matter, we are much more engaged with and agitated by those who nearly agree with us than those who are completely uninvolved. Pagans' risible superstitions guaranteed their damnation, and distinguishing among the inanimate objects, forces of nature, or monstrous imaginings they worshipped did not create subcategories of religion. In today's comparatively more respectful global community, where for instance the Roman Catholic Church has continued to broaden its fraternal recognition of other faiths begun in the 1965 *Nostra Aetate* encyclical, it is easy to underestimate the core Christian doctrines of exclusive truth claims and salvation through Christ alone. This is not only doctrinal but biblical, as Sharpe reminds us: "The tendency in the New Testament, then, is not to contest the *existence* of other gods and forms of worship, but to stress that for the Christian, it is fatal to enter into any kind of relationship, however superficial, with them" (p. 8). This is life-or-death business for all eternity; for a Christian, other religions are deadly traps.

What lifted the exceedingly diverse pagan practices of India and Asia into the status of religions of some importance in the eyes of the West was the arrival of Sanskrit texts in the Western academy and the development of philology, the historical analysis of languages. In 1814, the first Chair of Sanskrit was established in Paris, and two years later, it was "Bopp's comparative grammar of the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Persian, and Germanic languages that ushered in the new age of comparative 'Indo-European' studies, and ultimately the still newer 'science of religion', or comparative religion" (Sharpe, p.

22). Sanskrit seemed to be the noble ancestor of modern European languages, uniting the disparate Germanic and Romance languages and connecting them with the far older civilizations and languages of northern India and the legendary Fertile Crescent—all of this an attractive idea to the taxonomy-besotted nineteenth century. Europeans could therefore scientifically trace their development even further back from the glorious Greeks and Romans and position themselves as the apotheosis of Aryan civilization. Sanskrit texts, therefore, while pagan, must be the repositories of ancient wisdom, even more ancient than the Hellenic philosophers. The Vedas, the ancient texts of India commonly dated to the span of the second millennium BCE, provided the grounds for conceptualizing one encompassing religion of India.

For Christian scholars accustomed to Biblical authority, the need for a religion to have a textual foundation was obvious, and clearly they had found the scriptures of Indian religion. Doctrines could be extrapolated and thus Hinduism became codified, based on the belief that ancient texts embodied the true, pure, and correct doctrines of these religions in their revealed form and that the practices actually observable were local corruptions perpetrated by people ignorant of their own religion, people whom the British Raj had dubbed Hindus as a convenient census category covering everyone in the subcontinent who was not British or Muslim. Furthermore, this same process was even more satisfactorily applied to the Sanskrit texts discovered in Nepal which became the foundations of a systematized Buddhism. Not only were there ancient texts, but there was also something even more recognizable to Christian scholars: an historical founder, one who reformed an older tradition and established a new and more enlightened religion and

one whose life and practices, as well as his words, could be examined for doctrinal teachings. Thus, from a vast assortment of living practices that had gone unrecognized as belonging to larger traditions, Hinduism and Buddhism were constructed by Western scholars and positioned as the Judaism and Christianity of the East. Masuzawa's lengthy and well documented study establishes how completely Hinduism and Buddhism as we now speak of them were "from the beginning, in a somewhat literal and nontrivial sense, a textual construction . . . in the hands of European learned society," who saw themselves as "in the best position, if not to say an exclusive position, to grasp Buddhism's essential character" (p. 126).

The supremacy of texts as the defining characteristic of any religion of significance was cemented by the publication from 1879 to 1910 of *The Sacred Books of the East*, edited by Max Müller. These fifty volumes established Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism, and Islam as being the religions of interest and substance, and we have only to add Shinto (Christianity and Judaism already being legitimate) to have the usual World Religions construct. In introducing this idea of the exogenous nature of Hinduism and Buddhism to a consideration of introducing students to the religions of the world, we problematize what it is that we in fact are studying when we think we are studying Hinduism and Buddhism as systematic religious institutions. In interpreting this information, though, we cannot conclude that Hinduism and Buddhism do not exist. Masuzawa makes sure that we understand that we cannot now simply start over as if Asia were an undiscovered country, due to "the very process of mutually interactive development, on the one hand, of European representations of

non-Christian religions and, on the other hand, the native appropriation, reaction, or resistance to such representations” (p. 282).<sup>1</sup> Westerners did pour Eastern religions into a mold of their own making, but these religions have long since become endogenous as well; the World Religions instructor now must consider how to frame that history and how to trouble the tidy founder-to-text-to-doctrine-to-practice narrative that belongs more to the mold than the contents.

The valorization of Sanskrit and the union of Darwinian principles and philology have a second ramification in our consideration of the hidden influences on the development of the World Religions paradigm. The Indo-European language family tree mentioned above as enabling Western scholars to claim an intellectually aristocratic ancestry had another, equally gratifying, quality: it did not include the Semitic languages. “Summarily put, it was philological scholarship that generated a new type of distinction among peoples and nations in terms of language groups; the most immediately critical in this context was the distinction between Indo-European (or Aryan) and Semitic language groups” (Masuzawa, p. 149). This scientific proof of a substantial linguistic, and therefore ethnic/racial, distance between the Indo-European peoples and the Semitic peoples solved major difficulties that Western religion scholars had in categorizing two groups: Judaism and Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> A simple example of this circularity would be that a standard authority for Westerners, both scholars and the general public, who want to study Zen Buddhism is the Japanese author D. T. Suzuki. His descriptions of Zen as a purely experiential and ineffable phenomenon and as the source of Japanese culture continue to define Zen for Westerners. However, not only was Suzuki’s writing shaped by his goal of raising the status of Zen and of Japan in Western estimation, but “his approach to Zen, with its unrelenting emphasis on an unmediated inner experience, is not derived from Buddhist sources so much as from his broad familiarity with European and American philosophical and religious writings” (Sharf, 1998, p. 101).

The problem with Judaism was of course Christian anxiety over its origins in a religious/ethnic group towards which it had a long history of active oppression and denigration, and whose specific Near Eastern, Iron Age tribal history contradicted Western Christendom's sense of itself as the inheritor of the heights of Greek civilization. Islam was causing taxonomic difficulties because, while it met the same criteria for a world religion granted to Buddhism, European animosity towards Arabic Islam fueled a desire to keep it firmly in the category of a local, tribal religion. The solution to both problems came from philology and its enterprise of comparative grammar. Predictably, comparison meant evaluation and the creation of a hierarchy, and the taxonomy of languages, equated with the intellect of their speakers, generated scientific evidence of the development of superior peoples. Masuzawa quotes no less a personage than Friedrich Schlegel on the subject:

The division of mankind into peoples and races, and the diversity of their languages and dialects, are indeed directly linked with each other, but are also connected with, and dependent upon, a third and higher phenomenon, the *growth of man's mental powers* into ever new and more elevated forms . . . [the revelation of which is] the highest aim of all spiritual endeavor [italics Schlegel's].  
(Masuzawa, p. 159)

The specific grammatical evidence of the higher evolution of the Indo-European languages is their use of inflection, the property by which root words change to indicate syntax, as opposed to the agglutinative properties of the Semitic languages, by which syntax is expressed through the addition of particles. Philologists decreed that inflected languages were superior in every way to agglutinative languages, and, circularly, that the

supposed limitations of the latter were both the cause and the evidence of the inferiority of their speakers. The achievements of Greece and Rome, the Renaissance, the civilizations of Europe—all were enabled by the intellectual power and spiritual capabilities of their inflected languages, while the grammatical structures of Hebrew and Arabic doomed their speakers to rigid and primitive thinking and therefore rigid and unevolved civilizations unsuitable for the world stage.

This comfortably scientific affirmation of what nineteenth-century Europeans wanted to believe also solved the problem of defining why Islam felt so dangerous when Arabic Muslims were very much the minority within Islam. “What is also notable,” says Masuzawa, “is that to claim Indo-European superiority always seems to lead not so much to a disdain for the peoples speaking agglutinative language but instead to a peculiarly pointed and dismissive judgment against the Semites and against the Arabs in particular” (p. 166). Even if the large numbers of non-Arabic Muslims, for instance those in India, were native speakers of other languages, the Arabic roots of Islam had to define it, by the very nature of the philological enterprise and its principles that language and mind create each other and that we can know one through the other. “Thence it came to be widely held that, no matter how richly various its worldwide spread, Islam was in its very essence rigid, invariably intolerant and exclusive, incandescently purist, with an inherent tendency toward fanaticism” (p. 170). Moreover, this equation of Islam with Arabic Islam, and Europe’s sense of the tribal bellicosity that Middle-Eastern Orientalism represented, generated the Arab-centered definition of Islam that entered the World Religions construct and pertains today.

In effect, the concept of Islam as the epitome of stifling rigidity, intolerance, and fanaticism was by this time [1904] in the public domain; it had become a familiar theme, mechanically repeated by one treatise after another, in flagrant disregard of the diversity and obvious malleability evidenced by the vast domain of the actual Islamic world. It may be added that, despite better, far more extensive scholarship on Islam available today, little has changed about the image. (Masuzawa, p. 197)

So, happily confident that the verb conjugations of Greek New Testament grammar allowed Christianity to transcend its Jewish origins, doomed to a marginalized existence by Hebrew grammar, Western scholars could demonstrate which linguistic/ethnic classes of humanity were suited to produce religions of depth and significance. Damned to struggle and blunder along because of “petty” and “cumbersome” verb formations (Masuzawa, p. 173), Jews and Muslims could never exercise the intellectual powers necessary for a first-rate civilization, leaving Christianity in comfortable control of the field, sure that science had proven what it already knew to be true.

A last thread in understanding the development of the academic and public methods of understanding religions in the plural was the now-defunct and forgotten field of comparative theology. Once a thriving enterprise, its descriptions of the religions of humanity unsurprisingly proved the thesis underlying its efforts: that human religious sensibility proceeds in a Darwinian ascent from primitive superstition to the spiritual and intellectual perfection of Christianity. It is here that the term “world religions” is shaped; a world religion is one that transcends national boundaries and takes on the significance on the world stage that is its due, as opposed to local, folk, *Landsreligionen* (Masuzawa,

p. 109). While today we assume that a textbook titled *World Religions* is about the religions of the world, and that may be its stated intent as well, the meaning of that term, and the list of religions that it describes, is still in part determined by its original use to mean the few non-local, internationally triumphant, religions of the world.

This is more than a matter of practicality, of the argument that some historical facts are more relevant to a culture than others. Determining which religions qualified as “world” religions served the goal of establishing, in the garb of objective science, the triumphant superiority of Christianity. The facticity of this process seemed obvious to its practitioners. In 1870, John Lubbock developed a model of the evolution of religion rising from atheism through fetishism, totemism, shamanism, and anthropomorphism to ethical monotheism (Sharpe, p, 53). J. Estlin Carpenter, writing in 1913, can say that it is on the concept of evolution “that the whole study of the history of religion is now firmly established. . . . the general movement of human things advances from the cruder and less complex to the more refined and developed” (Sharpe, p. 95).<sup>2</sup> John Nicol Farquhar, Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester and expert on Hinduism, felt that he was writing about Hinduism with the utmost sympathy and with the attitude of an insider, but still his commitment to the evolutionary method was such that in 1909 he could describe his work as

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<sup>2</sup> Although we now can see it as meretricious, the evolutionary project of the comparativists seems forward thinking against the background of controversies within theology itself. In a 1901 furor over whether the Faculty of Theology in Berlin should even have a chair for the study of other religions, its dean, Adolf von Harnack, argued that there was no point in studying anything except Christianity, because anyone who did not know it knew no religion, “and anyone who knows Christianity, together with its history, knows all religion” (Sharpe, p. 127).

setting forth Christianity as the fulfilment of all that is aimed at in Hinduism, as the satisfaction of the spiritual yearnings of her people, as the crown and climax of the crudest forms of her worship as well as of those lofty spiritual movements which have so often appeared in Hinduism but have always ended in weakness. (Sharpe, p. 153)

In positing this process, scholars were not only suggesting a theory for the historical development of any specific religion; they were also positioning all present-day religions as existing on this continuum, so that, for instance, a tribal African religion was not understandable as equivalent with other contemporary religions but instead was viewed as a living fossil, a window into the past of more evolved religions. In 1847, F. D. Maurice was able to argue that the very historicity and limitations of other religions prove that they are merely human and can be understood only by those standing firmly on the ground of Christianity, whose universality proves its status as the sole divinely revealed faith (Masuzawa, p. 77). James Freeman Clarke, in his 1871 work *Ten great religions: An essay in comparative theology*, could conclude that comparison would prove that Christianity was the only religion “perfectly adapted to man” and therefore designed by God (Masuzawa, p. 78). Robert Flint, lecturing in 1882, concurs with Maurice that Christianity is not only the apotheosis of religion, but also the only one that affords a vantage point “from which all other religions may be surveyed, and from which their bad and their good features, their defects and merits, are equally visible” (Masuzawa, p. 102). Masuzawa sums up this approach thus:

This singularity of Christianity was often expressed in a vaguely oxymoronic phrase: “uniquely universal.” In the opinion of the theological comparativists, Christianity alone was truly transhistorical and transnational in its import, hence

universally valid and viable at any place anytime, whereas all other religions were particular, bound and shaped by geographical, ethnic, and other local contingencies. (Masuzawa, p. 23)

In the context of the present study, it is important to pause to connect this historical movement with today's World Religions courses. Clearly, a hallmark of an academic religion survey would be neutrality of approach and no sense of judgement or evaluation.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, religious studies has carried forward unexamined this codification of the "great religions" of the world, determining the scope and priorities of study of World Religions textbooks. More subtly, and less easily dealt with, it has carried forward this paradigm of Christianity as the measure of other religions by preserving the comparative structure of examination. Whether or not these ideas are meaningful to a tradition, concepts such as doctrines, rituals, deities, founders, texts, etc. are used as a means of laying out a variety of religious traditions for comparison. Comparison can of course be a useful tool for understanding phenomena. Well might we expect a comparison of the causes, means, and outcomes of the American, French, Russian, Zanzibar, and Vietnamese wars of revolution to illuminate matters of economics, power, colonialism, governance, political science, military strategy, and so on, for example. In the case of the religious traditions of humanity, though, comparison reinforces the

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<sup>3</sup> However, divinity schools certainly do continue to teach about other religions for the purpose of more effectively evangelizing them. See for instance Liberty University's World Religions description ("The basic principles and practices of the most significant world religions are discussed and evaluated. The course goes beyond descriptions and identifies points of contact and cultural opportunities for effective communication, understanding and engagement." [http://www.liberty.edu/index.cfm?PID=19959&action=courseDetail&CatID=24&CourseID=1704]) or that of Bob Jones University ("Examination of the doctrines and cultural features of major religions in light of the Word of God. Discussion of the best means by which adherents to these doctrinal systems may be won to the Lord." [http://www.bju.edu/academics/courses/]).

existence of Christian categories as normative and forces students to understand other religions as filling more or less successfully those categories. It is useful to understand lungs and gills as different kinds of respiration; it is a statement of superiority to understand gills as defective lungs. It might be useful to understand God's mysterious ways and karma as different responses to the apparent unfairness of life; it is a statement of superiority to regard karma as proof that Hinduism is mechanistic and nihilistic.

People are extremely prone to see comparisons in terms of hierarchies, rankings, and competitions in all aspects of life, and teachers of introductory religion surveys are in a difficult position if they wish to present their subjects fairly when this tendency is not only inherent in their students but embedded in the methods and content of their field as well. On the one hand, it is not difficult today to reject as outdated and inapplicable this statement by Louis H. Jordan in his 1905 work *Comparative Religion* defining the field as

that Science which compares the origin, structure, and characteristics of the various Religions of the world, with the view of determining their genuine agreements and differences, the measure of relation in which they stand one to another, and their relative superiority and inferiority as types. (Sharpe, p. xii)

It is precisely this inevitable view of difference as necessitating evaluation and ranking, of taxonomy as equivalent to hierarchy, whether overt or implicit, that has resulted in the widespread renaming of the academic study of religion from Comparative Religion to Religious Studies. On the other hand, the religions that the World Religions paradigm deems the great religions worthy of study; the grouping of "primitive" religions as

equivalent in their worldviews and in their differences from the religions that merit their own chapters; the language of doctrines, founders, texts, clergy, deities, etc.; and the focus on theology and institutions as defining a religion—all these aspects of content and approach were determined by the comparative enterprise. A World Religions instructor who wants to present religions on their own terms not only has to actively discourage students from their tendency to measure them against Christianity, he or she also has to work from a paradigm that has the nineteenth-century comparative process, values, and goals built in to every aspect.

The emergence of World Religions out of the equally emerging field of Religious Studies is so complex that even the only book-length study, Masuzawa's, tells only part of the story. Nineteenth-century issues of personal, national, and religious identity; of anxiety over and embrace of Darwinism; of the secularization of the university and the professionalism of scholarship; of anxiety for scientific justification for Western imperialism; of constructing a new metanarrative for a new global era—all these pressures and more shaped religious scholarship. However, the three factors examined above serve to demonstrate how thoroughly and unexpectedly nineteenth-century academic ideas that themselves have long since fallen out of favor created the model of the religions of the world that we still accept as purely descriptive. The Western construction of Hinduism and Buddhism based on ancient texts, the scientific proof provided by philology that certain peoples are intellectually suited to create a transnational civilization while others are naturally primitive and local, and the story of evolution from primal religions to the unique perfection of Christianity together made a

mold into which vast amounts of information about religions was poured. Then, as in the lost-wax process, the mold vanished, such that the exogenous forces on Eastern religions, comparative grammar, and comparative theology might never have existed, yet there is World Religions, shaped by disciplines unknown in the academy today and so appearing solid and self-evident.

## **II. Contemporary Critiques of Religious Studies**

The titles of works from the past twenty years such as *Manufacturing Religion*, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, and *The Invention of World Religions* more than hint at voices within the academy that can be described with some irony and accuracy as iconoclastic. These authors, notably Russell McCutcheon and Timothy Fitzgerald, call to account the study of religion for a fatal lack of integrity—both existential integrity as amorphous at best and perhaps even nonexistent, and also ethical integrity as hopelessly corrupt due to its origins in and continued enabling of oppressive power structures. In the context of my present concerns about the portrait of humanity created by the World Religions construct, this critique provides strong support for a contention that the construct essentializes and others its objects of study. Regardless of the effect they are able to have on the academic and the public perception of religion and religions as extant and legitimate phenomena, these voices tell us things that are necessary for a consideration of what is harmful about the World Religions paradigm. Below, we will see that the ideologies embedded first, in the construction of religion as a phenomenon; second, in the definition and organization of the religions of the world; and lastly, even in

contemporary attempts to embrace differences and promote pluralism are colonizing and patronizing, and position Western Christianity as the measure and the arbiter of religion.

Despite the overwhelming sense in this modern body of critique that such authors are revolutionaries shouting themselves hoarse at the gates of a smug and well-defended fortress, questioning religion's legitimacy as a category is not a trendy move of left-leaning academics looking to make their mark. For example, it was in 1963 that the distinguished Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote an exploration of these problems called *The Meaning and End of Religion*. Even half a century ago he says of "religion":

My own suggestion is that the word, and the concepts, should be dropped . . . This is on the grounds not merely that it would be helpful to do so; but, more strongly, that it is misleading to retain them. I suggest that the term "religion" is confusing, unnecessary, and distorting. (p. 50)

"Fundamentally," he asserts, "it is the outsider who names a religious system. It is the observer who conceptualizes a religion as a denotable existent" (p. 129). This is the crux of his argument—that "religion" in general and the specific religions that we talk about as if they are natural categories are in fact Western constructs. Smith says that "religion" is inadequate for the believers and a meaningless reification for the observer, and objects to defining what others have to believe, taking away their agency. This in particular, the idea that the West has essentially inflicted the "official" version of religions on others, is an objection that will be seen as even more political in later authors. Smith would not, however, have imagined that such authors would be necessary. Having made his case, Smith says

I am bold enough to speculate whether these terms will not in fact have disappeared from serious writing and careful speech within twenty-five years. . . . Such a disappearance could mean for the devout a truer faith in God and a truer love of their neighbour; and for scholars, a clearer understanding of the religious phenomena that they are studying. (p. 195)

Smith was of course not correct in his prognostication—the term “religion” and the assumption that it is in fact a thing that exists and can be studied, participated in, defined, recognized, and known prevail as strongly as ever in the academy and in the world at large. The key themes in his critique, however, do correctly foreshadow today’s critique of the study of religion, which has amplified his main points thus: that religion is not a category distinct from other aspects of the humanities and social sciences and that religion irretrievably colludes with colonization and oppression. These two themes are enmeshed with each other and also contain subthemes that intertwine as well. Both Russell McCutcheon, in *Manufacturing Religion* (1997) and *Critics not Caretakers* (2001), and Timothy Fitzgerald, in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000), go to great lengths to make the point that there are no aspects of the academic study of religion that are not already part of the domains of sociology, anthropology, and history.

The real substance of their problem with this, though, concerns the axiom, permeating the religious studies discourse, that religion is a separate discipline because there is such a thing as a religious sensibility irreducible to other matters. They find that scholars of religion consistently make claims for an ineffable special quality of religion that resists historical or psychological explanation (that explanations involving a culture’s sociological needs for order and ritual, etc. or involving the individual human need for

justice, life after death, etc. are inadequate) and which informs a religious approach to life that is recognizable in any human culture underneath the guise of a variety of manifestations. Fitzgerald says, “The study of religions is claimed to be a study of things that cannot be reduced to social and psychological facts or explanations, even though they may be acknowledged as having a social or psychological ‘dimension’” (p. 7), but that in fact “there is no coherent non-theological theoretical basis for the study of religion as a separate academic discipline” (p. 3). This belief in religion as a unique category becomes the basis for the creation of categories and qualities of religion that appear to be substantial and objectively extant. McCutcheon is referencing the ideology that “primitive” religions provide a window on the early, purer expression of human religiosity (still present in the field from the nineteenth-century predilection for evolutionary methods that we saw above) when he says

The politics of nostalgia as found within the discourse on sui generis religion is reproduced by a variety of techniques that facilitate the move from descriptive generalization to normative judgment: stressing myths as possessing normative value for the present; relying on essentialism and idealism to interpret symbols and understand history; emphasizing the decontextualized character of religious phenomena; and naturalizing and universalizing what are local values and beliefs. (1997, p. 34)

Resorting to the truism that humans universally evince some kind of spiritual orientation to the world as the ground for a special category of study for religion is just begging the question, because “locating the essence of religion in the private consciousness of individual actors is itself a theological claim” (Fitzgerald, p. 16). In other words,

justifying religion as a unique academic discipline by claiming that people have a spiritual sense is using religion to assert its own existence.

These critics situate the pervasiveness of the *sui generis* assumption in religious studies in the ambiguous background of the field and of its practitioners. As I introduced in section I above, the existence in the university today of departments of Religion or Religious Studies as distinct from schools of Theology or Divinity implies that the academy itself is quite clear about whether religion is being studied from an academic or a devotional point of view, but this is far from being the case. Regarding the current practitioners of religious studies, Masuzawa writes:

To begin, as some adamantly secularist scholars—who constitute a sizeable and vocal minority in the field—have observed with some displeasure, there is a higher concentration of unreconstituted religious essentialists in this department of knowledge than anywhere else in the academy. This should not come as a surprise, it is often said, given that the field is populated, and by sheer numbers dominated, by the representatives, partisans, and sympathizers of various religions or, more recently, by those who may be best described as advocates or sympathizers of “religion” in general. (p. 7)

Resolving “the deep confusion as to who is a colleague and who is a datum”

(McCutcheon, 2001, p. xiv), a tendentious but accurate way to describe an academic environment populated by both those studying religion and those practicing it, is much more than a matter of quizzing scholars about their personal faith, however. The transcendent and universalizing underpinnings of religious studies are part of its origins as the offspring of European-American Christianity. The critique of this history is

essential to an inquiry into the truth and the fairness of the World Religions construct and its representations of humanity.

The Christian basis of the very concept of religion and of the religions as now defined has become so invisible as to require unpacking and to require Fitzgerald to point out that the whole idea that all humans “have a natural facility for cognizing the Infinite and ‘the religions’ are particular forms or expressions by which these cognitions or special feelings are given tangible expression” is a Judeo-Christian idea smuggled in (p. 7). Therefore, we can begin to understand that World Religions presents young people with descriptions of the world overlaid on a hidden scaffold of Christian beliefs about how the world works and how people should relate to it and that therefore we are engaging in something fundamentally dishonest. Of great concern to those who aspire to a liberatory pedagogy is that we are also engaging in something fundamentally colonizing and oppressive. This too is in the genes of the field:

*I cannot state this forcefully enough: one of the great perils of our field is that we continue to ignore the fact that we exist in large part due to the needs of the nineteenth century’s imperial nations for powerful controlling and cataloguing mechanisms and categories for addressing and dominating the inhabitants of distant lands. (McCutcheon, 2001, p. 224).*

Critics locate the source of this hegemonic discourse in multiple places. There is the pervasive language and standpoint of Orientalism:

The discourse on sui generis religion is a strategy for reinterpreting and circumscribing novelty within repetition, of controlling the present by housing it in patterns from the past, and judging the present on the basis of past standards. It is conservative, elite, romantic, hegemonic, regressive, ahistorical, and

domesticating. In the words of Edward Said, through such a project, the threat of the present to the values of the past “is muted, familiar values impose themselves, and in the end the mind reduces the pressure upon it by accommodating things to itself as either ‘original’ or ‘repetitive’ ([*Orientalism*] 1979:59).” (McCutcheon, 1997, p. 73)

There is also the contention that “inventing religion was never purely an academic project. Creating, redefining, and standardizing religion has long been a political strategy linked to the making of national identities and the exercise of colonial power” (Peterson & Walhof, 2001, p. 1). Fitzgerald particularly aims “to show how religious studies, as an agency for reproducing a mystifying ideology, attempts to construct a decontextualized, ahistorical phenomenon and divorce it from questions of power” (p. ix).

Beyond its positioning of the practitioners of the most evolved religion as naturally the masters of more backwards peoples, Fitzgerald posits that the Christian worldview has enabled global capitalism by

establishing an ideologically loaded distinction between the realm of religion and the realm of non-religion or the secular. By constructing religion and religions, the imagined secular world of objective facts, of societies and markets as the result of the free association of natural individuals, has also been constructed. (p. 8)

This is a political/economic argument that by creating an evolutionary paradigm of religions, and by creating a paradigm that separates cultural components into religious and secular activities, the West has created anxiety over the idea that all cultures are evolving towards the worldview and culture of the neoliberal West and that some cultures are letting themselves be left behind:

But how can so-called underdeveloped societies come to realize and conform to this natural reality in order to be considered fully rational? They can be helped by adopting the non-indigenous western division between the religious and the secular and by placing their traditional values in the department of 'religion', where they become objects of nostalgia, thus clearing a cognitive space in their culture for putatively value-free scientific facts, for the natural world of autonomous individuals maximizing their rational self-interest in capitalist markets, for liberal democratic institutions such as parliaments, for modern nation-states, and so on. (Fitzgerald, p. 8)

By creating in cultures the idea that certain matters pertain to the religious sphere while others are properly secular, the Western world made space for many capitalism-friendly concepts, including that religion is the personal business of an individual and not a cultural practice and that the secular world is value-free and "is simply the real world seen aright in its self-evident factuality" (Fitzgerald, p. 15), thus valorizing individual actions in a positivistic world.

The creation of the secular—non-religious, the scientific, the natural, the world as it is simply given to rational observation—can be seen in this light as the mystifying project of western imperialism, for it disguises the western exploitation of the world and the unequal relations which in fact existed between nations. (p. 15)

McCutcheon finds this oppressive political dimension of the standard, unexamined concept of religion to be completely embedded in it:

At the very heart of the discourse on sui generis religion lies the assumption that certain aspects of human experience can be, and are, divorced from the interactions and negotiations of people embedded within historical, social situations characterized by power imbalances—in a word, the world of politics. (1997, p. 35)

Furthermore, he believes that efforts to reconceive the World Religions discourse in terms of pluralism, as Karen Armstrong, Diana Eck, and others urge, is a deeply misguided repetition of and indeed mystification of all that we have just examined above.

The very popular oeuvre of Armstrong, in this case her bestselling *A History of God*,

is not a history of the concept of God but is an unknowing history, and practical example, of the ongoing human effort to create social identity and homogeneity by means of the rhetorics of unity, a rhetoric that purchases social identity at the expense of those who do not quite fit the dominant pattern. As important as it is to recognize what “we” have in common, it is sometimes more important to investigate who does and does not constitute this “we” and who gets to decide on the criteria whereby something is understood as “same” and “different.” (McCutcheon, 2001, p. 55)

He sees the pluralism widely promoted by Eck in her bestseller *A New Religious America* and her Harvard-based Pluralism Project as the friendly face of a discourse of tolerance that is really “part of a normative discourse of dominance. . . . Tolerance does not take place on their terms. Instead, they themselves are tolerated. Seemingly benign discourses on tolerance therefore have a subtle irony at their very core: they are discourses of the powerful” (p. 163). Speaking more generally about the same phenomenon, in her work on Queer Theory, Britzman (1995) says, “curricula that purport to be inclusive may actually work to produce new forms of exclusivity if the only subject positions offered are the tolerant normal and the tolerated subaltern” (p. 160). This problematization of pluralism as a solution to a Western-dominated, colonizing, essentializing, and condescending World Religions discourse raises difficult questions for instructors who wish to position

neither themselves nor their students as privileged to evaluate, welcome, or affirm non-Christian religions.

In describing these critiques of Religious Studies, I am not suggesting that the discipline comprises on the one hand a citadel of unreconstructed Western Christians who do not know and/or care that they are subordinating the rest of the world to a meaningless construct that they reified from their own cultural history and beliefs, and on the other hand a very small group of scholars claiming the emperor has no clothes and wanting the entire business to end. Obviously, twenty-first century academics are familiar with the politics of imperialism and are actively working to broaden both the scope and the methods of their field. Exemplifying the efforts to do so are two weighty handbooks of essays exploring the uses and implications of broad concepts involved in the study of religion. *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (1998) and *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2009), for instance, both offer complex reflections on ideas such as culture, ritual, myth, time sacrifice, gender, and belief. These essays are calculated to disrupt the presuppositions of any Western-centric religion scholar, and as reviewer William Paden (1999) says of the former title, are “part of a wider movement to see religion within the whole scope of human life . . . and not only through the orthodox lenses of the phenomenology of religious experience” (p. 197). However, he also faults the book for not organizing its essays on a unifying theoretical ground, and for representing

the field of religion as the interpretation of ideas rather than as the cross-cultural, anthropological or scientific study of actual religious behaviors. In spite of its overall de-essentializing, de-colonializing tone, the volume is pretty Eurocentric and its multiculturalism verges on the tokenistic. (p. 196)

In this snapshot, we can get a sense of the push/pull of attempts to reform the academic study of religion into something other than a servant of Western cultural and literal imperialism, and criticisms that its nineteenth-century foundations are hopelessly compromised, and determination that it is possible to find grounds to move forward somehow with religious studies. Furthermore, the citadel image does seem to represent, if not a professional establishment that denies the history of religious studies, at least one that is not interested in engaging with the insistence that religion does not exist as a human or academic phenomenon adequately distinct from sociology, history, etc., and certainly not interested in engaging with the critique that the personal religious stances of scholars compromise the integrity of the academic enterprise of religious studies.

For our purposes in inquiring into the origins and legitimacy of the standard World Religions paradigm, we can now see that we have good reason to be wary of continuing to pass it along to students unchallenged. Not only are we now aware that entire religions are intellectual constructs of Western academics and that the Western need for Christianity to reign as the sole true and universal faith was “scientifically” encoded into religious studies through comparative grammar and comparative theology, but also that religion itself as a category melts under rational scrutiny and can be shored up only by recourse to faith-based claims about its special qualia. I am not advocating for an abandonment of religion as an object of study or for the repudiation of categories like Hinduism and Buddhism—not only would that be futile, but religion *does* exist culturally and we do need to understand it, and people *do* identify as Hindus and Buddhists. Rather, I am asserting that unmasking the historically situated constructs that we in the West

mistake for axiomatic truths enables us to take off the lens of Christianity and to see the religions of the world afresh. Whatever an instructor chooses to do about continuing to use these categories, it would clearly be unconscionable not to problematize them both in the construction of curriculum and in the classroom with students.

In closing this examination of how such a thoroughly biased, imperialistic, and Christian understanding of the religions of the world came into being and, more to the point, became so invisible that religion scholars continue to promulgate it, not “significantly altered or seriously challenged in the past hundred years” (Masuzawa, p. xi), one more factor will be illuminating. The reification of what appeared significant and true to the men who created the categories and language we use today continues every time each junior instructor who gets stuck with an introductory course for non-majors defaults to the same book and the same syllabus and teaches the same course. Assigned to teach a course that covers the entirety of religion, that junior instructor can do nothing other than replicating the same course he or she took as a student, grabbing Huston Smith’s *The Religions of Man* off the shelf and dusting off the syllabus. No matter that using Huston Smith—charming, influential, important in his time, but the epitome of the amiable, Christian-centric, gee-whiz encounter with other religions—as the template for a religion survey class is like using Freud as the template for an introductory psychology class; it’s the book that one has heard of, so it must be standard.

Beyond the issue of an outdated standard continuing in use, what we see most significantly here is the fact that World Religions is the kind of 100-level class that belongs to no specialty and that more senior faculty can avoid. The other likely

candidates assigned these courses are “those members of the faculty whose area of specialty is described as ‘history of religions,’ which in turn has been a virtual code word for any specialty other than Christianity or Judaism” (Masuzawa, 2005, p. 8). (Apparently due to possessing a sort of double consciousness, such a scholar is assumed to know at least two religions, their own and the dominant one.) The lowly status of the course is captured in title of this academic article: “Teaching and Self-Formation: Why the Ignoble ‘Intro to World Religions’ Really Matters” (Burnes, 2001).

Here is an indication of why the terrible waste of the one academic religion class people in this highly religious nation are likely ever to have continues to replicate itself: no one has ownership of it. World Religions is not itself an academic field, no one is a professor of it, and no one advances their career by addressing the American Academy of Religion about it. In the same way that most college students take freshman comp or Brit Lit 101 but no one holds a chair in them or presents at MLA about their significance, World Religions reaches a wide swath of non-specialist, college-educated Americans and constitutes most of what they know and how they think about an entire academic field—in both cases, a field integral to a humane and cultivated life—yet no one in the field specializes in it and few deign to think about how to use that brief fifteen weeks for maximum information and transformation.

In the next chapter, we will search out the academic conversations that do exist about World Religions. This provides an opportunity to learn in more detail what aspects of it instructors have specifically found to be problematical and why. In looking at the solutions they propose and tactics they employ, we can begin to organize a vision of what

principles could guide a different kind of World Religions course that positions the students as belonging among the peoples of the world rather than observing them like visitors to a natural history museum.

## CHAPTER II

### CURRENT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT TEACHING WORLD RELIGIONS

Despite the critiques of religion as a category, and of the various religions as constructs, clearly both in the academy and in public perception, religion is and will continue to be a robust concept. Religion exists as the object of academic study, and it exists in the world institutionally, politically, socially, historically, and personally. Young people want and need to be introduced to some of the variety of religions of the world, and my purpose here is not to sweep away the introductory survey course, but to consider what it is and what it could be. Having explored and considered what the origins of these concepts are and how their political aspects have stayed hidden and why they are colonizing and othering, we can now ask if instructors are inquiring into these problems and devising ways to teach with and against them. I went in search of a critical academic conversation today that troubles the Big Five and that elucidates specific questions and/or strategies for making a more fair, effective, and humane use of an introductory religion course.

There is a small amount of literature in academic journals in which a few professors are identifying conceptual problems such as those described in the previous chapter and proposing a variety of strategies for structuring a World Religions class in more transparent, less essentializing ways. There are also books that more broadly address issues pertaining to teaching about religion, books that aspire to a more general

audience, and these are valuable as part of understanding what the issues are in teaching about religion. In Chapter Two, I will examine these conversations by topic, in order to focus on the process of unpacking the ways in which the standard World Religions is harmful and counterproductive, and to begin to shift to thinking about where the opportunities for change lie.

The work in the academic journals varies enormously in approach and intention, but in analyzing what instructors are discussing and proposing in their articles, I see this academic conversation as addressing these seven topics: using textbooks, training teachers, taking a civics approach, emphasizing lived religion, problematizing religion, having students examine their positionality, and problematizing authority. Understanding these topics as efforts to make the course more valuable by making changes in one of three major domains reveals the bone structure of the course and helps us begin to see more specifically how and where a World Religions course could be transformed. The first two topics are specific problems within the domain of course content, the second two topics are part of the domain of course approach, and the last three are aspects of the domain of critical student engagement. These topics and domains will make concrete and visible the kinds of concerns involved in a World Religions classroom, and some strategies for dealing with them.

Course content is a defining question for World Religions, in two important ways. While any college course, no matter how focused or advanced, can work with its putative subject matter only in part, the very idea of a World Religions course is risible. Within fifteen weeks, a class might at least have heard of all of Shakespeare's history plays and

studied several of them in depth, or grasped basic principles of differential equations, or learned to tell Schopenhauer from Spinoza, but knowing anything significant about all of the religions of humanity is clearly impossible. So, when the potential subject matter is the personal, cultural, and institutional history, practices, literature, and worldview of the entire human race, there is no such thing as a default course. Under these circumstances, then, choosing what is so important that everyone should know it becomes an ideological statement. In using the standard paradigm, we have been making the statement that what is important is Europe and America, countries that Europe and America have had economic and military relationships with, patriarchal institutional structures, clergy, texts, and dogma. A student who has been taught in detail about Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli but nothing at all about Yoruba women has not just learned about the Protestant Reformation but also about what has value.

The domain of course content is vexing not only in the matter of what to choose and why, however. Course content is also a central problem for World Religions because of the practical limitation that no instructor can have more than a glancing familiarity with the majority of even the traditional content. This makes the textbook much more important and influential than it would be in any corresponding situation. No junior faculty member needs a textbook to teach Intro to American Lit; few create a religion survey course from scratch with primary sources. If we consider the value of this course for high schools, the question of teacher preparation and some kind of reliably structured curriculum becomes even more pressing (although a distinguished professor of Coptic

Christianity is no more likely than a high school history teacher to be prepared to select passages from the Mahabharata to teach).

In the first section of this chapter we will explore the various perceptions of where these problems lie and how they manifest themselves that appear in the academic literature. These include vigorous condemnations of the bias and shallowness of the textbook treatment of numerous religious traditions, written by specialists in those traditions, and opinions about the necessity and desirability of using a textbook at all. The limitations of teacher training are also addressed, including a particularly interesting point about the benefits of training in the legal aspects of teaching about religion that connects to a discussion of situating teaching about religion in the context of American religious liberties.

The second domain, course approach, connects to this as well. By course approach, I mean structure and goals—the standard version being (structure) the Big Five tour (goals) for the purpose of learning as much as possible in the time available about their histories, texts, doctrines, and practices. As we saw above, the potential course material is vast, and there is some conversation regarding other ways to structure this material and other goals in working with it than reciting the Five Pillars of Islam and delineating the Soto and Rinzai schools of Zen.

One of the studies that have been conducted specifically on a World Religions course addresses the possibility of emphasizing goals of promoting citizenship, respect, and democratic engagement. Exploring how this could work may raise the question of at what point a course is no longer “World Religions” but has become something else using

religion as material, but a course that has goals regarding citizenship and student engagement is not abandoning the goals of academic religion and is even enhancing them, considering the gulf that has opened between modern Religious Studies and the antiquated discourse of World Religions.

Another component of this domain is emphasizing lived religion, a tactic espoused by several of the writers as an antidote to the traditional and problematical emphasis on origins, texts, and doctrine. In their triage for pages and time, textbooks and teachers have tended to make those unfortunate choices, which have had a number of unfortunate effects. Students learn to keep “other” religions at arms’ length, they think of them as part of the history of faraway lands rather than as active concerns of their neighbors, religions appear both abstract and static, the impression forms that action logically springs from doctrine and that religion is an intellectual process more than an emotional praxis, and class is boring and bloodless. In the literature countering this, people argue for site visits, guest speakers, in-class activities, contemporary literature, service learning, and case studies. The lived-experiences approach can be a feature of either the more traditionally structured class, still emphasizing the Big Five, or a more wide-ranging structure that tours the contemporary world looking at what people do. In either case, it furthers a goal that is more concerned with people than history and texts—both the people practicing the religions in question and the people studying them, as it requires the whole student to engage with an embodied phenomenon rather than just a verbal one.

Turning to the third domain, we especially see course content and approach changed when instructors desire and create critical student engagement. The topics in the literature that I saw as falling into this domain are having students examine their positionality, problematizing religion, and problematizing authority. What is especially interesting in trying to tease out how people are thinking about World Religions classes is that these topics are both strategy and goal. One instructor who had an overt critical goal of disrupting white authority in curriculum and classroom discovered that having students define their own positionality also served as a strategy for better learning about various religious traditions, because it required the students to put themselves within the field of study rather than hovering above it separately. Similarly, teaching overt problematizing of what a religion course chooses to cover not only serves the goal of critical learning, it also is a very effective strategy for addressing the inherent problems of the first domain, course content—that choices have to be made about what to include and that those choices make a statement. Problematizing the authority of the textbook has allowed some instructors to cut the Gordian knot of whether to have one—letting the students in on the problems that having the textbook creates means that the students can become more canny about what they are being told about religion. This connects to the value of a World Religions course for an instructor committed to critical pedagogy. Both the content of a class that is concerned with every aspect of human culture and addresses humanity's and the students' most personal issues, and the metaproblems of a discipline that has historically been and continues to be oppressive, Western-normed, and high-

handedly biased provide endless opportunities for a critical pedagogue to create classroom experiences to engage and challenge students.

Outside of the academic literature, there is also the call-to-action book aimed at a more general audience. These offer much that is of practical use in the classroom and reveal theoretical underpinnings that belong to the academic conversation, but they are particularly notable because they show us what their authors believe to be the key issues in education about religion from the public's point of view. Some of these works, such as those of Stephen Prothero and Linda Wertheimer, explain the story of religion in America and in its schools to a public highly invested in religion, not well informed about it, and thoroughly confused about whether it can be addressed in schools. The wide popular attention suggests a widespread desire for reliable information about and engagement with the multiple religions of Americans.

Of particular interest to my present argument is a book meant for a general education audience that analyzes what seems to be the only required public-school World Religions course and makes policy recommendations based on this study. The author, Emile Lester, is very concerned with the implementation of a religion course and focuses on the politics of doing so, arguing frequently and at length about what must be done to accommodate those whose religious position precludes not only the truth of but also knowledge of the religious positions of others. This provides an opportunity to include questions of the place of religious liberty in education about religion and to consider the existence of the secular realm and the state's concern in insisting on that. Lastly, the findings of this study that show that couching education about religion in a context of

American religious liberty enhances students' receptivity to religious pluralism—that is, shifting the grounds for coping with pluralism from respect for others' beliefs to defense of a right we all own in common. Along with a more intimate view of the human story of learning about religions offered by Wertheimer, this exploration sets the stage for my proposal in Chapter Three that an introduction to the religions of the world will be more effective and valuable if it moves its goal to foster the humane development of students from the ancillary and unspoken place it always occupies in the liberal arts to front and center.

### **I. The Academic Literature: Course Content**

In my search for a conversation critiquing introductory religion survey classes in the context of actual classroom teaching, I found that, in journals such as *Religion & Education* and *Teaching Theology and Religion*, a few professors are identifying conceptual problems such as those described in Chapter One and proposing a variety of strategies for structuring a World Religions class in more transparent, less essentializing ways.

Within the domain of problems and solutions relating to the content of the course, the first issue I identified in the literature is the World Religions textbook itself. In 2005, *Religious Studies Review* put out a special double issue called “Religion/s Between Covers: Dilemmas of the World Religions Textbook,” based on a panel at the American Academy of Religions annual meeting in 2003, in which fifteen textbooks are considered by a group of authors writing shorter articles on specific topics. In his introduction, Mark MacWilliams describes the problem of World Religions textbooks thus:

They rely on a world religions model that sees each of these traditions as a synthetic whole that can be coherently summarized through a set of sub-categories: founders, sacred scriptures, fixed doctrines, ritual practices, festivals, and so on. Given their homogeneity, it becomes important to look at how the world religions model works as a method of representing specific religions. (MacWilliams, "Introduction," p. 2)

Multiple authors in this project and elsewhere observe that textbooks remain a necessary evil for an introductory survey of religions, as of course no one is an expert on the entire body of information to be covered:

For many instructors of the comparative religion survey course, expected to cover from nine to twelve different traditions in a 10–15 week period, the immensity of gaining expertise in any more than a handful is overwhelming. We therefore often rely on the accuracy of textbook authors both for our students' knowledge of the tradition and, occasionally, our own grasp of increasingly complex and rapidly changing scholarship. Nowhere is this more evident than in the introductory course, routinely assigned to the departments' junior members (many of whom may be inexperienced teachers), and filled with first-semester students (most of whom are inexperienced and unfamiliar with even the most basic facts concerning religion). (Dippman, 2001, p. 41)

Jeffrey Dippman's remarks introduce his quantitative analysis of the thirteen most widely used World Religions textbooks, in which he examines their presentation of Taoism and evaluates them on the amount of coverage they give each of seven areas. He is able to give a detailed and nuanced view of exactly how and how much the books represent Taoism as primarily a philosophical viewpoint based on the *Tao Te Ching* and Chang Tzu, versus the historical and cultural situation of religious Taoism. Dippman's conclusions highlight the complexity of the difficulty of satisfactory textbook presentations of a religion: he finds two of the textbooks worthy of note, but the one that

has the best coverage of the historical development of Taoism has one of the worst levels of coverage of women, less than 1%, while the one with the best balance of philosophical and religious Taoism spends only .5% of its text on women (p. 52). The desiderata for presenting a fair portrait of a religion are so numerous, encompassing all aspects of human life, and in Dippman's study we see both the unlikelihood that a textbook chapter will do justice to all aspects of a religion, especially to traditionally less regarded aspects such as women's lives, as well as the likelihood that a non-Western religion will be represented largely in the text-based and intellectualized mode that feels normal to Western scholars that we explored in Chapter One. The latter is his main concern for an accurate representation of Taoism, but his discovery of the former makes his point of the misleading nature of textbooks all the stronger. He is firm about the potential for damage: "As the bread-and-butter course for most departments of religion, this introduction to the field is often the only opportunity students have to explore the richness and variety of humanity's religious response" (p. 42). His and my concern is not just that a specific course has problems but that this course represents everything most students will take into their private and public lives about religion other than what they learn at their own religious institutions.

Similarly, Deborah Sommer finds in the *Religious Studies Review* colloquium that textbooks typically reduce Chinese religions to a yin/yang paradigm presupposed to be familiar to the students, (Sommer, 20015, p. 5), that ancient and modern beliefs are blurred, and that where Western religions are portrayed as complex, Eastern religions are mysterious (p. 6). This approach should sound familiar from our exploration of the

origins of this discourse, and in fact, Sommer finds that newer editions of textbooks replicate the sources of their original editions, pointing out that in the case of Noss's *A History of the World's Religions* (2002), "the bulk of the current edition's sources still date to before" its 1949 first edition. "What is at heart an early twentieth-century survey of Chinese religions is thus marketed in its eleventh edition to unsuspecting undergraduates, who pay a very high price for what amounts to pre-war scholarship" (p. 5). Noss continues to be available; the 2011 edition is a \$144 paperback.

The cycle we saw in Chapter One of the Western construct of religion being adapted by practitioners to conceptualize and codify non-Western traditions which then appear self-evident to Westerners is exemplified in MacWilliams's critique of the textbook treatment of Shinto. He summarizes the process by which the Meiji imperial state responded to European influences by constructing Shinto from folk practices, creating an origin and structure for it, and packaging it as a powerful, indigenous religion, ready to oppose the Christianity of the West. In turn, the West has reified it, obscuring that what "the textbooks manufacture as Shinto often relies on a particularly powerful and politically charged indigenous discourse, officially sanctioned by powerful Japanese neo-conservative politicians and the politically well-connected Association of Shinto Shrines" (MacWilliams, "Shinto," p. 19).

Other examples from the *Religious Studies Review* critique include this description of the valorization of texts and institutional religion and the corresponding invisibility of lived human practices:

Emphasis on synagogue and Torah study, combined with lists of male philosophers, can lead to the impression that Judaism is only about what men do in formal gatherings. Yet practices of the family and household are equally important for sustaining this religion. This aspect gets lost when the descriptions of rituals are so short that they do not take much note of the roles of women and children, or stress the fact that the family meal often *is* the ritual. (Shattuck, 2005, p. 10)

In this suite of critiques we also find evidence of the nineteenth-century evolutionary view of religions, with thirteen of the thirty-two textbooks examined by Baum locating African religions in an “indigenous” chapter, “suggesting the viewpoint of an earlier generation of anthropologists, namely, that contemporary indigenous peoples are a kind of living laboratory in which we can witness the ways of the West’s prehistoric ancestors” (Baum, 2005, p. 28). The curriculum-as-text problem discussed above is in evidence when Halter finds in studying textbooks’ coverage of Christianity that one of them mentions only three women by name in that chapter: the Virgin Mary, Mother Teresa, and Anne Boleyn.

A text that reveals no cognizance of the intellectual importance of gender-inclusive language or, more perniciously, altogether omits the names of women, teaches by example that women have not earned their own place—or the writers have determined that women do not belong—in the histories of religion. (Baum, 2005, p. 25)

Anderson, in looking explicitly at the lack of reference to or indexing of women in textbooks, says “This question, why historians of religions regard male experience as normative, remains a fundamental question for our discipline” (Anderson, 2005, p. 31).

While it is perhaps unsurprising that any specialist would think that a general introduction does not do justice to their topic (as expressed for instance thus: “I discovered to my dismay that there is not a single world religions textbook that acknowledges the existence or the complexities of South Asian minority religious traditions.” [Raj, 2005, p. 14]), the preceding examples are not meant to suggest that the problem is simply that introductory textbooks do not give a sufficiently advanced level of information on each religion. Rather, what we have seen are some concrete examples of instructors finding that textbooks both overtly and systemically replicate some of the serious problems inherent in World Religions’ nineteenth-century origins.

The further question of whether the textbook is actually helpful and productive for students is taken up in a suite of three very short articles that appear under a banner “Textbooks and the Introductory Course” in *Teaching Theology and Religion* in 2009. On the one hand, Kathryn Blanchard says that

The information students encounter in World Religions is itself so potentially unsettling that it simply does not pay to add unnecessary obstacles to their learning. A textbook provides a familiar structure for them to start with; the information in it appears “unbiased” and lends legitimacy (in science-oriented minds) to learning about religion as an academic subject. It also allows students to keep a safe emotional distance from the material until such a time as they are ready to encounter it on a deeper level. (p. 253)

In her experience, her students, mainly committed Christians, are getting their first introduction to basic information about other religions, and she finds that they are in general extremely anxious without a textbook; therefore her goals—“to fight basic ignorance” so that “they can be more critical consumers of American media and better

global neighbors” (pp. 252–3)—and her sense of the optimal level of “disequilibrium” that will engender learning dictate that a textbook is essential. On the other hand, Bruce David Forbes says, “I almost never use a survey text in any introductory course I teach” (p. 256). His reasons include the unengaging nature of textbooks, their single crushing authorial voice, and the format they impose on a course. He also faults textbooks for, out of fear of anticipated criticism for neglecting something, including so much disjointed information that students remember little. His tactic is to focus on a few specific things in depth rather than try to touch on a wider array of traditionally basic information; however, we might note that he is teaching a four-to-five week World Religions component within an Introduction to Religion course. In a third position, Karen Derris says that despite having reservations that a textbook actually creates religious traditions in the guise of appearing to be descriptive, World Religions, with its vast content, is the only class in which she regularly does use a textbook (p. 356). Her resolution to the inherent tension in using a questionable source as a foundation for necessary information is to use the textbook as a platform for teaching critical analysis, a strategy that we will see more of below. Overall, the choice to use a textbook or not seems to be connected with a teacher’s level of knowledge in the subject, comfort with structure, and perception of student comfort; whether or not the student learns to be critical about reified representations of people and their religions may depend primarily on the outlook of the teacher.

Because of that, the training of that teacher emerges in this literature as another key topic of concern relating to the content of the course. In her article, Blanchard, whose

religion degrees are from Kenyon, Princeton, and Duke, says that she is “woefully unqualified to teach a course on world religions” (p. 252); of course, she is admitting what is the case for any specialist in Religious Studies. However, while no professor knows everything about his or her discipline, training has a particular additional dimension in teaching religion: awareness of one’s own bias and of the potential for wounding or alienating students. Emile Lester and Patrick S. Roberts (2006) found this to be important in their empirical study of what may be the nation’s only required World Religions course in a public school. In their reflections on their study, they are clear that teacher training is an ongoing problem for the course (p. 60). Even the thirty hours of training provided in the first exciting year of launching this novel course (we will return to this story below) was problematical in its depth, sourcing of instructors, monitoring, etc. (p. 48). In just the five years from that initial training through the point of the study, that level of training was impracticable to maintain, and there was increasing reliance on books and videos. Teacher training, Lester and Roberts found, would also be a reason that the possibility of extending it to a semester or a year is questionable (it is a nine-week course), since teachers would simply have to know more in order to teach more than a week on each topic, and more time for discussion in the classroom would also mean teachers would have more opportunities to display bias (p. 62).

In his qualitative study of student teachers in Harvard Divinity School’s Program for Religion and Secondary Education (2007), one of Michael Evans’s most distinctive findings is also an aspect of teacher training, and one much more remediable than the need for wide-ranging knowledge about religion itself. He found that teachers need to

“develop an understanding of what they legally can or cannot do in the classroom” (p. 42)—a concern relevant to high schools and colleges, public and private, in an era when issues around religion can quickly become sensational controversies. Evans situates the resistance teachers experience from colleagues, their schools, the public, and even within themselves, to teaching about religion not just in a lack of knowledge about religion but in the widespread assumption that they are not allowed to teach about religion. Despite relative clarity about what is constitutional, the sensational church/state conflicts that make the news leave people both misinformed and uneasy, and Evans found that participants cited a course on education and the First Amendment as empowering them to deal with resistance with clear, ready facts.<sup>4</sup> This relatively simple component removes several barriers to proceeding, allowing teachers to be more confident, to better protect the rights of their students, and to justify their practice to colleagues and parents. “The ability to articulate the rationale behind their pedagogy is essential in a social context that is rife with religious illiteracy” (p. 42).

Joanne Punzo Waghorne, a contributor to the *Religious Studies Review* symposium, offers a possibly unique class at Syracuse on teaching World Religions. She prepares future Religious Studies department members for this class that they are likely to have to teach by contrasting the standard Huston Smith model with a newer version of it by Stephen Prothero, followed by the Masuzawa book we saw so much of in Chapter

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<sup>4</sup> In his *USA Today* column on the Pew Forum’s report on religious knowledge, prominent religion essayist and professor Stephen Prothero tells us that in his travels he constantly talks with people who think that disestablishment means that religion is completely forbidden as a topic in school. “The Catch-22 here is that our religious illiteracy is so profound that it extends to imagining (incorrectly) that our schools cannot do anything to remedy it” (Prothero, 2010).

One, as a way of introducing the kinds of issues that instructors should be considering. She has her students examine syllabi and textbooks in order to problematize approaches to the subject, and she brings in literature on globalism and diaspora to introduce ideas about connectivity and place. The semester ends with the students presenting their own syllabi. Waghorne's intention for her course is "to help us all think together about the complexities and the problems of teaching religions in the current global context," and to prepare instructors to deal with the ways that "the world's religions have outrun our textbooks and many of our theories of traditionalism and modernity" (Waghorne, 2012, p. 1). She has a pragmatic concern about the kinds of issues that became apparent in Chapter One—the gulf between the academy and the public in their understandings about religion—saying that

while the field of comparative religions/history of religions moves on to meet a series of unsettling critiques and self-critiques, some of the public and our students embrace the very aspects of the field now under attack. This disconnection between public perception and academic debate can and will erupt in any class on religions in a global perspective. (p. 2)

In this irregularly-offered seminar, Waghorne deals with the difficulties of teacher preparation for such a theoretically and practically challenging course by helping her students "to develop a *consciousness* of the problems and *confidence/tools* to find solutions" (p. 2).

So, some instructors are finding the World Religions paradigm that commonly structures their textbooks to be troublesome, and the specific qualities that they critique are active instances of the problems that we uncovered on a more theoretical level in

Chapter One. Among their many objections, they find that World Religions textbooks tend to reduce non-Christian religions to Western stereotypes, overwhelmingly present men as normative in all aspects of religion, manufacture an essentializing and ahistorical version of religions, and privilege texts and institutions over laypeople's household practices. Nevertheless, given the constraints of introducing students to the religions of the world in a semester, textbooks are largely seen as a necessary evil, bringing together in one place information that any one instructor cannot master and reassuring students with a conventional presentation of potentially controversial or personally upsetting material. The current literature pragmatically acknowledges that the amount of information it is possible for an instructor to have in order to supplement or devise a course is a problem. The presence in this conversation of the legal status of religion and the understanding that it affects and intertwines with teaching and learning about religion is significant and will become more so as we consider course approach, in our next section and beyond.

## **II. Academic Literature: Course Approach**

I interpret some of the concerns expressed and strategies proposed in the academic literature as efforts to address the course approach of their World Religions classes. By course approach, I mean structure and goals—the standard course approach being (structure) the Big Five tour (goals) for the purpose of learning as much as possible in the time available about their histories, texts, doctrines, and practices. Two ways in which instructors have approached a World Religions survey differently are to emphasize goals of promoting citizenship, respect, and democratic engagement, and to emphasize

lived religions over texts and doctrines, on the principle that “preference should be given to particulars over universals, and to concrete relationships *with* religious others over theories *about* them” (Locklin, 2012, p. 166).

Citizenship goals were built in from the beginning to the course in the Lester and Roberts study mentioned above. It was designed explicitly to deal with community issues of prejudice and fracture in Modesto, CA. Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center was invited to moderate a community meeting, and to everyone’s surprise, the outcome was a commitment to create a World Religions course that all ninth graders in the public school would take. There was extensive buy-in from the school, the parents, and civic leaders, and the course was developed specifically for and by them, with input and training from local religious leaders. The book they chose is not a conventional textbook, but rather a highly illustrated book for young people from Usborne. The goals set out by the school board for this course included “safer and more inclusive schools and communities,” “increased knowledge of world cultures and improved test scores,” and, interestingly, to “ensure neutrality and balance materialism,” by introducing material with moral and spiritual content that would provide a counterpoint both to science and capitalism (Lester & Roberts, 2005, pp. 16–18).

What is so remarkable about their approach is that the course spends only seven weeks on the religions of the world. The first two weeks of this nine-week course are devoted to a unit on religious liberty and the First Amendment, and most of the study’s seven findings pertain to the success of the course in fostering civics goals. Lester and Roberts found that the course “had a positive impact on students’ respect for religious

liberty,” they “emerged from the course more supportive of basic First Amendment and political rights in general,” they “left the course with increased appreciation for the similarities between major religions,” and that students believed the teachers were “fair and balanced” and the course had not “stirred up any controversy in the community” (pp. 6–7). They did also evaluate the knowledge about religions that students had acquired, and found that it increased substantially both immediately after the course and at a retest several months later. Students also reported that they knew more, and furthermore, that it was important to know more.

While this course approach does not address the objections relating to the essentializing and colonializing aspects of conventional World Religions, the effect of increasing religious respect is a significant accomplishment for a course in a diverse nation whose politics and public life are so intertwined with religion. With the exploration couched in terms of religious liberty, students learned to see people’s religious beliefs first and foremost in terms of a civil right that they themselves also enjoyed and so to see religion per se as something shared by Americans in common. Reframing respect for other religions as a matter of aligning oneself with all holders of an American civil right seems to be a far more effective strategy than the usual finger-wagging discourse of tolerance for others as a virtue we should cultivate despite ourselves. Developing respect and empathy and even camaraderie is a worthy goal for education, and this course approach will be an important part of my rethinking World Religions as a less othering, privileging paradigm. We will see more of this topic below,

in Lester's book-length work in our final set of literature addressed at a more general audience.

The course approach of emphasizing lived religion is a tactic espoused by several of the writers as an antidote to the traditional and problematical emphasis on origins, texts, and doctrine. Jack Hill (2009), a white, male professor at Texas Christian University, became very concerned about discovering strategies to empower educators “to confront ideologies of white privilege, social class dominance, and male chauvinism” (p. 3), and to help “largely white, Anglo, affluent students value and respect differences in the classroom” (p. 5). Although he was not specifically setting out to combat the inherently Christian and Western biases in World Religions, he is a religion teacher, and his concerns and strategies are very pertinent to the present exploration. Three of his classroom practices in particular demonstrate the value of an approach that foregrounds lived religion. First, in reading Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hill found the argument that praxis precedes theology, the latter being based on rather than forming the former, and so “to properly understand the sources of any theology, one must immerse oneself in the terrain of praxis that has given rise to theology” (p. 7). This principle supports teaching praxis first and so undermining the tendency in World Religions to imply that texts and doctrines are the authoritative version of a religion and practices are only more-or-less successful enactments of the real thing. So, in a practice of making others present in the course and bringing religion into being as something people do rather than something students study, Hill asserts that “for maximum impact on radicalizing awareness about

oppression, well-conceived site visits are perhaps the best pedagogical strategy available” (p. 11).

Similarly, writing in a set of essays in response to Masuzawa’s *The Invention of World Religions*, Reid Locklin (2012) of the University of Toronto describes his yearlong World Religions service-learning class called Interreligious Dialogue and Practice. This course includes multiple site visits, and Locklin finds that his approach

forces students to cross cultural boundaries and to disrupt familiar constructions of social and religious others, . . . implicating students directly in the issues raised in class and empowering them to subject these issues—and the theoretical tools used to study them—to self-reflexive examination. (Locklin, Tiemeier, & Vento, p. 167)

Not unlike the way that the emphasis on shared civic values in the Modesto course increased students’ openness and empathy for other religions, Locklin’s students reported that this shift from “the universal to the particular” generated “a more situated, critical, and appreciative engagement with religious diversity itself” (p. 170).

Site visits are also part of the approach of Richard Carp (2007), who believes that all types of religion classes need a component of material culture. He contends that “The Academy participates in a gnosticizing tradition that tends either to devalue the material or to turn material meanings into disembodied essences” (p. 4), and in studying only the verbal representations of what is “fundamentally material, bodily, and physical” (p. 3), we are in effect studying religion in translation (p. 6). However, lest we fall into a dichotomy of thinking that the problem lies in an essentializing, Western, and altogether biased World Religions discourse in the textbook and the answer lies in video, speaker,

material, and site sources for lived religions, we can understand from Carp's experiences with videos, objects, museum visits, etc., that everything is contextualized and situated in some way. Speakers have their own personal viewpoints and experiences, videos are made by specific people who are choosing to show and talk about specific things, and museums curate their collections from a standpoint of their own. Carp sees using these resources as another opportunity to teach students to understand and critique sources.

Other instances of instructors valuing and/or implementing an emphasis on a lived-religions approach include Dippman's (2001) critique of the depictions of Taoism in the earlier consideration of textbooks. He found that uniformly they focus on the philosophical Taoism of the *Tao Te Ching* and Chang Tzu, favorites of Westerners, and all but ignore religious Taoism, the lived beliefs and practices of actual Taoists. Stephen Berkwitz (2004) has developed a very unusual approach: rather than treating Western Buddhism as an artificial phenomenon, as opposed to "real" Buddhism, he believes that a "critical discussion of how Buddhism is conceived and practiced in western countries leads to a revision of many common misconceptions about the Buddhist tradition and undermines the habit of treating Asian religions in the West as exotic and marginal" (p. 141). He cites the just concern over "the problematic tendencies to treat one's subjects of study as exotic, undeveloped, and utterly different" (p. 142), and believes that bringing a study of Western Buddhism into the conversation defuses the tendency to essentialize and objectify the distant Other. This also brings his students into an engagement with Buddhism in the form they are more likely to encounter outside the classroom. William Barnard (1999) finds that supplementing his lectures with "movies, slides, artworks,

music, incense, icons, and so on” to give students “a full-bodied, multi-sensory exposure to a variety of religious worlds” is limited and thwarted by students’ desire “to keep other religions and other cultures at a safe distance” (p. 169). Therefore, he engages his students in participatory activities, so that they are more present and engaged, they get a taste of the lifeworld of those who are otherwise just objects of study, and they see that religion is not entirely words and texts. Although there are many risks in this approach, including leaving students “with the mistaken idea that they now know what it is really like to be, for instance, a Hindu or native American” (p. 170), and especially the difficulties in discerning what activities are appropriate given the significance of religious practices and the religious sensibilities of students, Barnard believes that the transformative possibilities of this approach are worth the effort in planning, framing, and managing it. Another example is the feminist approach of Johann M. Vento (2012), who says:

The attention to the specific and concrete, amid the discussion of the diverse perspectives and subject-positions involved, helps, I think, to destabilize and sense that “religion” is one easily definable thing or that religious beliefs and practices can be easily categorized, schematized, and digested in textbook format. (p. 161)

She assigns an essay about Hinduism that argues that “there is a problem with the way most western scholars have studied Hinduism and especially the roles of women in it, because they focus on history, texts, and priesthood, while that is not the experience of the faith for most Hindus” (p. 164). Focusing instead on “the areas of Hindu life where women are most active and where most Hindus learn about religion: the home, weddings,

the temple, and funerals” (p. 164), this lived-religions approach remedies some of the inherent problems of the World Religions paradigm and, in being transparent about those problems, also engages in the critical tactics we will see more of in the next section.

A last example is the approach of Jill DeTemple (2012), who engages in an overt introduction to globalization and its specialized vocabulary in order to disrupt an essentializing and ahistorical worldview. She finds that her students, most of whom are taking the class to fulfill an area requirement, are very invested in ideas about purity, correctness, and compartmentalization, and feel that what “is so messy and changeable simply cannot be what is most important in their view of genuine religion: true” (p. 66). They tend to see corruption rather than adaptation, and her goal is to unseat their insistence on discovering the one, pure, static authoritative standard for each religion. Her tactic for addressing this in her pedagogy of globalization is the use of contextualized case studies, such as the diverse elements of a Japanese wedding, the televising of the *Ramayana* in India, and the convergence of flows that make possible Hasidic rapper Matisyahu.

In this manner, students learn to view religion as a social process that is enacted and experienced in multiple geographic and social spaces. They learn to evaluate religion as something that both causes and is affected by global processes. They learn to see religion outside of religious institutions, both on the local scale of lived religions and on the global scale of transnational broadcasting, political movements, and international conflict. (p. 66)

In conclusion, there exists a small academic conversation around approaching World Religions with different goals and structures than those of the standard Big Five

paradigm. We have seen a study reporting on the outcomes of framing the course within a discourse of religious liberty as the common property of Americans to promote goals of citizenship and democratic engagement. A number of instructors to a greater or lesser extent employ an approach emphasizing lived religions, including site visits and bringing into the classroom material culture, speakers, videos, contemporary literature, etc. These strategies can undermine the usual implication that theology precedes praxis, foreground the particular over the universal, and involve students in actual religion rather than allowing them to hover above it. Instructors find that emphasizing the variety, irrationality, messiness, and eclecticism in lived traditions disrupts student commitment to a tidy and distant, and therefore essentialized and inert, construct.

### **III. Academic Literature: Critical Goals**

The final three key topics—student positionality, problematizing religion, and problematizing authority—that I have identified in the academic journal literature are interrelated, and all have to do less with how the religions are described than with how the students are taught to analyze what they are learning. Of course, in general instructors often approach their course with critical meta-goals for their students—academic critical thinking and a more sophisticated worldview are part of the curriculum along with facts and ideas—but in the case of World Religions, these goals are very specifically part of how the instructor can solve the inherent problems of this subject. As we have seen to this point, World Religions has a number of features that are not what and how we want to teach our students, and we have seen instructors identifying and discussing these features and proposing some tactics for dealing with them. However, we have also seen

that Religious Studies and World Religions cannot be purged of everything colonializing, Christian-centric, and essentializing and still continue to exist, and that therefore the critical approach to the course is a solution that enables the academy to continue working with these established categories by simultaneously teaching them and teaching students to critique them. As Read (2005) says in his essay on the way that textbooks handle the “indigenous/minority” religions:

If large numbers of our students want to learn about world religions, then that is where one should probably start. But given that the topic itself is problematic, such courses must problematize the study of world religions itself, setting the whole endeavor in its appropriate historical context and exploring the interlocking nature of those diverse histories. (p. 12)

For instance, in “Teaching World Religions without teaching ‘World Religions,’” Locklin, Tiemeier, and Vento (2012) respond to the problematic nature of World Religions by problematizing it for their students. They acknowledge the criticisms that we saw in Chapter One, laying out the premises that *sui generis* religion may indeed not exist, but on the other hand, there *are* religious persons, and “world religions” may not exist, but there *is* a scholarly conversation going on. In their view,

the ideal of objectivity in the study of religions is replaced by an ideal of transparency. Students encounter both the data of religious traditions and the theories employed to study them without any pretense of neutrality on the part of the teacher or of assigned sources. They are thereby invited to become active, self-reflexive subjects in the process of interpretation, ideally conscious of the limit of these or any practices of comparative inquiry and empowered to challenge the hegemony of any interpretive position—including, again ideally, those adopted for the construction of the courses themselves. (p. 177)

This idea is especially provocative in light of the commonly made argument that the only way to teach religion in public schools is by hewing to the utmost neutrality. In the *Religious Studies Review* symposium mentioned above, Joanne Punzo Waghorne (2005) says that even in the most refreshingly insightful textbook, committed to a postcolonial outlook,

the authors ignore the most important injunction of postmodernism, the need for self-reflexivity about the field itself—religious studies, comparative religions, and the history of religions. Postmodernism is more than relativism or even pluralism or even the questioning of science. It begins with a critique of the academic field—deconstruction of the process of knowledge. (p. 4)

Overtly working with student positionality is a second way for instructors to take a critical approach to World Religions. In his year-long qualitative study of liberatory teaching strategies mentioned above, Jack Hill discovered that he needed to get his (mainly Anglo) students to articulate their own multiple identities in detail, and reflect on the various social locations and value sets that emerged, thus breaking down the possibility for students to be an unmarked norm studying the Other. “If everyone is ‘intercultural’ in some way or other, then it becomes harder to reduce ‘others’ to uncritical stereotypes” (p. 8). Similarly to the way that the students in Modesto were taught to see themselves as members of a nation of owners of religious liberty, exercising that liberty in a variety of ways, Hill’s students situated themselves inside of rather than outside of the object of study by having to identify their own positionality, making them describable social actors just like the people whose religious traditions they would be learning about.

Hand-in-hand with helping students problematize the study of religion and their own position comes problematizing the authority of their materials. Berkwitz, whose lived-religions approach featuring Western Buddhism we saw in the previous section, uses popular trade books rather than academic texts not only because he is emphasizing contemporary lived experience but because their very uncritical and unintellectual nature—that is, their more visible author-ity compared with the all-knowing, inhuman textbook—is what makes them “exceptionally useful as pedagogical tools to foster critical thinking, nuanced insights, and a reflective self-awareness of one’s scholarly position and cultural background” (p. 151). Aspects and values of taking a different approach to course content, of taking a lived-religions approach, and of the different facets of taking a critical approach are all visible and intertwined in Berkwitz’s work. He is concerned with problematizing the students’ positions, in that he finds “perhaps the most valuable benefit” of focusing on Western Buddhism is that it “necessitates focusing attention upon ourselves and the societies in which we live,” and presents “opportunities to encourage our students to consider themselves as subjects of critical thought along with the other groups of people normally depicted in textbooks and lecture outlines” (p. 142). He is very concerned with the conventional subject matter and approach and their “problematic tendencies to treat one’s subject of study as exotic, undeveloped, and utterly different,” as “quaint or logically determined by other factors of which only we as scholars with external viewpoints are aware” (p. 142). Berkwitz’s decision to lead his students in a study of Western Buddhism is part of an effort “to disassociate ourselves from the privileged position of describing and knowing the Other who remains unable to

respond to or challenge our views” (p. 142). Berkwitz’s unusual approach simultaneously combats the standard paradigm’s presentation of essentialized, ahistorical others and the traditional privileged positioning of students outside or above the objects of study.

On the other hand, one reason that Derris, whom we saw above in the discussion of the representation of religions created by standard texts, chooses to use a textbook is specifically as a platform for teaching critical analysis. Her response to the problem of the Western construction of religion and religions is to lead her students in critical interpretation of the textbook. “Throughout the semester we question why religious traditions are represented in particular ways and examine the issues of authority and power at play in constructing those representations.” As a teacher, she hopes to initiate “a life-long critical engagement with the representation of religious traditions and issues” (p. 357).

Steven Ramey (2006) is another instructor who is concerned about the ease with which students can acquire a stereotyped and idealized impression of religions in a World Religions survey, and also about leaving students with a more nuanced and complex understanding of contemporary lived religions so that they are better equipped to understand the people whom they encounter. He too finds using a textbook to be valuable, because its familiar format reduces student anxiety and resistance, its basic information is a “safety net” (p. 213) for students who resist engaging, and its representations provide a platform for critical thinking. Like Derris, Ramey specifically has teaching critical thinking as a priority, and he uses his textbook “as an opportunity to introduce briefly the colonial context of interreligious contact and the development of

academic discourses on religions” (p. 214). With verbal and visual sources, he challenges his students to interrogate the authority and perspectives of material as well as their own assumptions, with particular emphases on the diversity within religions and on religious diversity within geographical regions as ways to disrupt the usual static depictions. Ramey has developed a very interesting critical tool for talking about the religious traditions and dealing with the student frustration that accompanies breaking down categories and frameworks and definitions. He uses the language of set theory, presenting a religion as a set that includes its various associated phenomena. What makes this an important shift in how students think about religions is that sets do not just ahistorically exist; they are constructed and defined.

By recognizing the agency of individuals to construct a set in various ways, the diversity within each religion makes better sense. The textbook’s discussion of each religion forms a particular set, while groups and individuals, such as those discussed in the comparative material, construct their own sets that draw boundaries differently. This heuristic device shifts the questions from “Why don’t these people follow their own religion properly?” to “How does each group or individual construct and understand their own set?” (p. 217)

Ramey’s tactic has undermined the standard reification of religions by framing them as constructed and internally diverse, while disconcerting the students less and empowering them as scholars more.

One last example of World Religions instructors who emphasize a more critical approach is the Comparative Sacred Texts class taught by Patton, Robbins, and Newby (2009) at Emory. This alternative approach to World Religions groups texts (not *textbooks*) around topics and requires the students to engage with the texts through

critical reading, a skill the instructors are particularly anxious to promote. They design their approach to bring out the internal variety within a tradition, and they are concerned that students “learn that well-formulated questions regularly are more important than definitive conclusions in the study of religions” (p. 46). These instructors are very aware of the more contemporary critique that religions have been taught as if they are made entirely of texts and they feel that they are engaging students in an interactive interpretive textual practice that counters the more inert place of texts in the standard paradigm. They also require site visits, and so the goal is that students understand “that people are relating to, interpreting, asserting the authority of, and rebelling against religious texts on a daily basis” (p. 41).

When we understand that Patton, Robbins, and Newby are making “an argument for textual reading as a form of living intellectual practice” (p. 37), and when we compare that with Ramey’s reframing of the usual religions as sets, Berkwitz’s focus on the Buddhism of the West, and Modesto’s situating of religion as a matter of American freedom, among other tactics above, the overriding importance of a critical approach to a World Religions class becomes clear. The standard paradigm may rightly be criticized for perpetuating a text-based, westernized, essentialized representation of religions, but we can see in the kind of work these instructors are doing that it would be a simplistic solution to pin the problem on a list of aspects of the paradigm and then solve it by sweeping them away. Rather, the critical intent of the instructor can infuse a textual study with lifeblood, confound the tidy march of a textbook, and situate all people, including the students, within the field of study.

In looking at the concerns and strategies in the academic literature, the point is not to draw some kind of overarching conclusion about the state of affairs in the typical university classroom. Rather, this patchwork of perspectives has suggested the variety of senses of what constitutes “normal” within the academy when it comes to World Religions. On one end of the spectrum, there are voices from teachers whose students have never encountered information about non-Christian religions and whose feelings of unease and even threat are significant considerations for course approach and content. It is also clearly common for instructors to unquestioningly use the many textbooks we have seen critiqued, taking the World Religions paradigm at face value. On the other end of the spectrum, Patton, Robbins, and Newby at Emory assert

Those who work in the contemporary classroom, now very rarely respond to these students’ questions with a set definition, or a set of essentialized categories called “the world religions.” As a result of legitimate and hard-hitting critiques, most of us have moved away from world religions definitions, in which each religion is a thickly walled container into which we pour knowledge, a set of doctrines, beliefs, and practices unique to itself. (p. 37)

It is also obvious to them that students have no problem with diversity: “we regularly have about five to ten Muslims, ten to fifteen Jews, five to ten Hindus, three to five Buddhists, and ten to twenty Christians, and five to ten students with a secular background or no particular religious background” (p. 47). This classroom is a “normal” state of affairs that would not be recognizable to those who teach students for whom most of those groups are all but mythical. So, there is no monolithic understanding within

academia about what difficulties a World Religions course faces and what is best to do about it; there is instead a mosaic of voices contributing to this conversation.

All in all, looking back over the concerns that are mulled over and the solutions that are proposed in the academic literature on teaching World Religions, we see resistance against the standard paradigm and its positioning of the student as a visitor to a natural history museum, viewing from a comfortable distance a curated display of the religions of others. Instructors are bringing in material from outside their textbooks, taking their students outside the classroom, shifting the focus from texts to practices, emphasizing the internal diversity and geographic dispersion of religious traditions, and making not only the Other but the students present in the classroom within the field of study. They are troubled by the inevitable limitations of how religion and religions are conceptualized and are using those very problems to make visible to their students the situated human construction of knowledge.

Outside of academic journals, there are a few books with information and points of view that will tell us more about how people are thinking and talking about the teaching of World Religions. Some are more mainstream and some are aimed at a more professional education audience, but all are intended for a more general readership than the journals, and we will turn to them in the final section of this chapter.

#### **IV. General Literature**

A second category of literature about teaching religion is books that are aimed at a more general audience. These offer much that is of practical use in the classroom and reveal theoretical underpinnings that belong to the academic conversation, but they are

particularly notable because they show us what their authors believe to be the key issues in education about religion from the public's point of view. When the issue is engaging students in an exploration and personal involvement with one of the most tendentious and intimate aspects of public and private life, we cannot simply prescribe from within the university how best to do that while disregarding the perceptions, information, and feelings that the American public—which would include both potential students and policy makers—bring to this issue.

Obviously, there is a vast amount of popular literature revealing the unbounded diversity of how Americans think about religion in general, and there is also a large body of resources on the church/state conflicts that have accompanied the teaching and the practice of religion in American schools. For our present purposes, however, we are concerned more specifically with how we present the religions of the world in a survey course in the classroom. In the remainder of this chapter, we will look at two books that are aimed at a nonspecialist education audience, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* by Warren Nord and Charles Haynes (1998) and *Teaching About Religions* by Emile Lester (2013), and then two thoroughly mainstream books on that subject, Stephen Prothero's *Religious Literacy* (2007) and Linda Wertheimer's *Faith Ed.* (2015).

The late Warren Nord of Chapel Hill and Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center collaborated on *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, which addresses the absence of religion in public school curricula due to misunderstanding the difference between teaching about religion and endorsing religion. They believe that what they call a New Consensus has emerged as the result of Supreme Court decisions and

documents developed by several professional educational and religious organizations; that this consensus clarifies that religion is integrated throughout every aspect of human affairs and students cannot understand history or the present without including religious factors in the curriculum; that this consensus clarifies the difference between what the teacher may not do as an agent of the state and what the teacher must do as a responsible educator; and that the problem now is that most teachers and curriculum developers are not aware of the New Consensus (Nord & Haynes, p. 36). Their contention ultimately is that not only is information about religion necessary for understanding the human story, but also that civic and constitutional principles of fairness and neutrality demand that education not present history and culture as if only secular worldviews exist—their “governing value is fairness” (p. 203).

The bulk of the book discusses how religion can be appropriately integrated into different academic subjects, and, most pertinently, there is a chapter on courses specifically on religion. Concerning these, Nord and Haynes acknowledge “that neither certified teachers nor required courses are likely prospects in the foreseeable future—but it is important to keep the ideal in mind if we are to move in the right direction” (p. 164). Their list of aspects of teaching World Religions that are of especial concern when presenting them in the context of neutral public schools includes the same kinds of issues already familiar herein. They start with the difficulties of balancing diversity and depth and being sure not to privilege Christianity when time is short. They point out that different dimensions have different weights in different traditions and that it shouldn’t be implied that dimensions like creeds or rituals are equally a feature in all religions, saying

that what should be conveyed is “*each religion’s own conception of what is normative*” (p. 173). They are also aware of the problem of internal diversity, including that this is important because “students will sometimes not recognize their own tradition in the simplified versions of them they will encounter in the classroom” (p. 173). How scriptures of various types are presented and contextualized is another matter of concern, as is the danger of teaching a classical form of a religion and thus implying that religions do not change or develop throughout history. We see the concern that prioritizing unity will misrepresent: “it won’t do to say (as teachers sometimes do) that deep down all religions worship the same God. They don’t—or, at least, the claim that they do is deeply controversial” (p. 175). Lastly, they feel that as much as possible religions should speak for themselves from within their own point of view, and also be presented as living forces in the world today.

While they are not at all interested in a critique of religion as a construct or undermining the Big Five paradigm, their criteria demonstrate a concern with not presenting an oppressive Christian-based norm for other religions and not presenting students with a static, ahistoric tour of essentialized Others. Translated into lay language and filtered through a civics and constitutionality viewpoint, we see here many of the same problems and solutions of concern to the religion scholars and critics in Chapter One and the religion instructors in the previous sections of this chapter. Although Nord and Haynes are primarily concerned with the value and the constitutionality of teaching of religion in public K–12 schools, the same qualities that they present as making a World Religions course more accurate, neutral, and inclusive inform my project of

rethinking the World Religions construct for greater respect, honesty, and fairness for both the religions and the students.

The limits of neutrality become the focus of another work aimed at a general education audience, Emile Lester's *Teaching About Religions: A Democratic Approach for Public Schools* (2011). In this lengthy book, based on the study he and Roberts did of the Modesto World Religions course, Lester addresses more fully issues relating to the broad acceptability of teaching about religions, and what emerges is his conviction of the necessity to mollify Christian conservatives. "A truly inclusive education about religion," he says, "must balance required world religion courses with carefully constructed and balanced elective courses on intelligent design and the Bible that involve special recognition of crucial conservative religious beliefs" (p. 10). While the existence of religious communities who believe that their religious freedom is violated by learning that all religions are to be taken equally seriously is indeed an important topic in a consideration of teaching religion in public schools, Lester's focus throughout on not upsetting evangelicals amounts to an obsession, and his repeated insistence on intelligent design as the one necessary topic on which to accommodate them is curious indeed. Perhaps based on his study's strong civics findings, Lester's main argument is that everyone should follow Modesto's lead, and that cosmopolitanism is basically correct, but "When schools promote consensus, openness, and cosmopolitanism too exclusively, they violate the religious liberty that belongs equally to open and mutually exclusive religious beliefs" (p. 244). This leaves the reader wondering how it can be possible to teach anything about religion to someone whose beliefs include the total illegitimacy of

other religions without in fact violating their constitutional rights—or if the right to free exercise can in fact be construed to include this right.

It may be that Lester’s focus on preventing conservative evangelicals from possibly objecting to the curriculum is in part driven by his belief, unlike Nord and Haynes, that there should not be an opt-out alternative for those families who object to their children studying World Religions:

A society like ours in need of both active tolerance and citizens educated for democratic participation can do no other than require students in its public schools to take an independent, extended course on world religions. The course must be required, because among the students most likely to opt out—religious conservatives—are those most in need of the skills for active tolerance. (p. 51)

His continual concerns about not upsetting evangelicals and about policing the boundaries between having students study about religions and participate in them—readings in sacred texts, visiting houses of worship—lead him to assert that a course taking an “educational” approach as opposed to a “democratic” approach could not be required, because it would not be based on “nearly universal consensus.” He believes that “The risk of bias in the educational approach is too great, and the reward of a well-rounded intellectual appreciation of various religions is a dubious benefit to many” (p. 58).

Turning from Lester’s particulars on how a World Religions course should be instituted, in his overall reflections on the success of the Modesto course we can see once again, as we did with Nord and Haynes, the idea that the kinds of concerns about fairness and neutrality that must guide public school teachers due to the demands of

constitutionality are similar to the concerns of a college instructor looking for a less oppressive and more liberatory way to introduce students to the religions of the world. When fairness prevails, not only do we see the move away from Western-normed content that we have been seeking, we also see that students are more receptive to the course. The signature quality of the Modesto approach, what Lester refers to as the “democratic” approach, is to begin with learning about the First Amendment and so to teach about religions to students already prepared to accept that all Americans, including themselves, share the right to free exercise of religion. These findings should be of importance to anyone teaching World Religions, because regardless of how brilliantly a curriculum remedies all the inherent problems with the World Religions paradigm and presents students with experiences of diverse religions from within their own point of view, if the students are entrenched in the rightness of their own positions and resistant to granting the claims of others, they are unlikely to move beyond an us/them binary. So, the concerns and recommendations of these authors who are writing about the need for educators to be teaching about religions in public schools have much to contribute to a consideration of how college instructors might teach World Religions, not the least of which is the benefit of situating an understanding of religion in the American emotional and historical landscape of freedom and fair play.

The first of the two very mainstream titles we will conclude with is Stephen Prothero’s *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t* (2007). His perception of this need was initiated by experiences such as observing his own Boston University students not know who Abraham or Moses were, the FBI escalate

the Branch Davidian siege to a fiery destruction, and a CBS commentator not understand George W. Bush's inaugural reference to the Good Samaritan. Prothero, clearly aware of potential dismissal as a "things aren't what they used to be" handwringer or an elitist prescriptivist, undertakes an argument about the multiplicity and seriousness of the aspects of public and private life affected by religious illiteracy in America. He is at pains to be clear that, unlike the loss to the culture wrought by ignorance of classical or Shakespearean references, ignorance of religion can be a life-or-death matter, as in the Branch Davidian incident or in Madeleine Albright's observation that US ambassadors to Muslim-majority countries are not trained at all in Islam (p. 4). While evangelical Christianity is on the rise, bringing an agenda of a literal reading of the Bible to politics, and nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that the Bible holds the answers to all of life's questions, only half of American adults can name even one of the four Gospels (p. 30). This kind of ignorance about something people profess to be central to their lives is not just pertinent to private religious life; in a country where bitter public protests and court fights erupt over public officials posting the Ten Commandments in court houses, most people cannot come up with even five commandments (p. 28), and only one of the ten cosponsors of a 2005 Alabama bill to protect public displays of the Ten Commandments could name all ten (p. 31). Since only three of the commandments concern deeds that are actually illegal in America, this knowledge is certainly relevant to an argument about whether they should be carved on our court houses.

Prothero spends his first section on these kinds of explanations of the significance for American public life of ignorance about religion, as well as the resultant inability to

interpret both American history—abolition, women’s suffrage, Manifest Destiny, the Cold War, and so on depending in their own time in large part on religious convictions—and current world events. His second section tells a brief history of the role of religion in American public life and how widespread knowledge about it has receded. He then presents his solution: high school courses in Bible 101 and World Religion 101. In his final section, Prothero offers a dictionary of terms, with paragraph-long explanations of their significance, as a kind of bedrock of the kind of knowledge he is talking about: Medina, Prodigal Son, reincarnation, Upanishads, creationism, the five Ks of Sikhism, Dalai Lama, Torah, dispensational premillennialism, and so on.

For our purposes here, what is of such interest is twofold. First, we see a compelling argument being made to the general public that knowledge about religion in general and religions in the plural is essential to America. It’s not just a novelty that the once marginal and cobbled-together teaching of premillennarianism is now pervasive as a vaguely understood but fervently asserted belief in the Second Coming and the Tribulations; the rise of that belief is instrumental in American support of Israel and therefore disinterest in dialogue with the Arab Middle East and a vested interest in escalating conflict in Jerusalem so as to bring about the End Times. Framing support for teaching about religion in terms of the public good, as opposed to personal intellectual enrichment or personal spiritual development creates an argument that is more utilitarian, and therefore useful to the fight for space in the curriculum. This also is germane to my own proposal for a World Religions course that emphasizes goals of citizenship and cosmopolitanism.

Second, Prothero's penultimate section, his proposal for required Bible and World Religions classes in high schools, tells us what he thinks the solution is for these citizenship problems: a basic literacy in the Christian Bible so that people know the key phrases, stories, and characters that occur in American discourse, and a knowledge of World Religions so that citizens can make sense of world affairs and understand their own neighbors. His goals of civic engagement provide more support for rethinking the World Religions paradigm than his brief specific proposal does; he takes the paradigm for granted, suggesting only the modification that other traditions be added if they have a physical presence in that community (Santeria in Miami; Sikhism in Stockton, CA, home to America's first Sikh temple) (p. 136). Not only might we critique this idea by saying that the neighbors of Sikhs mistaken for Muslims and killed in Arizona and Wisconsin, and routinely attacked in many American communities, need to understand Sikhism, but we might also be surprised that he suggests that it is Arizona and New Mexico where Native American religion should be added to the World Religions curriculum, as if that is the only place in America that Native peoples live. However, his proposal does illustrate the normative status of the standard model of World Religions in the academic establishment, even for a distinguished professor and widely published public intellectual. Prothero takes it for granted that the extant World Religions course is what is needed—though he also makes the point that students should not just learn the origins and scriptures of traditions, but also about how today they are “adapting their religious traditions to modern life” and that “Hindus and Buddhists might be invited into these classes to talk about their holidays” (p. 136). His other important point in his discussion

of both the Bible and World Religions classes connects with our earlier section on the importance of teacher training, which he emphasizes as necessary, perhaps including creating certification programs, to ensure that teachers will be able to present these topics objectively, as Nord and Haynes did as well.

*Religious Literacy* does not engage the subtleties of how we talk with students about the religions of the world, but it does indicate that there is a public, popular engagement with the idea that ignorance of religion and religions is a problem in America today and that teaching World Religions is important for enabling Americans to understand and cooperate with their neighbors, participate in political discourse, and develop meaningful positions on world affairs. These aspects of World Religions come to the fore in the curriculum I will be presenting, and this kind of successful popular literature suggests that there is receptivity to this concept.

Lastly, noted journalist and broadcaster Linda Wertheimer entered the conversation in 2015 with *Faith Ed.: Teaching about Religion in an Age of Intolerance*. She travels around the country in her narrative and tells several stories about conflicts that have erupted involving religion in schools, culminating in her attempt to find resolution concerning her own childhood pain over a Christian education class in her public elementary school. As a series of vivid narratives, strung on an overarching personal narrative, rather than a more argued work like the preceding books, *Faith Ed.* makes some things clear to the questing religion instructor that might have been glossed over before.

First, the human complexities of interpreting what constitutes a fair and neutral presentation of religion become painfully obvious. The previous authors can leave us feeling that the difference between presenting material about religions to students and asking them to participate in those religions is clear and that a knowledgeable and fair-minded instructor will be able to create reasonable and justifiable lessons. However, the stories that Wertheimer reports on demonstrate how quickly perception becomes reality and then obviates any clarification of the value and legitimacy of a lesson. Once an opportunity for students to handle and try on typical Middle Eastern women's clothing is positioned as indoctrination, the teacher's credentials and history or any argument about pedagogy become irrelevant. Likewise, when students visiting a mosque accept an invitation to participate or a visiting speaker is seen to have affiliations that are too partisan, ideological firestorms can consume communities and careers.<sup>5</sup> The point is not that this book provides us with a reminder to be even more careful than we thought to design lessons that will not require students to engage in a religious activity which they have a right to refuse or that will not expose our captive audience to unsuitable proselytizing. Rather, Wertheimer's stories bring to life the complex and irrational responses that people can have to ideas and information about religion and should

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<sup>5</sup> This is not just a matter of Christian parents in rural Texas shielding elementary children from exposure to Islam. College instructors should not consider themselves above the concerns of constitutionality that guide public K-12 teachers. First, as indicated above, the principles of neutrality and care to not advocate for or cross into classroom practice of religion that make a course constitutional also make it fair and appropriate for any college student. Second, public and private university faculty are certainly open to criticism for the actuality or the appearance of requiring students to practice a religion. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill chose as its required summer reading in 2002 a book about the Qur'an and found itself in the midst of a national furor. A lawsuit was brought by students among others, but a US District Court judge declined to grant a restraining order (Franklin, 2002).

prevent any World Religions instructor from thinking of religious objections to academic material as only an abstract possibility.

The second and related aspect of teaching religion that the narratives in *Faith Ed.* illustrate for a teacher is that even when the appropriateness of the lesson is not in question, even when the teacher is presenting simple factual material about religious beliefs and practices around the world, material that the teacher finds ordinary and unremarkable, students may still experience significant distress. The writers in the academic journals addressed above and in the books addressed in this section may sometimes mention student fears as a factor in their pedagogy, for instance as a reason for choosing the comforting medium of a textbook, but this factor of the potential educational experience looks different when told as a story. Wertheimer visits Modesto and talks with teachers and students, and Lester and Roberts's account is hardly recognizable when we learn that, despite all of the careful preparation and community ownership and success reported in that study, a student sits in class "terrified" by the religious objects on the window, such as a menorah, Shiva, and Buddha, praying that she will not go to hell for being near them (p. 159). Nor is she the only tearful teen described in that chapter. A Pentecostal Christian, she determinedly attends the class, however, and in the end becomes an emblem for Wertheimer of the kind of transformation from isolation to inclusion that a World Religions class can bring about. Before that could happen, though, the student had to undergo a truly traumatic experience, and this reminder of the possible abyss between the teacher's understanding of what is going on in the classroom and the student's is a valuable aspect of this book.

*Faith Ed.* is indeed mainstream popular nonfiction and Wertheimer has not conducted a study from which a religion instructor could extract academic data about what should or should not be included in a World Religions curriculum and why. Neither the reader nor Wertheimer is in any position to draw significant conclusions, and indeed her amateur status means that some questions do not get asked or connections made. The portraits of Americans engaging with education about religion are faces and stories that religion instructors need to see, however, and the existence of this book also tells us that the author and the publisher are confident that issues around teaching about religion are important to people and that Americans want to understand both religion and education about religion better.

## **V. Conclusion**

In Chapter Two, we have discovered that, although an essentialized, nineteenth-century view of what religion is and what the religions of the world are prevails within the academy and is unquestioned among the general public, there is a small conversation taking place among World Religions instructors trying to counter this. Finding their textbooks biased, shallow, static, and misleading, but needing a source of basic information for themselves and their young, inexperienced, and often apprehensive students, instructors have developed some strategies for supplementing the textbooks with information and experiences and for challenging the textbooks with overtly critical approaches. Some instructors choose to undermine the colonizing and distancing qualities of the World Religions paradigm by focusing on ways to think about other religions that are more direct and immediate (in terms of both space/time and relevance), such as

though discourses of living practices or shared civic and cosmopolitan principles. Problematizing the entire enterprise—the standpoints of the students as people rather than as classroom components, the construction of knowledge in the textbook and other sources, the authority of the teacher and of those who speak about and for the religions—can powerfully demystify the study of World Religions and prevent students from accepting a pageant of simplistic stereotypes, pages of bullet points, and sketches of institutions as a meaningful experience of the people of the world. In the less technical publications, we see that there is a more general public concern that Americans need to understand religion and religions better and that it is very important to the well-being of the students, the culture, and the religions to do so with fairness and neutrality and a sense of religious liberty as a civic possession.

These concerns and strategies develop the criticisms I explored in Chapter One; they indicate that there are some instructors who take seriously this valuable opportunity to affect what and how young Americans think about religion; and they point the way, with both general principles and specific classroom practices, towards designing an approach to an introductory survey of World Religions that situates students within a cosmopolitan landscape of practices and beliefs. In Chapter Three, I will delineate some of the theoretical grounds that support such an approach.

## CHAPTER III

### PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES FOR A REIMAGINED WORLD RELIGIONS

Thus far, I have explored the evolution of the World Religions construct and unpacked its reification of a nineteenth-century Christian worldview in Chapter One, raising questions about what contemporary instructors can do about this entirely institutionalized fossil that affects so many but is critiqued by so few. In Chapter Two, I searched out and analyzed the current conversations about it, looking for what scholars believe to be the nature of its problems and what they propose as possibilities for change. Now in Chapter Three I have to ask what educational principles will provide solid ground for a radical shift in both the structure and the goals of a World Religions course. In order to imagine and defend a different kind of course about the religions of world, I need a theoretical ground that establishes the value of reallocating the limited time of a course in order to privilege past and present praxis over doctrines and theologies; to favor live practitioners and live students over texts and checklists; and to bring stories, emotions, and experiences into the foreground and push hierarchies and histories into the background. As we saw above, the potential course content in a survey of the religions of the world is all but infinite, and the traditional response to that has been to frantically cram in as many facts as it is possible to read and lecture about in a semester—facts organized, codified, and deemed significant by the Victorians. I propose that there is greater value in having students learn more about less, to experience fewer things but

more deeply, to understand some things about what it means to belong to some of the religions of the world—to see with rather than to look at.

Furthermore, the *purpose* of the traditional course, as opposed to the *approach*, is oddly paradoxical. It has been to acquaint students with as much information as possible of an academic nature, yet as we have seen, within academic religious studies, this information is viewed as highly unsatisfactory. No specialist in Islam, Taoism, or Southeast Asian religions would represent their subjects with the language and structures used in a World Religions textbook. Nevertheless, despite this asynchronicity with today's academic religious studies, the goal of the standard course is essentially purely academic—to know as many facts as possible about the traditionally important religions. In general, I am very much opposed to pragmatic, utilitarian arguments about the purpose of education (as career preparation and so on), and I value knowledge and learning for their own sake very highly as a crucial aspect of being human and of understanding the story of humanity. However, in the case of this one opportunity for those with a wider knowledge of religion to give people a non-faith-based understanding of a variety of religions, I think that practical goals of national and world citizenship have a substantial claim on the curriculum of a World Religions course.

To justify and inform this different kind of introduction to the world's religions, in this chapter we will listen to some pertinent scholarship addressing theory and practice in education. The voices I will bring in will be multiple and interconnected: education for democracy, cosmopolitanism, peace education, a pedagogy of caring, critical pedagogy, and postmodern educational theory. All of these provide both ethical and intellectual

support for a course that better serves both the students and the religions, a course that, rather than positioning the students to survey from on high a few specious and static constructs, embeds students in a world of people engaging in a wide variety of religious actions and speech.

Although any educational theory has implications for numerous aspects of teaching, learning, personal lives, and society, in order to keep the focus on the areas in which my curriculum differs most from the standard paradigm and which are most germane to the intersection of religion and education, I will organize Chapter Three into four sections. First, we will examine some ideas pertaining to national and world citizenship, and then we will look at cosmopolitanism and the push/pull between difference and unity. Next we will see some scholarly support for emphasizing the cultivation and protection of the humanity of the students. Lastly, there are some principles from critical and postmodern pedagogical theory that speak to the priorities and goals of the teacher, and to how the classroom experience actually functions to engage, challenge, and transform. In each topic, we will explore a few exponents of these theoretical areas and connect their concerns with the issues we have identified in the teaching of World Religions.

### **I. Education for American and World Citizenship**

In a sense, of course, it is quite obvious that Americans have decided that education is for the purpose of improving our civic life—we have chosen to pay for public education with our tax money. As a nation, we are not paying for the personal actualization and private improvement of individuals; the polity does not care that my

years on this earth are more nuanced because I read *Middlemarch*. What we are supporting, in the same way that we support roads, the military, and trash pick-up, is other people having the knowledge and skills that keep society functioning. It is a public good that people be able to perform in jobs and be socialized into American life. This covers a wide range of outcomes: performing in jobs can be going to work in a factory or an insurance office or it could mean innovating an entire industry, and being socialized into American life might just mean accepting one's place as another brick in the wall or it might involve learning enough about government and law to become a very active voter or politician. Across the many ways people live, the skills and abilities to act in the public sphere in an orderly and productive manner are what justify the investment in public education. The message that we think that having educated fellow citizens is a general public good appertains whether we are talking in any particular case about public or private schools, or about children or adult students.

So, we as a political entity want our schools at the minimum to produce fellow citizens whom we can live with and who can keep our nation functioning. In continuing to talk about citizenship as an educational goal I would like to put forth a definition more specific than just what we can infer from the fact that we have tax-supported schools. When I refer to good citizenship, I mean acting in the world in ways that make one a better neighbor, ways that make public relationships between people (individuals and groups) and relationships between nations more respectful of human rights, more open and other-directed, more cooperative, and less closed and defensive. Good citizenship leads to public actions and public policies that reduce conflict, promote civil rights, make

everyone's life safer, and address crises from a position of rationality and compassion. While the story of humanity is the story of the conflicting goods of the individual and of society, a tension between freedom and security integral to civilization, good citizenship is the call to honor each other and to value the protection of everyone's rights. What we will explore in this section is what a better education about the religions of the world has to do with a better education for citizenship.

A person with an effective introduction to religions in the plural is closer to being a person who is able to act not from fear that others are hostile and strange and incomprehensible, but from knowledge and experience that others are people with understandable needs and desires, and are people who may also have values that spring from a religious commitment that one can recognize, even if one doesn't share the values themselves. In this section, we will look at several explorations of the connections between knowledge about religion and the public sphere. Beginning with Diane Moore's application to religion of Amy Gutmann's concerns for an educated populace that can participate politically, we will move through other thoughts about how not excluding religion from the public square is both more functionally democratic and philosophically defensible, and then transition to a more pedagogical concern espoused by Gert Biesta about how we can come into being as democratic people in a plural world.

Amy Gutmann's landmark work *Democratic Education* (1987) is specifically concerned with preparation for citizenship in a deliberative democracy. Society wants and needs schools that predispose "children to accept those ways of life that are consistent with sharing the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic

society” (p. 42). She is not making here a sinister totalitarian claim that the state is to force, over individual and family rights, its own version of how people are to live their lives; on the contrary, she asserts that the very existence of multiple competing conceptions of the good life is exactly why education must prepare people for democratic citizenship. The knowledge and the evaluative skills—intellectual and moral—to make one’s own choices and to understand and respect the choices, or at least the choosing, of others are essential to the functioning of a democratic society that acknowledges multiple human goods. So, for Gutmann and for this consideration of teaching World Religions, society requires education that neither instructs students what the one right answer is, nor equips them to participate in a culture that votes on the one right answer and then visits it upon all, but instead one that recognizes the diversity of humanity and inculcates the serious obligation to protect that diversity in making political decisions in a democratic process.

Diane Moore, of Harvard’s Religious Literacy project, firmly believes that “Gutmann’s understanding of democratic education provides the basic minimum requirements to cultivate democratic values within our future citizens” (2007, p. 15). Her brief is that religious literacy is an essential component of this kind of education, for several reasons. One is that “Religious beliefs, expressions, and worldviews have inspired and affected the full spectrum of human agency in artistic, philosophical, ethical, political, scientific, and economic arenas” (p. 28), rather than just being of personal import as a matter of individual belief. Moore is also interested in the study of religion as part of critical deliberation over the meanings and moral dimensions of historical events,

literature, and other aspects of human enterprise. Religion is important both as the means of engaging and understanding these things per se, and she also sees this kind of engagement as part of education's larger goal of crafting opportunities to practice critical reflection. All of this supports her third point, which is that people need to understand religion in the plural in order to be respectful members of a diverse culture. She recounts some examples of religious ignorance leading to unjust treatment, and says that "cultivating an informed respect for religious differences will equip students with the skills and temperaments to function more meaningfully and effectively within their home communities and the workplace realities they are likely to encounter in the future" (p. 33). In the context of the democratic values from Gutmann's larger view, Moore asserts that while it is indeed "imperative to protect the secular framework of public education as the only foundation capable of promoting a shared set of values amidst our religious and cultural diversity," we need to include religion in the curriculum for a more complete education. "The failure to do so promotes repression by perpetuating ignorance and limiting the exposure of students to rational considerations of religious worldviews as legitimate and widely held expressions of the good life" (p. 52).

Of course, examinations of the idea that it is education's business to prepare people for participation in a diverse democracy abound; Stephen Macedo, in *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (2000), bases his on a Rawlsian conviction that "reasonable people disagree deeply and permanently about their religious beliefs and philosophical ideals of life" (p. 169) and so the commitment must be to the ongoing process itself, not to a uniform outcome. While Macedo affirms one of the

basic points we are concerned with here, that “the work that public schools are meant to do [is] helping us negotiate our differences in the name of forging a public life” (p. 6), he is not directly addressing the role of teaching about religion in the work of education. His interest in religion’s place in a discussion of civic education is tangential to our purposes here, as he is concerned not with instruction about religion but with the ways in which the religious beliefs held by people can come into conflict with the curriculum. Macedo’s concern is with the inevitable tension in a liberal democracy in dealing with the rights of the intolerant, in the degree to which it is possible to include the exclusive, in accepting the argument that neutrality can violate the rights of the religiously exclusive. This is still germane, however, as it speaks to ideas around education’s insistence that there exists generally acceptable neutral knowledge that a culture can expect everyone to at least learn about regardless of whether they subsequently agree with or act on it. The position Macedo takes is that allowing people to opt out of a literature or science course because of religious objections to the content is no different from allowing them to opt out because of racial prejudice—that members of a culture cannot choose to learn only those facts that please them. “We cannot allow,” he says “that dissenters have a general right, on private, conscientious grounds, to opt out of generally acceptable and publically justifiable policies or rules” (p. 211).

In *Surviving Diversity: Religion and Democratic Citizenship* (2000), Jeff Spinner-Halev interestingly disagrees with Macedo, Gutmann, Lester, and the many others who assert that in order to protect liberal democracy, dissenters who are at all within the system must not be allowed any partial opt-out, that holding the line on generally

accepted neutral educational content is key to perpetuating a public sphere in which all can dwell and act (and conversely, giving in would be a slippery slope to irrationality). His argument is that, while we do indeed want schools to be where people learn liberal democratic values such as mutual respect and intellectual autonomy, as a rule, inclusion bolsters citizenship and “accommodation should be granted even when it means exempting students from being exposed to beliefs that are at odds with their own faith when it is feasible to do so” (p. 136). When schools refuse, on the grounds that the normal curriculum is reasonable and in line with the values and beliefs of the larger culture, to grant alternative reading assignments or excuse a student from a class, the outcome is likely to be that a religiously conservative family will leave for a private school. On the other hand, says Spinner-Halev, an accommodation means that the student stays in the common school and misses one class or lesson, not all of them. Furthermore, the student learns values, information, and a worldview from the entire experience, not just one assignment:

A school whose ethos is one of mutual respect, where all students are treated respectfully by teachers, and teachers ensure that students treat one another respectfully in the classroom, is teaching mutual respect, not by books but by example. It is not so important if some students do not learn through a book that gay people deserve respect if they see their fellow students and teachers treating gays with respect. (p. 138)

In the exploration at hand of the role of education about religion in a democratic society, discussions such as these serve a purpose. One more practical one is simply a glance at the idea that, if a science, health, or literature class can have trouble presenting

content that everyone in the culture can agree is ideologically neutral, then an instructor preparing a religion survey course is certainly going to have to be prepared to have these conversations multiple times, never finally arriving at a universally satisfactory academic study that no one can object to on religious grounds. Anecdotes abound about activities and assignments that suddenly become controversial, such as having students try on Muslim garb or visit a mosque (Wertheimer 2015). People's religious feelings are so varied, the potential content and approach of a religion course so vast, classroom teaching so situated in place and time, and the media so potentially inflammatory that instructors have to be committed to a constant self-interrogation of how they are positioning religions, how students are being asked to interact with them, what the goals of any activity are, and so on, so that mistakes can be avoided and so that at any moment decisions can be clearly explained to others.

More to the point, though, the disagreement between Spinner-Halev and Macedo illustrates the need to be measured, calm, and inclusive when working at the intersection of religion and citizenship. Maintaining a doggedly academic position that the knowledge and activities in a religion class are neutral and a member of a more exclusive religious group is simply wrong and needs to learn how to correctly participate in a liberal democracy where we set aside private beliefs to act in the secular public sphere will surely further alienate the religious fundamentalist and drive him/her farther from a constructive place of citizenship. Not only do I agree with Spinner-Halev that accommodating religiously extreme families with alternate assignments, etc., when at all possible, is a better route for defending the health of deliberative democracy than forcing

them to choose church schools in the belief that one is defending intellectual integrity by punishing them for privileging belief over rationality, but I also think that the issue itself points towards the need for the World Religions survey course. The more that people who have a wide-ranging experience of religious world-views, including their own, are present in the public square deliberating the norms of our democracy, the less we will be paralyzed by a binary between the secular and the religious, driven farther apart by their stereotypes of each other. Religious people retreat to church-related schools and home schooling in large part because of their perception that public schooling is hostile to them. One of Lester and Roberts's (2006) notable findings was that the Modesto World Religions course did not upset conservative families in California's Bible Belt largely because they were so pleased that the school was taking religion seriously rather than ignoring it. Liberal families, on the other hand, liked it because it was inclusive and multicultural, making the point that a carefully constructed World Religion survey can indeed foster a meeting ground where people with very diverse worldviews can learn to understand and appreciate the range of worldviews held by the neighbors with whom they share citizenship.

In considering the role of knowledge about religions in American citizenship, we must note again that one of the most powerful results of the Modesto course that Lester and Roberts observed was the "positive impact not only on students' respect for other religions and their willingness to act on behalf of vulnerable religious minorities, but on students' respect for First Amendment and political rights in general" (Lester and Roberts, 2006, p. 55). Situating an understanding of the religious beliefs of their fellow

Americans in the public sphere as an essential feature of this course's approach meant that these students were not being asked to accept the existence of religious beliefs that might be completely contrary to their own doctrines on any abstract grounds of humanism or tolerance, but explicitly because everyone has a right to be part of the public sphere and everyone's religious beliefs, including their own, enjoy the same constitutional protections. That is, instead of teaching the variety of religions and then convincing people that the culture requires them to respect and act alongside them as fellow citizens in public matters, this more civics-forward curriculum explicitly frames knowledge and acceptance of multiple religious points of view as not a spiritual threat but a civic duty and a public good.

It is perhaps due to a brief aberration in our intellectual history that there is even any need to assert as part of grounds for a World Religions survey course that religion is an integral part of the public sphere. As Craig Calhoun says in his epilogue to *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (2011), religious institutions and religious convictions have shaped political events from the founding the nation through abolitionism to the Civil Rights movement. He says

These included not only motivations but also social networks, practical experience in public speaking, resources of physical space and funds, ideals of justice, visions of peace, language for grasping the connection between contemporary problems and deeper moral values, and capacities to both generate and recognize the power of prophetic disruptions to the complacency of everyday life. (p. 122)

Calhoun credits the educated elite's perception of religion as a reactionary and laughable force to snobbery such as that John Dewey observed in the condescension to William Jennings Bryan (p. 121). With religion linked to an evangelical populism, the assumption became that it was a right-leaning sideshow to an increasing secularization of the public sphere. If there is a perception today that religion is a resurgent force on the political scene, that may be more a correction of the mistaken narrative of secularization than actual change in the role of religion.

Jürgen Habermas is one who has made such a correction, modifying his earlier views on the necessity of an entirely rational public square that cannot admit as legitimate any position based on belief, but his compromise position is awkward. Calhoun explains:

Because the public sphere is for Habermas a realm of rational critical argumentation and propositional content, admission is a matter of ability and willingness to participate in open debate. He worries that religious commitments inhibit this, both because faith or revelation are reasons that can't hold weight for those who don't experience them and because religious ideas come in language that is not accessible to those outside particular traditions. (p. 128)

Habermas's solution is what he calls *translation*, somehow restating religious convictions in terms that do not require that one subscribe to the foundations of those convictions in order to engage in the public sphere. Charles Taylor, who is engaged in a dialogue with Habermas earlier in this book, doubts that this fancy footwork is necessary, putting forth

that religion should not be considered a special case, either with regard to political discourse or with regard to reason and argumentation in general, but, rather, that religion is simply one instance of the more general challenge of diversity, including diversity in comprehensive views of the good, in Rawls's language. (p. 60)

“Habermas stresses agreement and clearer knowledge,” sums up Calhoun, “while Taylor stresses mutual recognition and collaboration in common pursuits. But both see excluding religion from the public sphere as undermining the solidarity and creativity they seek” (p. 129). The voices in this conversation also include Judith Butler and Cornel West, and while all have different emphases, they all are concerned with, to use Butler’s point of view, the protection of alterity, considering the circumstances of, as Taylor says, “this Arendtian idea that we don’t choose the people we share the world with” (p. 111). Finally, cutting through these attempts to define exactly how people are to legitimately participate in a diverse democracy, Cornel West’s understanding of how the religious and the secular interact in the public sphere is more intuitive and more experiential. Calhoun sums it up thus: “Mutual understanding is achieved through empathy and imagination, learning the rhythm of each other’s dances and the tunes of each other’s songs. This sort of knowledge is tested in action, not in propositions; the capacity to understand each other is not derived from arguments” (p. 131).

West’s response to how people can interact in the public sphere of a diverse democracy when they do not necessarily share even the basic commitment to a neutral, rational, secular public discourse presupposed by Gutmann, Macedo, and Habermas sends us back to the World Religions classroom. The physicality of his terms—rhythm, dances, tunes, songs—speaks to an education in the religions of the world that is embodied and enacted. The ineffability of empathy and imagination does not square with classroom practices as easily as the prevailing paradigm of testable lists of verbal information, but West says that empathy and imagination—seeing and feeling with

others, creating new mental spaces, experiencing other realities—lead to mutual understanding. People cannot be argued into sympathy with others. This is grounds for a World Religions pedagogy of empathy and imagination, of songs and dances—of personal experiences that lead to a public sphere of mutual understanding, where people do not have to be talked into respectful behavior as an abstract duty.

To return to Gutmann, she in fact does assert that moral sensibilities need to precede a more formal ethics, saying

Children first become the kind of people who are repelled by bigotry, and then they feel the force of the reasons for their repulsion. The liberal reasons to reject bigotry are quite impotent in the absence of such sensibilities: they offer no compelling argument to people who feel no need to treat each other as equals and are willing to live with the consequences of their disrespect. (1987, p. 43)

Gutmann believes, however, that college is too late for these considerations, that if adolescents have not learned “basic democratic virtues, such as toleration, truth-telling, and a predisposition to non-violence” by college, it is too late (p. 173). In college, an appropriate moral education should be “learning how to think carefully and critically about political problems, to articulate one’s views and defend them before people with whom one disagrees.” While Gutmann means this as part of her argument for the academic freedom of higher education, I think that she is oversimplifying the moral development that everyone experiences throughout a lifetime. Certainly college is too late for someone who has literally not learned the basic democratic virtues, but such a person would be a sociopath. The capacity of empathy, of a combined emotional and rational understanding of the world of another person, is awakened over years, through a variety

of encounters, lost, found, reawakened, refined, and recommitted to. The democratic education of a young adult should most certainly include experiences designed not only to refine thinking but to awaken feeling, and an introduction to the religions of the world must do both as part of the education of a mutually respectful citizenry.

Writing in *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (2006), Gert Biesta is critical of the kind of Enlightenment ideas about education preparing people with knowledge, skills, and values for citizenship that he sees Gutmann as exemplifying. The problem, he says,

is that this view of democratic education rests upon an individualistic view of democracy itself, one in which it is assumed that the success of democracy depends on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of individuals and on their willingness as individuals to act democratically. What is particularly problematic here is the assumption that democracy is only possible if all citizens are “properly” educated and act accordingly. The question this raises is whether we take democracy seriously enough if we assume that it can only exist if it is founded on a common identity. Isn’t it the case that the challenge of democracy lies precisely in our ability to live together with those who are not like us? (p. 120)

Biesta is interested in an Arendtian subjectivity, one not defined by clusters of individual attributes but one that comes into being in action, not privately but in action in the social world. Therefore, his pedagogical concerns revolve not around the imparting of the information that democratic citizens need to know but around the creation of opportunities for students to act and to reflect upon action in a world of plurality. Biesta elaborates:

To act, that is to be a democratic person in a world of plurality and difference, is therefore as much about doing and saying and bringing oneself into the world, as it is about listening and waiting, creating spaces for others to begin, and thus creating opportunities for others to be a subject. This means that a democratic school, a school in which action is possible, is not a child-centered school, if, that is, we understand childcenteredness as self-expression without concern for others. Action is anything but self-expression; it is about the insertion of one's beginnings into the complex social fabric and about the subjection of one's beginnings to the beginnings of others who are not like us. The Arendtian conception of the democratic person thus calls for an approach to democratic education that is not child-centered but action-centered, one that focuses both on the opportunities for students to begin and on plurality as the only condition under which action is possible. It thus entails a double educational responsibility: a responsibility for each individual and a responsibility for "the world," the space of plurality and difference as the condition for democratic subjectivity. (p. 139–140)

I do maintain that an important reason to teach World Religions courses is simply to impart information; people feel so strongly yet know so little about their own religion and the many other religions that they encounter in both their personal and public lives that any increase in information from a non-faith-based source is likely to move us towards better understanding and better behavior between people. However, my particular project is not just to advocate for World Religions but specifically to suggest that the usual way of teaching it tends to undermine and waste the potential for increased empathy and respect. Distance is maintained from the everyday American lives of students by a geographical approach that keeps practitioners of non-Christian religions neatly in other nations and other times. Distance is maintained from the everyday American concerns of students by a lack of linkage between religions as historical phenomena and religions as active motivators in people's lives. Distance is maintained from the everyday American selves of students by the natural-history-museum approach

that privileges students to gaze on and critique the worldviews of others by their—the students’—standards. Distance is maintained from the everyday American hearts of students by a pedagogy of frantic assimilation of facts that alienates them from a topic that should be among the most personally engaging that they encounter. For a World Religions course to connect rather than to distance, to open up students rather than to shut them down, to make others more real rather than just more detailed abstractions—this requires the kind of space Biesta is describing, a space where students are taking action with the materials and with each other. Passively receiving new information about Muslims may help a Christian student become a more fair voter and a less hysterical neighbor, but probably only in the sense of becoming more “tolerant,” more inclined to think that “we” shouldn’t be prejudiced about “them.” A student who has to take action and work through materials and experiences, develop ideas about them, contextualize them, question them, connect them to other ideas and information, and then reflect on and develop this work in the presence of other students has had to break down the barriers between self and information and has new ideas, thoughts, and feelings of his/her own, not just new information.

Furthermore, doing this work together means that the entire enterprise of religion is contextualized as a community effort in which the emotional, intellectual, and physical presence of others matters. In situating students within a group of others who must each grapple with feelings and facts and situations, an interpersonal and experiential pedagogy itself teaches as much of what students need to understand about religions as the new information does. Biesta sees this kind of learning environment as a way for students to

understand what it means and what their responsibilities towards themselves and towards others are for taking action in a diverse democracy:

The role of schools and educators is therefore not just that of creating opportunities for action—both by allowing individuals to begin and take initiative and by keeping in existence a space of plurality and difference in which action is only possible. Schools and educators also have an important role to play in inviting and supporting reflection on those situations in which action was possible and, perhaps even more importantly, those situations in which action was not possible. This might foster an understanding of the fragile personal, interpersonal, and structural conditions under which human beings can act and can be a subject. It might foster an understanding of the fragile conditions under which everyone can be a subject and hence democracy can become a reality. (p. 142)

As our planet proverbially shrinks to a global village, the kinds of knowledge about religions and the kinds of commitments to the liberty and the human rights of others that are part of being a good neighbor within the sphere of our local public life—in our families, at work, in our towns—and of being a good citizen who supports public policies and laws that protect everyone’s First Amendment rights are also the kinds of knowledge and commitment that make one a good global citizen. That is, global citizenship calls for knowledge and values that move Americans towards foreign policies and military actions not based on religious prejudice and that reduce an us/them worldview abroad as well as at home. For a World Religions course, ideas about our place as citizens of not only a diverse America but a diverse world are especially important. In the next section, we will bring in some support from the literature on cosmopolitanism, and also pay attention to what the tension between seeing the world as

united and as varied tells us about what we tell students about whether all religions are similar at heart or not.

## **II. Cosmopolitanism**

My arguments that the traditional World Religions paradigm privileges students to look at essentialized Others, arrayed for the purpose like butterflies on pins in a vitrine, and that a more experiential and empathetic religion survey course is conducive to better citizenship, now demand a more specific examination of some principles relating to encounters with others. In the first place, it is increasingly difficult to defend the idea that the obligations of good citizenship end at our national borders and that our fellow nationals are the only people deserving of humane consideration. Our employment practices, environmental impact, and cultural marketing have all already created a global web of complex and very personal causes and effects, so that, far from being a matter of thinking in terms of large historical forces, a fad in America for an updated iPhone means that very specific young adults in China live in factory dorms. The world is such that we are as able to affect children in Indonesia with our purchasing as we are able to affect the people in our own city by voting. Furthermore, thanks largely to social media and green consumer movements, Americans are much more likely than ever to have actually seen the face of a South American farmer whose hands touched the coffee beans they are pouring in their grinder. This is surely then a kind of citizenship, a public sphere in which we are acting and must bring to bear our thoughts and feelings about what we owe others. Of course, an even more powerful example of that is the fact that our foreign policies and military actions have everything to do with our personal feelings and beliefs at least as

much as they have to do with the actual defense of our nation, and so even our military actions in the world are a matter of world citizenship. That is, even if there were such a thing as a purely military action untainted by ideologies between nations, so that one might argue that the members of each nation had no citizenship obligations towards each other, in fact the kind of military actions America has been involved in reflect a tremendous failure of world citizenship among individuals—along with other motive forces, actual Americans’ ignorance and fear regarding Islam have directly resulted in the deaths of actual Iraqi children. So, in considering the principles of world citizenship on this small planet, we will in this section examine some aspects of cosmopolitanism and extend those ideas to a pedagogy of World Religions.

In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), Kwame Anthony Appiah is looking to a near future, one that is perhaps already the present, of post-national thinking and being. His thoughts combine pragmatism (that there are now “so many of us and we all have a realistic possibility of affecting each other” [p. xii]) with an ethical argument that caring does not know borders and with another ethical argument that people matter in the particular not just abstractly en masse. Appiah says that there are two stands of cosmopolitanism:

One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. (p. xv)

Appiah belongs to a long line of thinkers who find it obvious that human ethical obligations transcend nationalism, from Diogenes's famous world citizenship to Thomas Paine's equally famous ridicule of the reifying of kings and their domains. As a person of our present times, Appiah's major concern in presenting his assertions is heading off both recommendations for and criticisms of relativism. He believes that we cannot just throw up our hands and say that the world is so diverse and everything so completely contextualized that everything is relative:

From our different perspectives, we would be living effectively in different worlds. And without a shared world, what is there to discuss? People often recommend relativism because they think it will lead to tolerance. But if we cannot learn from one another what it is right to think and feel and do, then conversation between us will be pointless. Relativism of that sort isn't a way to encourage conversation; it's just a reason to fall silent. (p. 31)

He is interested here in the creation of a common world, perhaps in an Arendtian sense, and he thinks it happens when diverse elements come together and spark, citing Salman Rushdie's enthusiasm for cultural contamination. He says that Rushdie "rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world" (p. 112). Appiah believes that people can connect over shared large concepts, like courage and morality, and "reasonably disagree about their application" (p. 58). A common world is possible, and he is confident that we see evidence all around us in our lives that we can agree on *what* to do even with little agreement on exactly *why*, that we can live together without identical values.

On the other hand, Appiah is not only rejecting total relativism as a solution, he is also rejecting it as a charge that can be leveled against him, at the same time that he is arguing for a moderate relativism. The existence of those underlying shared large concepts means that Appiah is positing a shared human moral world underneath those different practices, and so for him embracing a cosmopolitan outlook does not mean accepting all moral positions as equally valid. We can refute many of the practices and values that we encounter in the larger world, but he believes that we will find enough bedrock on which to stand together. For Appiah, the demand that relativism be completely rejected is counter-cosmopolitan and is the hallmark of totalitarian points of view such as those held by the Taliban. A cosmopolitan is someone who is ready to admit that his/her own answers to all of life questions are not the only ones for all people in all places and times. His modified relativism is summed up when he says, “Cosmopolitans think that there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by all of them” (p. 144).

His signature point is that our worldview is hamstrung by what he calls the problem of imaginary strangers—that our feelings, thoughts, and actions are based on vague and specious mental constructs of strangers, constructs that have little to do with actual other people. Appiah’s cosmopolitanism is primarily concerned with combatting this, not under the belief that once people know each other they will become friends and discover that they are the same under the skin, but that when they come into presence with each other as real humans, they can come to a point that makes understanding—and global citizenship possible. He says that “the great lesson of anthropology is that when

the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him, you may agree or disagree; but if it is what you both want, you can make sense of each other in the end” (p. 99).

This idea of making previously imaginary strangers present informs my approach to a less essentializing, less intellectualized, and more empathetic World Religions course, for all the kinds of reasons that Appiah thinks that cosmopolitanism is important. Before bringing in more ideas about cosmopolitanism and education, though, I will briefly counterbalance the concept with some critiques. One is the vagueness of the term; it is commonly criticized for meaning whatever a writer chooses. David Simpson (2005) describes the term being pressed into service as the basis of a variety of political, ethical, social, and economic arguments, and himself seems largely to scorn it as a kind of dilettantism. He is wary of a kind of middle-class tourism associated “with the display of boredom, the sense of having already seen and done it all: Byronic melancholy” (p. 143). He is not directly addressing Appiah’s work, and I find this view useful primarily as an articulation of my critique of the conventional World Religions survey course: that it instills in students the comfortable illusion that they have become familiar with and legitimately knowledgeable about entire religions and cultures after a few weeks of classes. It is certainly a guiding concern of a World Religions course to constantly address this point overtly, that students are being introduced to a large and complicated human phenomenon and that anything we can learn and discern is just the beginning, and that as scholars and as a fellowship of humans, it behooves us to maintain an attitude of humility towards our subject. This sense extends not only out towards unfamiliar peoples,

but also within, towards the more familiar territory, like Christianity, that students traverse. One of the more important outcomes for many American students, used to a dominating Protestant, evangelical rhetoric, is understanding the enormous diversity of Christianity in America and the world. Simpson, whose interest is in literary translation, remarks multiple times on the extension of cosmopolitanism to comrades who are more culturally and linguistically different from us than we may have considered: “But if we are talking about our responses to difference and distinctions, to the challenges of the unfamiliar, then a cosmopolitan spirit is just as essential to constructive relations with our fellow British citizens . . . as it is to our non-British interlocutors” (p. 147).

Another issue that it would be remiss not to mention in a consideration of the call of cosmopolitanism to put students in the presence of the Other is the host of philosophical issues around the Self, the Other, and their encounter. In developing a World Religions pedagogy that tries to engender more humane and empathetic world citizens by seeking that encounter, we can look beyond Appiah to the work of Emmanuel Levinas for support that this encounter can change what students believe their obligations to others are. “For Levinas, all ethics is necessarily rooted in a face-to-face relation with an Other who is unique and singular, that is to say, not comparable to a third Other” (Bernet, 2000, p. 54). In parsing this assertion, many questions are debatable: Is the Other a kind of alter ego, as Derrida poses (Bernasconi, 2000, p. 65)? Is the Other recognizable by the empathetic imagining of the self as Other, as Husserl poses (“Only through empathy, as a form of alienation, is the alien constituted. It is by making myself Other that there is an Other” [p. 68])? What legitimate demands are made by the alterity of the

stranger? Can the encounter ever be symmetrical? Creating a World Religions curriculum certainly does not demand that such questions be resolved, but they should be asked as part of the continuing effort to create genuine encounters that decenter the student. The tension between Levinas and Derrida over whether the Other must be what I am or must be what I am not (p. 72) is another facet of cosmopolitanism's problem of how others can be simultaneously different but the same and how we navigate that paradox honestly.

This is what makes cosmopolitanism an essential part of the grounds of my World Religions pedagogy. Appiah's pragmatism about the inevitability of our encounters on a small planet, his insistence on the ethical obligations of the human family, his enthusiasm for the creation of a common world that welcomes newness—all these factors matter in the World Religions experience, but coming into presence with the previously imaginary stranger is both a crucial goal and a chronic problem for the study of religions. I have already argued the former, that it is essential for a better approach to World Religions to make others as present as possible, rather than being interesting stereotypes observed at a distance, but here is where we emphasize what an ongoing problem that is as well: to find the common ground for understanding the Other without washing away differences. The World Religions teacher must suggest that the Other is knowable but not by means of sentimentalizing the Other. The discourse that people are understandable because they are just like us only with interesting and different clothing, interesting and different foods, and interesting and different names for their places of worship is widespread among those committed to interfaith understanding and cooperation. This is commonly expressed in the phrase that the various religions are many roads to the same mountaintop, that

universal impulses and verities underlie the religions of the world, which differ mainly in the cultural dress of those universals.

Tempting as this position is as a way to resolve the conundrum of framing diverse religions in terms familiar enough that students can understand them, the paradoxes we see in cosmopolitanism and in Levinas and Derrida about how it can possible for genuinely different beings to be similar enough for genuine comprehension has to pertain in this situation as well. Stephen Prothero (2010) is adamant that the many-roads expression is a specious platitude and an unproductive and dishonest stance. Religions do not all ask the same questions or have the same values, and Prothero maintains that pretending they are the same is simply more of the kind of mutual ignorance that fuels cultural and military conflicts. Furthermore, he finds it false to be so pleased with some basic ethical convergences that one is dismissive of the divergent doctrines and practices as cosmetic. Prothero says, “These differences may not matter to mystics or philosophers of religion, but they matter to ordinary people. . . . They have real effects in the real world” (p. 3). They certainly matter to Shias and Sunnis. They certainly matter to an Orthodox Jewish grandmother who does not recognize her granddaughter’s bat mitzvah. They certainly matter to the administration of Wheaton College, who recently dismissed associate professor Larycia Hawkins for agreeing with Pope Francis that Muslims and Christians worship the same god (Oppenheimer, 2016). So, it is important to understand that not only is the problem of making the Other less strange without sentimentalizing or domesticating him/her inherent to a World Religions course, but the pitfall of a glib and

counterproductive answer is also inherent in the prevailing public discourse about religions.

So, for a World Religions course that seeks to make the Other real, there is no shortcut that does not lead to a disingenuous unity, a concealment of differences in the rush to understanding, that denies Otherness in the name of accepting it.

Cosmopolitanism tells us that the way forward is to choose to live in the tension of being different together. Indeed, school may be just the place to work on that—David Hansen (2013) sees the typical American school as an almost miraculous instance of people living in the “cosmopolitan canopy,” a space of interaction among all kinds of culture,

not just national, racial, ethnic, gender, religious, and other typical categories we deploy in conjunction with the concept of diversity, but also the sheer range of personalities, individual habits and dispositions, and the like, when we get down to the level of moment-by-moment interactions in the classroom and school. (p. 43)

He feels, thinking of Montaigne’s view that the diversity within a person or community can be as great as the diversity between people or communities and of Dewey’s sense of school as a cultural platform, that despite its overly normative aspects, school is a place where young people and their teachers are learning from everything that all of them bring into the cosmopolitan canopy and can “respond intelligently to the pressures current globalizing trends place upon them. They can inhabit their shared world even as they create it and metabolize it into their outlooks on life” (p. 45).

To conclude this section by looking both back towards educating American and world citizens and forwards to the next section, about students’ emotional lives, many of

these ideas and values come together in the field of peace education. Peace education synthesizes beliefs about national and global citizenship and the inherent ethical obligations; values pertaining to the kind of very personal and individual as well as systemic injustices and violence that both mar and destroy specific lives and are also the engines of larger forces; and concerns about the students themselves as humans in the world, the classroom as the world, and the classroom as a place of resistance. Peace education goes beyond the analytical imperatives of critical pedagogy and the ethical implications of education for citizenship and places front and center an intention to involve the students on a deep emotional and human level, recognizing them as being themselves victims of a viciously competitive consumer culture that is soul-killing, as well as of a viciously racist and sexist culture that is literally killing—and that also recognizes them as agents of change who can become educated, awakened, and empowered. Svi Shapiro explains the kind of education we need:

Civic literacy is more than a matter of information and knowledge, or even the capacity to be thoughtful and persistent interrogators of our nation and our world. It means teaching young people the importance of social responsibility, deep concern for our nation and our global community, an ethic of caring and compassion, the imperative of social justice to a humane and peaceful world, and, not least, a sense of agency and hope. Civic literacy means learning to be “border crossers”—comfortable with human difference and capable of seeing the world from the experience and perspective of others. . . . And in the present world, civic literacy means teaching the young that they are more than citizens of the United States. They are global citizens who are part of a complex weave of international communities. (Shapiro, 2010, p. 160)

In her World Religions course at Valparaiso University, Nelly van Doorn-Harder (2007) has drawn on research on peace education to develop an approach in which, like

mine, “Challenging students’ assumptions in this context takes precedence over filling their heads with facts” (p. 105). She too is concerned with complicating their uninformed preconceptions without alienating them, and one of her theoretical underpinnings is the work of Mennonite peace studies scholar John Paul Lederach. She is particularly interested in his argument that conflicts have more to do with personal ideologies than politics, that “People involved in conflicts are driven by human perceptions and emotions that state-level actors tend to ignore, such as deep-rooted prejudices, animosities, and fears” (p. 109). Her course now includes the goals of “raising students’ awareness of their potential roles as religious actors, and challenging their perceptions and preconceived notions about religion and the ‘Other’” (p. 111).

The spirit and goals of peace education are interwoven in a World Religions pedagogy that strives to cross borders and make the larger human world visible and real to students through verbal, visual, and physical face-to-face encounters, with a goal of engendering empathy that leads to a different worldview and to new options for action. Conversely, this kind of better education about World Religions is interwoven in peace education’s goals of global citizenship and literacy with and critical examination of the systems that move individuals and peoples.

Peace education embraces the belief that all human lives are of equal value and that all human beings deserve to be seen and treated in the full richness, beauty, and complexity of each life. Peace education is about helping students understand something about the spiritual, ethical, and political traditions upon which our views of human dignity and worth are built and the consequences of failing to live up to the deep significance of these traditions. This involves looking honestly at how all of our religious traditions have been vehicles that affirm the preciousness

of every life, while also providing justifications for intolerance, persecution, and even war. (p. 121)

All objects of study of course have an emotional, personal, human component beyond the data imparted; students must in some way react to their encounters with science, history, literature, math, etc., resisting them, incorporating them into their worldview, adjusting their meaning-making, etc. However, religion is an especially personal topic, even in the context of academic, non-devotional study, and in a pedagogy specifically designed not to keep everything at arms' length, not to be purely abstract, but rather to engage multiple worldviews and lifestances held by diverse real people, it is hypocritical to contend that care for students' emotional well-being is not part of asking them to become present before the religious views of humanity. Therefore, guidance from a body of theory regarding the emotional, spiritual and humane aspects of education will now be brought into the conversation.

### **III. Education that Cultivates and Protects the Humanity of the Students**

In this section, my primary purpose is to present some arguments that relate to the emotional development and well-being of the students. A consideration of a *humanities* class in a *liberal arts* institution should not perhaps have to apologize for or justify having goals and concerns other than the strict imparting of data, but with loud instrumental, pragmatic, careerist attacks on education, the prevalence of a business model for colleges and universities, and the traditional sense of college professors that scholarship, not students, is their business, a look at the grounds for some of these issues is in order.

What could be thought of as the data/emotions barrier, a sort of academic corpus callosum, is no more permeable in the study of religion than anywhere else, despite its entanglements with talk of ethics, ultimate concerns, faith, and personal convictions. If anything, the potential for confusion between talking about what a religious tradition believes and talking about believing it is of sufficient concern that professors are all the more motivated to be clear that the classroom is an intellectual space and all other concerns must be bracketed. Despite the leakage between their own faith commitments and their work that we saw critiqued in Chapter One, academic Religious Studies faculty would be in accord with Russell McCutcheon that the priority is to produce religion scholars and to actively discourage personal emotional and spiritual issues, that “First and foremost, my own interest is in producing good scholars” (McCutcheon, 2001, p. 170).

The construct of school as a purely intellectual zone along with the social and political pressures on school to teach only what can be evaluated on quantitative standardized tests and to produce trained workers for the economy are additional constraints, along with the overriding traditional course paradigm described in Chapter One, on how a World Religions teacher can imagine and bring into being a course. “All of this means,” says Shapiro, “that schools encourage a distorted view of our lives as human beings—long on the capacity for detached and abstract thinking and short on our capacity as feeling, aware, and sensitive beings alert to our lives as embodied creatures and to that of others who share our world” (Shapiro, 2010, p. 125). So, in support of a more embodied World Religions experience that is mindful both of the cultivation of the humanity of the students and of the fraught emotional territory an introduction to

religions in the plural can be, we will consider some principles that can guide the crafting of this experience, and that remind us that there is a large middle ground between a classroom devoted strictly to the imparting of information and one that degenerates into a sectarian Sunday School.

Certainly, the particular subject matter of a religion class offers opportunities to articulate and discuss ethical issues largely absent in other areas of the curriculum. Asking students to identify and examine these kinds of issues and bringing these conversations into being can be a form of cosmopolitan resistance against the economic and political co-opting of the curriculum: “Given the nationalistic pressure on educational systems today to transform themselves into mere appendages of the economy, school leaders and teachers must constantly reaffirm their values regarding the people they aspire to be and the aims they hope to serve” (Hansen, 2013, p. 36).

It is hard to overstate the personal benefits to students and to society of exercising the opportunity to consider multiple systems of ethics, the relationship between ethics and civil law, the difference between ethics and personal feelings, the sources of ideas about right, wrong, and justice, the intersections of ethics and social customs, etc. All of this may well be new to young adults, who can easily go through high school living the unexamined life and who are on the verge of a life of both personal relations and citizenship equipped with at best half-baked ideas and at worst only gut feelings about fairness, justice, and so on. I am not suggesting that a World Religion course, already, as we have said, overloaded with potential content, should attempt to undertake a full formal education in ethics. However, it should deliberately involve students in overt and

facilitated considerations of ethical systems as part of the curriculum, mindful that acquainting students with some of the religions of the world has to include the perhaps new and surprising idea that ideas of right, wrong, and justice are highly situated and not innate in humans and not eternal and ubiquitous. As well as being part of the personal development of the student, this is part of the course's mandate to make difference present.

This is also connected to citizenship and to the critical pedagogy piece that we will consider in the last section of this chapter. Part of being better neighbors to diverse fellow citizens is being able to think through the importunities to vote to enact sectarian and religiously based ethics into law, for instance. Many of our responsibilities as citizens to each other have to do with ethical considerations, such as who deserves to have resources allocated to them and why, and people often have very little overt knowledge of the bases of their own decisions. Nel Noddings talks about the possible outcomes of seizing the chance to raise these issues:

For high school students, discussion of the long-standing tension between social action and individual spirituality can serve at least to shake complacency. When students hear that their conventional acts of charity—"giving to the poor"—can actually be regarded as oppressive acts that tend to keep everything as it is and thus, to undermine the struggle to end domination, they may well be astonished. But reflection on such discussions may also lead to thoughtful examination of life-styles in the United States, the selfishness of continual striving for more and more material goods, the ways in which religion sometimes soothes our consciences when they should remain disturbed, and the enormous risks taken by a few who are willing to give up both personal and spiritual comfort. (Noddings, 1993, p. 131)

Regarding the World Religions goal of helping students understand widely differing world views, Robert Nash goes perhaps even a little too far in his rationale for students' need to learn about the ethical tenets of the world's religions. He tends to be more stark and essentializing than I would like in his concerns that students be able to discern the "pure" and "moral" aspects of the religions of the world from how they have been "corrupted" by extremists, but that does helpfully raise the question of internal diversity and authority in religions and his overall point is valid:

Let us imagine that this is a cosmopolitan person . . . able to embrace what is good about religion and to disavow what is bad. This person is liberally educated and knows that it is impossible to understand the history, culture, or politics of most modern societies today if one is ignorant of the fundamental role that religion has played in every country. Most importantly, this would have to be an ethically discerning person who realizes that much of what we in the United States believe to be moral—or immoral—is largely a legacy of the Judeo-Christian heritage, as well as of the European Enlightenment; similarly, what much of the rest of the world believes to be the crux of morality for themselves is based on the teachings of their own endemic religions and philosophies. (Nash, 2005, pp. 93–94)

It is important to mention at this point that one common argument for "religion in school" is the moral education of young people. Whether "religion in school" means devotional study and practices or academic study, there is the idea that exposure to religion is good for people. In arguing that learning about and grappling with ethical issues is an important part of the education we as a society owe young people for themselves and for the culture, I do not believe that exposure to religion is somehow magically beneficial, and I am not advocating for teaching the ethics themselves as the object of moral instruction. World Religions students appropriately encounter the ethical

systems of religions and principles of the study of ethics as subject matter; what constitutes the personal and even moral component is the process of understanding ethical systems and discussing their contradictions and implications. Engaging in that process is part of a moral education, while inculcating a religiously based system of ethics is most definitely not within the purview of this course.

Cultivating the opportunities in this course to further the moral development of students and to care for them when they are confronted with unsettling worldviews involves integrating these actions into the curriculum, not teaching values per se. Noddings places this in opposition to the right-leaning belief in character education, which tends to feature lists of virtues, such as Secretary of Education William Bennett promoted, and inspirational hero stories that students are urged to adopt or emulate. Instead, “Care ethicists depend more heavily on establishing the conditions and relations that support moral ways of life than on the inculcation of virtues in individuals” (Noddings, 2002, p. xiii). Her approach combines creating a caring environment for the students themselves with critical thinking about moral dilemmas in order to develop their own sense of caring. Noddings finds this not ancillary but essential to the more traditional functions of education:

All students should be engaged in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, the environment, objects and instruments, and ideas. Moral life so defined should be frankly embraced as the main goal of education. Such an aim does not work against intellectual development or academic achievement. Rather, it supplies a firm foundation for both. (p. 99)

For a World Religions class, this requires of the instructor sensitivity to the stresses placed on students in exposing to academic scrutiny an area of human life that is ordinarily considered private. Students may well find this uncomfortable and need a sense of safety in the religion classroom. It also requires that the instructor present the peoples of the world and their religious beliefs as something the students should care about and care for. Nash asserts that the content of religion classes will naturally emphasize this, saying that “Students also need to understand that religion and spirituality have the reconciling power to call forth that which is universally generous and decent in human beings everywhere” (p. 97), but one need not have his great faith in the virtuous qualities of religion to agree that World Religions offers many opportunities to talk about ethics and to have to relate to the no-longer-imaginary stranger.

At some point a World Religions course has to deal with whether it will incorporate aspects of students’ own religious and personal concerns and in what way. One very practical aspect of this question is featured as the most distinctive result of Barbara Walvoord’s 2008 empirical study *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses*. Walvoord reports that while both students and faculty shared the goal of learning a body of information, students’ own goals for such courses were primarily developing or strengthening their own beliefs, a goal not at all shared by faculty. Contrariwise, faculty’s main goal of developing critical thinking was not at all shared by students (pp. 17–18). The absence of an impetus to address this concern in the literature we saw in Chapter Two as well as among the faculty in the study is understandable as a reflection of their own definition of their role in the classroom—but

this absence speaks loudly of an opportunity to create meaning in the World Religions classroom, an opportunity that may connect with the priorities of education for caring and for peace. Whether or not an academic course should be muddying the waters between knowledge about religion and spiritual development, it seems reckless to ignore the main reason that students are in the room. Furthermore, the idea that the development of the students' full humanity is not the province of the classroom calls into question the entire *raison d'être* of the liberal arts.

Helping students formulate a more caring and humane outlook intertwines with creating a curriculum and a pedagogy that are concerned with integrating school with the rest of life and pointing students towards the creation of meaning. Maxine Greene connects what we give students and how we treat them with how they are going to be impelled to act in the world:

It [making visible the gap between what is and what might be] is to require them to refuse indifference, to act to close the gaps that exist, to pursue justice, to repair the insufficiencies in their lived worlds. Now it seems clear enough that this cannot happen if the humanities are presented as “texts and monuments” to be reverently examined and disclosed. Nor will it happen if students are treated as barbarians or suppliants, waiting humbly outside the “house of intellect” hoping to be admitted by the guardians of the treasure within. In my view, attention must be directed to the students' own life situations, to what (preferably) is lived in common, if a work is to make any significant demand. (Greene, 1981, pp. 295–6)

Attempting to do this in a religion class calls for the Other to be present in the classroom and not represented by a text or monument and for the students' own lives and concerns to be brought into the conversation.

We get a sense throughout Shapiro's *Losing Heart* (2006) of the really horrifying sense of futility and waste students feel undergoing an education divorced from meaning, learning from the unspoken, implied curriculum that school is a game that can be won by doing a cost/benefit analysis on assignments and keeping one's head down. He says

Whether we like it or not, education is always, and everywhere, a process that shapes what it means—or what we would like it to mean—to be human. Education is always a process that gives us a template for the moral life and our spiritual quest for meaning and purpose. . . . I believe that the particular messages we convey in our schools about what is socially worthwhile, how we should relate to others around us, or in what we should invest the preponderance of our life's energy do little to address the crisis of meaning that permeates and corrodes our culture. (p. 52)

When young people use school as a source of meaning and what they learn is competition, consumerism, and careerism, educators cannot then frame the problem as being incurious students who just want to know what will be on the exam. When school rewards that kind of thinking, there may be few opportunities to discover that students do have other concerns. Noddings (1993) addresses this:

Although getting a good job is a worthy aim, it is not the most important thing in life, and we underestimate teenagers when we suppose that is all that matters to them. They are in fact intensely interested in the questions we have been considering, especially those concerning life and death: Does life have any meaning? Is life worth living? Is there life after death? What does the fact of death mean for life? (p. 78)

A survey of the world's religions may be the place in the student's education where these kinds of questions get raised and where school can become a place of meaning. Nash too

speaks of the urgent concerns that young people have that commonly go unaddressed at school:

They want to know why so much violence is committed in the name of religion; why so much hate is manifested under the guise of God's love; why religions can't seem to get along with one another instead of having to dominate all the rest. They want to explore alternative religions and spiritualities for themselves. They want a chance to find convincing spiritual answers to their worrisome existential questions about meaning, love, relationships, autonomy, careers, higher education, faith, peace, patriotism, and violence. (Nash, 2005, p. 101)

Undeniably, this enterprise of creating a space in which students are exploring religions critically and are also being asked to be fully present in their entire humanity creates some irresolvable tensions. The instructor may have to struggle with conflicting goods; on the one hand, there is an obligation to the students for their care and safety, and on the other hand, there is an obligation to the students to develop their critical skills and their mature intellectual lives. Students who have learned to bracket their own personal religious beliefs in order to engage with other practitioners of religions objectively (rather than as heretics, idolaters, in need of evangelizing, wrong-headed, etc.) may experience, at the very least, some powerful dissonance when they are also expected to engage with the various objects of study throughout the curriculum. Those who practice religions with exclusive truth claims can go only so far in accepting the religions of others, and some students may simply refuse to do more than learn what is required and back away from engaging more deeply. Those who apply the critical tools of the course to their own personal beliefs may or may not have to take stock of their own religious beliefs. People have remarkable abilities to compartmentalize, and many if not most students will be able

to be robustly present to classroom experience without precipitating a crisis. Whether, when, and how an instructor should act in the interests of student safety and when he/she should push a student towards some difficult knowledge, analysis, and comprehension is not something that can be a matter of theory or policy—it is up to the humanely present teacher. Learning should be transformative; how damaging that transformation might be is going to vary wildly and a teacher has to be constantly mindful of what role it is conscionable to avoid or to play in this.

Teaching at this level of engagement with students demands a willingness to teach with all one's heart. David Purpel (1989) describes the “prophetic educators” committed to doing so:

Such educators must regard themselves and their students as holy and sacred, not as tools and mechanisms, hence as ends not means; they must be committed to the development of institutions of learning in which all those involved (teachers, administrators, staff, students) are full citizens, each of whom has inherent and full dignity, and each of whom has the inherent right to grow, learn, and create as much as he/she possibly can. (p. 110)

Returning to the concerns expressed in Chapter Two that teachers with sufficient training to undertake religion courses correctly and safely are rare indeed and seeing that problem in light of an ethic of caring and a call to prophetic teaching, we might find strengthening the words of Noddings on how we are to enter a classroom filled with students desperate for meaning:

We cannot satisfy existential longings by pretending they do not exist. We cannot excuse ourselves from the responsibility to meet these longings in school by saying that we would approve the suggested program if our children could have

the very best teachers. Just as most children have to be satisfied with “good enough” parents, so we will have to work with “good enough” teachers. Teachers who care deeply for their students, who are willing to engage in continuous inquiry, and who are committed to pedagogical neutrality are probably good enough. It is also possible that teachers, as well as students, will grow from “good enough” to considerably better under a program that allows full discussion of religious and ethical values. (Noddings, 1993, p. 139)

Not only might we be happy to have Noddings affirm that a teacher does not have to have everything analyzed and solved before setting foot in the classroom, we should also return to some of Gert Biesta’s ideas, first mentioned above in the section on democracy and citizenship, before we start imagining that inviting students into these conversations means having a structure and a planned outcome for them. His point, developed from Levinas and Bauman, that we are called into subjectivity when our uniqueness matters in our encounter with the Other, means that our responsibility in that encounter is the responsibility of each of us alone. “What others do with their responsibility is entirely up to them. I cannot *make* anyone else responsible” (Biesta, 2013, p. 22). Biesta feels that the teacher’s “empty-handedness” in creating this encounter is not to be feared, because it undercuts an instrumental and production-oriented view of education. He says that teachers, curricula, and pedagogies should not shield students from encounters that might evoke subjectivity, even though they cannot be controlled and outcomes cannot be planned or quantified:

But whether this event will occur, whether students will realize their subject-ness, is an entirely open question. It is beyond our control and fundamentally out of our hands. Keeping education open for the event of subjectivity to occur does, of course, come with a risk, because when we keep education open, anything can happen, anything can arrive. But that is precisely the point . . . it is only when we

are willing to take this risk that the event of subjectivity has a chance to occur. (p. 23)

A teacher trying to prepare him/herself for what Parker Palmer calls live encounters might also feel empowered, justified, and relieved by Greene's dictum that "a teacher in search of his/her own freedom may be the only kind of teacher who can arouse young persons to go in search of their own" (p. 14). Palmer also has liberating thoughts for the teacher too often paralyzed by fear, or reduced by it to a shadow of what he/she could be. He acknowledges that facing a room full of young people is frightening, as we recall our own hypercritical youth and as we evaluate our own shortcomings, and he writes at length of the culture of fear in which the students themselves are immersed. Schools become bunkers of isolation, where the best anyone can do, as Shapiro says, is just wait it out, living not in the present but in some imagined future (Shapiro, 2006, p. 21). Palmer places the power to do something about that deadening alienation in the teacher's hands:

Each time I walk into a classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come, just as I can choose the place within the students toward which my teaching will be aimed. I need not teach from a fearful place: I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are as real within me as are my fears. I can have fear, but I need not be fear—if I am willing to stand someplace else in my inner landscape. (Palmer, 2007, p. 58)

That someplace else is a place of integrity. Palmer does not mean that in a cheerful, daytime-chat-show, "just be yourself" way. What he is concerned about throughout his work is the damage done by our tendency to break all of life's paradoxes

into binaries, that we've learned to "think the world apart." Education is full of paradoxical truths—that teaching means being present with both all your experience and a beginner's mind, that our personal inward identity manifests in the presence of others, that a teacher's identity and technique are separate and yet feed and express each other, that teaching happens "at the crossroads of the public and the private," and that the divide I mentioned at the beginning of this section between information and emotions must be understood as a paradox that we must embody (p. 66). The heart of Palmer's worldview and of his efforts to heal teaching and learning is living into paradoxes instead of denying them, letting the tension of opposites make us something larger than ourselves instead of trying to tame them by making them smaller (p. 87).

Paradoxical thinking requires that we embrace a view of the world in which opposites are joined, so that we can see the world clearly and see it whole. Such a view is characterized by neither flinty-eyed realism nor dewy-eyed romanticism but rather by a creative synthesis of the two. The result is a world more complex and confusing than the one made simple by either-or thought—but that simplicity is merely the dullness of death. When we think things together, we reclaim the life force in the world, in the students, in ourselves. (p. 69)

This whole-hearted classroom is where teachers can break down the barrier that lets thoughts in but keeps feelings out, that privileges data over humans. Students who are not alienated from learning and who are invited into a place of presence and honesty are going to be more able to encounter the religions of the world in the same spirit.

Discussions of ethics, fears about religious truths, resistance to the lives of others, and the many other contentious possibilities of a World Religions course cannot be prevented or smoothed over by any brilliant curricular structure or magical pedagogical approach, but

a teacher who is prepared to acknowledge and teach paradoxical truths and short-circuit the reassuring rush to certainty will do the students—and the religions—a great personal service.

Pedagogical priorities for citizenship, for cosmopolitanism, and for care have all involved aspects of the teacher's worldview and commitment to certain goals for education and certain ways of encountering students. In the last section of this chapter, we will take a look at some overarching pedagogical principles that support the kind of World Religions course that puts students and religions together for a humane encounter.

#### **IV. Critical and Postmodern Pedagogy**

The final area of theory supporting my argument pertains to critical and post-modern pedagogy. Critical pedagogues return the argument to the critique of an education that enables hierarchies and hegemonies to continue unseen and unchallenged. The ahistorical, essentialized, and unauthored narrative of World Religions that typifies the standard approach cannot stand under an interrogative pedagogy that continually demands to know whose voice is being heard and whose agenda is being furthered. Critical pedagogy disallows the authoritative, abstracted Big Five story and counters it not by pretending it does not exist but by asking whose truths are being told. Its resistance to unexamined assumptions and disembodied learning are essential to a more humane and liberatory World Religions. Lastly, the post-formal pedagogical theories of Kincheloe and Steinberg and the post-structuralist theories of Patrick Slattery round out the grounds for a different kind of curriculum. The former provide a scaffold for

organizing a body of knowledge and the latter bring the transformative energy of deconstruction to the curriculum.

Critical pedagogy propounds and advocates for an approach to education and to human life that underlies the goals and values of my World Religions curriculum. Aspects of particular interest in the present context that we will look at below include the critique of hegemonic forces, the embodied reality of students and religions, the disruption of norms through queer pedagogy, and Henry Giroux's commitment to the future.

The liberatory and humane goals of critical pedagogy are its defining factor. This is not a pedagogical theory that quibbles over classroom methods and the best way to write up a lesson plan. Critical pedagogy wants an education that frees people from the visible and invisible social controls that co-opt them into replicating the world into which they were born. Henry Giroux describes the enterprise thus:

Rather than viewing teaching as technical practice, radical pedagogy in the broadest terms is a moral and political practice premised on the assumption that learning is not about processing received knowledge but about actually transforming it as part of a more expansive struggle for individual rights and social justice. This implies that any viable notion of pedagogy and resistance should illustrate how knowledge, values, desire, and social relations are always implicated in relations of power, and how such an understanding can be used pedagogically and politically by students to further expand and deepen the imperatives of economic and political democracy. . . . Central to such a challenge is providing students with the skills, knowledge, and authority they need to inquire and act upon what it means to live in a substantive democracy, to recognize antidemocratic forms of power, and to fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on systemic economic, racial, and gender inequalities. (Giroux, 2011, p. 72)

In an era when the political right has an increasingly tight grip on our legislatures and so can close down university research institutes, rewrite AP History, and let charter schools use Christian homeschooling curricula, anyone concerned about the liberatory potential of education would have to agree that “Teaching our children what it means to think critically, to question the assumptions that govern our lives, and to have the capacity to challenge injustice and inhumanity, and the need to wage war, as well as our environmental destructiveness, has never been more important” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 100). Without being shown how to question the pronouncements of a neoliberal establishment that owns not only the military-industrial complex but also the rhetoric about patriotism, students are robbed of their Arendtian moment of newness and instead join the lockstep. Shapiro emphasizes how much we need wide-awake people:

A vibrant democracy ultimately depends on human beings who have been educated in ways that emphasize their capacity for being thoughtful and creative citizens. Such individuals learn to see that our world can be reinvented and changed, not simply received as something we must adapt or conform to. (p. 109)

This wide-awakeness is an important term for Maxine Greene. Coming awake to knowledge about one’s true relationship to the world, to others, and to information—knowledge that had previously been invisible—is also coming awake to self. Both Greene and Paolo Freire are very concerned with the interplay among understanding, choice, and autonomy, the crucial requirement for true human freedom that people be able to make decisions in full knowledge of the circumstances. Greene says, “We shall be concerned with intelligent choosing and, yes, humane choosing, as we shall be with the

kinds of conditions necessary for empowering persons to act on what they choose” (1988, p. 4), seconded by Freire: “I can never learn to be who I am if I never decide anything” (1998, p. 97), implying that “a pedagogy of autonomy should be centered on experiences that stimulate decision making and responsibility, in other words, on experiences that respect freedom” (p. 98). The tragedy against which this critical epistemology is battling is the illusion of freedom created by all of the taken-for-granted systems and the controlled choices they offer. Greene points out that “When people cannot name alternatives, imagine a better state of things, share with others a project of change, they are likely to remain anchored or submerged, even as they proudly assert their autonomy” (p. 9). This pertains throughout the domain of education, and Greene is concerned with the ways that schools make students feel everything is fated and determined (p. 124); “The persuasion is often so quiet, so seductive, so disguised that it renders young people acquiescent to power without their realizing it” (p. 133).

The march of externally determined information that tramples over students is a defining characteristic of the traditional World Religions paradigm. Whatever curiosity and excitement with which students enter a religion survey class are quickly extinguished in the realization that this will be just like every other history class and that their interest in learning about what is of ultimate importance to other peoples, what practices and beliefs shape the lives of others, and how they themselves fit into a religiously diverse nation and world are nowhere to be found on the syllabus. The opportunity for wide-awakeness and engagement slips away. My World Religions curriculum seeks to invite the students into an engagement with religions that maintains and nurtures their

autonomy and freedom. For religion students, a pedagogy in which there is choosing places the students in conversation with the religions and with one another. Choosing does not mean something superficial like having options to pick a topic for a class presentation or a term paper; choosing means entering into an authentic encounter with ideas and people, in assignments and discussions—and being able to do that by having the knowledge and the power to choose to act, respond, and engage authentically.

Critical pedagogy is very concerned with embodiment—with the integration of mind and body, the affirmation of all kinds of bodies, experiential knowing, and presence. Its emphasis on authenticity, empowerment, and personal freedom places an insistence on three-dimensional reality in opposition to a privileging of uncontextualized data from abstract authoritative sources. This can mean inviting into the room previously excluded bodies, a tactic particularly central to my argument for making the Other present in the World Religions classroom. The norming of the Christian West in the traditional World Religions text places everyone else in the position of the abstract Other, the one who is defined by difference, a difference inevitably positioned as deficiency. A curriculum of embodiment deliberately counters this, decentering any claim to normative practices or beliefs, and disabling tendencies to oversimplify the unseen.

In the previous section we encountered support for a classroom environment that does not pretend that teachers and students are disembodied intellects, and critical pedagogy both insists on this and acknowledges that the reality of coming to life in the classroom is indeed risky. The teacher who invites the embodied texts of the world into dialogue in a place that had been a tightly controlled monologue of testable data does not

know what will happen next. “Addressing emotion in the classroom may feel threatening to instructors who are then required to deal with whole people, rather than portions of people’s minds, which carries the messy complexities that come with being human” (Bettez, 2008, p. 279). As discussed in the previous section, it takes courage and commitment for a teacher to let go of the safe and comfortable hierarchy that places his/her personal authority and the unquestionable authority of the monolithic subject matter over the disempowered and silenced students. Freire too emphasizes the renunciation of power that comes with humans being present to each other: “True humanism, which serves human beings, cannot accept manipulation under any name whatsoever. For humanism there is no path other than dialogue. To engage in dialogue is to be genuine” (2008, p. 104). Dialogue is authentic and humane because one party cannot objectify the other. “The *I* and the *thou* thus become, in the dialectic of these relationships, two *thous* who become two *I’s*” (Freire, 2000, p. 167). This is the kind of embodied presence that a World Religions course should aspire to.

Queer pedagogy, a branch of critical pedagogy, also uses the multiplicity of human embodiment as a ground on which to enact ways of disrupting the curriculum and making space for students to generate real knowledge rather than endlessly reiterating the status quo. Queer pedagogy is about resistance to the reification of categories of existence, about multiplicity rather than linear binaries, and about the freedom of the self to interpret and define. A teacher who queers the curriculum points the students towards a kaleidoscope of factors that both contribute to and call into question the matter at hand, with the goal of a considered critical process of making meaning, a meaning that may

prove to be paradoxical rather than a tidy soundbite from the metanarrative. Considering both the need to break down the unexamined cultural norms that students bring to a World Religions class and the above discussion of the necessity to hold multiple truths in tension in an encounter with religions in the plural, queer pedagogy provides some more help in thinking about why destabilizing students who are too comfortable with and well-versed in playing the game of school is worthwhile, especially in a subject area with the central purpose of opening up students to new human worlds:

In a sense queer pedagogy wants us to be confused. By engaging with complexity, queer pedagogy hopes to overwhelm our capacity to “get it,” to bring us to a point where we are absolutely ignorant, having neither knowledge nor resistance to knowledge. This kind of ignorance may represent a profound kind of wisdom. Lacking answers, we are able to embrace questions, engage with multiple understandings, and imagine new possibilities. (Shlasko, 2005, p. 129)

In undertaking a study of a topic—religion—that people feel they know and have a complicated relationship with and yet actually have little information about, bringing students to a place where everyone is learning with a beginner’s mind is extremely valuable.

Critical pedagogy makes it clear how completely integrated in a religion course are bringing the religions to life and bringing the students to life, and awakening the students for their own sake and awakening the students for the sake of the world. Freire addresses all of critical pedagogy’s concerns—knowledge, critical thinking, and the wisdom of embodied knowing—when he says

One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice is to make possible the conditions in which the learners, in their interaction with one another and with their teachers, engage in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias, capable of being angry because of a capacity to love. (1998, p. 45)

In a nation and a world in which so much is defined and enabled by religious ignorance and fear, my World Religions pedagogy is disruptive and revolutionary. A commitment to making the religions of the world present and their practitioners human and encounters with them as authentic as possible is a commitment to resisting the hegemonic narratives that use verbal constructs to define who we are and to control who we can become and whom we can be in empathetic communication with. Freire's critical pedagogy invites people into conversations by posing problems and creating the space for them to ask where those constructs came from and whether they want to continue to perpetuate them.

To that end, it enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of reality. The world—no longer something to be described by deceptive words—becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization. (Freire, 2000, p. 86)

Henry Giroux says that the engine powering this quest is hope: “Hope as a form of oppositional utopianism is one of the preconditions for individual and social struggle and the ongoing practice of critical education in a wide variety of sites—the attempt to make a difference by being able to imagine otherwise in order to act in other ways” (Giroux, 2011, p. 121). Ultimately, a teacher who wants to offer students a more genuine

encounter with the religions of the world, an encounter that places the students among others as fellow actors in the human story and not privileged viewers and judges of the failure of essentialized others to be a better version of the students' standards, is doing so out of a vision of a different human, global future:

Pedagogy always represents a commitment to the future, and it remains the task of educators to make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world, a world in which the discourses of critique and possibility in conjunction with the values of reason, freedom, and equality function to alter, as part of a broader democratic project, the grounds upon which life is lived. (Giroux, 2007, p. 2)

Turning to another area of pedagogical theory, Jay Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg proffer a post-formal intellectual scaffold that organizes four aspects of knowledge: etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization. Exploring where knowledge about and within religions comes from, seeing patterns within and across religions, privileging evolving processes over static facts, and highlighting the multivalent contexts within which religions exist—these all help point the way to a class experience that places students and teachers within a dynamic web of learning, and offer some guidance to a teacher trying to move away from a curriculum of an overly intellectualized and verbalized body of knowledge.

Their first aspect, the etymology of knowledge, where knowledge comes from, is a core concern in teaching about religion. Far from being blank slates, students enter a course with knowledge about religion, but where that knowledge comes from is problematical. Typically, American students have been brought up in a religious

environment and have lived in an unexamined state of taking religion for granted as a true and standard feature of human life. Paradoxically, however, they often do not know very much about their religion; modern American Protestantism emphasizes personal faith and Biblical guidance, but often does not actually instruct adherents in the reading of Biblical texts, let alone in any information about the history of the texts or of the church as an institution. Therefore, many students arrive with a free-floating sense that religion is extremely important, but without much information about it. The teacher who asks him/herself about the etymology of their knowledge, then, has to recognize that they “know” a great deal and very little simultaneously, like the fish who is in one sense an expert on water but in another has never thought about it. As a guiding curricular theory, this idea about the etymology of knowledge demands that the teacher situate new information in relationship to knowledge that they do have and that opportunities for students to express opinions and bring to bear personal experience be structured with information and guiding questions, so that they cannot default to what they came in thinking they knew. Understanding the etymology of the students’ knowledge also means working with their orientation to the world and positioning new information in ways that maximize their interest and minimize their resistance to incorporating new things into their worldview. Furthermore, it pertains to one of the major paradoxes of inviting students’ own knowledge into the religion classroom, which is the need to affirm and incorporate their own human experiences, feelings, and points of view together with the need to prevent them from believing that their own uniformed points of view are valid grounds for judgment. That is, considerations about the etymology of knowledge have to

be brought to bear in guiding a classroom in which students are empowered to be makers of meaning but not privileged to glance at Hinduism and pronounce it “stupid.”

Kincheloe and Steinberg make a distinction of tremendous use in understanding the purposes of a religion course. They suggest that problem-detecting is a far more nuanced enterprise than problem-solving, and one that is more likely to lead to both learning and justice. They say, “As a problem is detected, questions are formulated about a situation [and this becomes] a form of world making” (p. 305). This provides a different way to frame discussions and thus addresses this just-mentioned problem that asking students to bring their own opinions and experiences to the fabric of the course has the potential to reinforce and endorse their tendency to critique and dismiss other people’s religious worldviews, speaking with the illusion of authority and from a position of insufficient information and excessive privilege. Being able to deliberately frame the multitude of social and personal ramifications of religious views not as problems that are ours to solve but rather as human problems that we can detect can help students to observe without judging.

The next aspect of knowledge—pattern—provides a theoretical ground for two of the more experimental features of my re-imagined course. The first is that rather than defining a religion as a sequence of historical events that generate doctrines that generate practices in logical progression, it is more valuable and also more true to describe a religion in terms of patterns of practices and beliefs, of a landscape of praxis, of “like” and “tend to” and “here this” and “there that.” These patterns characterize a religion, give students a feeling for what it would be like to belong to that religion, rather than

delineating with absolute certainty what many millions of people must do and believe. Absolute certainty is normal for school of course, and is comfortably testable, but the pattern paradigm is truer and can still be taught without completely dismaying students. Many of them may be glad to have intuition more valued in school, and finding a place for less verbally explicit knowledge is also a goal. “Profound insight in any field of study may involve the apprehension of structures not attainable at the explicate order of reality” (p. 306), and a religion class would seem to be the place to make that stand.

Furthermore, the tapestry of implicate order becomes more complex, because perpendicular to the pattern of concerns within religions is the pattern of concerns across religions, large topics such as ethics, mysticism, salvation, and evil that most religions deal with and that need to be considered as phenomena themselves. Seeing these as patterns as well, as constellations of ideas and practices, no one of which is definitive, is more honestly descriptive, and my second innovation is to weave these two perpendicular sets of patterns together throughout the year by including what I am calling “special topics” within the study of specific religions. This will be addressed in Chapter Four when we look at my World Religions curriculum, but its theoretical home is post-formal thinking’s goal “to get behind the curtain of ostensible normality . . . to create situations that bring hidden assumptions to our attention and make the tacit visible” (p. 306).

I am wary of embedding metalessons about what I personally think are truths about life within this course, because we are already in danger of students’ mistaking learning about religion for learning religion, but it is also the case that one teaches in order to do just that. So, one more reason to frame what we are learning about as being

patterns is that it is a way to suggest something useful and provocative and perhaps true about a transcendent outlook on life. Kincheloe and Steinberg say

The world around us (maybe more precisely, the world, as an extension of us) is more like an idea than a machine. . . . The only definition left for life in the postmodern world is not some secret substance or life-force, but an information pattern. This definition of life as an information pattern elevates the recognition of relationship from the cognitive to the spiritual realm, for it is the relationship that is us. (p. 310)

The third aspect of knowledge that Kincheloe and Steinberg discuss is process: understanding everything as a text that, rather than existing as a static and unexamined fact, can and must be analyzed, processed, deconstructed. This changes everything: “Deconstruction represents the contemporary postmodern extension of a century of attempts in art, literature, psychology, and physics to penetrate surface appearance, to transcend the tyranny of common sense, to expose the unconsciousness of a culture” (p. 311). Theorizing knowledge as process, as interpretation, as something that happens, that students do—rather than as a thing that can be possessed—can enable my ideas about positioning students to have experiences of what religions are like, to have opportunities to interpret verbal and nonverbal information from multiple sources that, synthesized, can characterize a religion. If this is what knowledge really *is*, we can turn our backs more confidently on the conventional approach of imparting facts about history and doctrines to student, believing that they will then “know” that religion.

A particular concern of mine is the pervasive way that school “wordifies” everything, even math and science; for a religion class, as we have seen, this is a method

that puts the religions at an even greater remove, making the objects of study artifacts, fossils, or models rather than the real thing. Far better for the teacher to think about and draw students' attention to the idea that words are just a way of taking notes about other things and that we should be more aware of our tendency to mistake the words for the reality. In practice then, poetry, architecture, art, music, scriptures, practices, essays, personal statements, pilgrimages, and food all become texts that can be read, deconstructed, delved into, allowing the student to assemble a mosaic of information that creates a bigger portrait of the life of that religious tradition, a multiplicity of voices describing feelings and facts.

Post-formalism ensures that the reality of the world of emotions is not excluded from the classroom. Kincheloe and Steinberg echo our earlier critique of the overly intellectualized traditional World Religions classroom when they say that

formalist objectivity came to demand a separation of logic and emotion, the devaluation of any perspective maintained with emotional conviction. Feeling is designated as an inferior form of human consciousness—those who rely on logical forms of thinking and operate within this framework can justify their repression of those associated with emotional and feeling. (p. 312)

As a nonrational human phenomenon that clearly drives much of history through to the present day, religion itself stands as a reproach to the idea that emotion exists in opposition to knowledge and that a strictly logical analysis explains much of anything about human behavior. Trying to understand religion, with its connection to the “unconsciousness of a culture” mentioned above, without building in ways both to learn

about and experience others' emotional responses and to experience and process our own emotional responses to what we are learning is dishonest and incomplete, to say the least.

Bringing this kind of valuing of emotion into the classroom does not necessarily therefore create a good emotional environment. School does not normally strive to give students an impression of a subject, does not normally present multiple aspects of a subject until a student has “grasped the implicate order, the overall structure of a set of relationships all at once” (p. 314). School is about certainty, and most students have learned to be more formal thinkers, uncomfortable with ambiguity. Part of working from this curriculum theory has to be acknowledging that those feelings are real as well, and building in many smaller opportunities for students to be sure of what is being asked of them and to earn the kinds of academic rewards they are used to for knowing things that they are supposed to know, lest they become even more alienated rather than less so by an environment that they feel is unknown and even hostile to them as students.

Finally, the fourth post-formal aspect of knowledge—contextualization—has to inform how all the sources of information in a religion class are positioned, how feedback to students is worded, how discussions are facilitated and summed up, and more. Kincheloe and Steinberg go so far as to say that “the contextualization of what we know is more important than content” (p. 314). We could think of this as closing the circle back to the first aspect of knowledge, its etymology. Students who come in thinking they know certain things to be true and yet perhaps being mistaken and/or not knowing why they know those things or what that might mean cannot then be sent back out into the world with equally misleading beliefs that they now know a collection of discrete facts that

apply equally everywhere and that exist independently of the rest of the world. Part of the study of each religious tradition has to include opportunities to connect beliefs and practices back to American life, to the student's life, to the lifeworlds of others. This drives curricular choices, including the objectives of personal reflection assignments and of the special topics studies that have more scope to be integrative.

As well as contextualizing knowledge about the subject matter within the larger world, the relationship of knowledge to power can also be contextualized in the classroom, connecting back to our examination of critical pedagogy's goals. The religion classroom can ask students to consider why they know what they know, whose interests the new information they are presented with serves, why conflicts exist and persist, who controls or judges the beliefs and behaviors of others, and so much more. Not only can making power more visible teach even more about religion itself and about the injustices of the world that they might then take an interest in in their lives, a teacher interested in the relationship between power and knowledge also must enact empowerment within the classroom itself. "Post-formal teachers," say Kincheloe and Steinberg, "realize that in school, power often silences the very people that education purports to empower. . . . Educators speak of empowerment as a central goal, but often ignore the way power operates to subvert the empowerment of teachers and students" (p. 317). A more inclusive classroom that honors what the students bring into it is not only more fair, it teaches by example that knowledge comes from specific people and specific circumstances and not from some abstract authority who holds the single correct information and interpretation. If a World Religions survey course is to meet any of its

transformative goals and not simply end when the student turns in the exam, the student must leave with the power to learn about and interpret people's religious traditions in his or her hands, not the teacher's.

Kincheloe and Steinberg's vision of post-formal thinking about thinking, of what putting these ideas at the foundation of curriculum design could mean, captures my concerns about how classroom experiences can move students to an awareness of the sources of their own knowledge, of what knowledge actually is, and of how they and their knowledge can relate to the rest of their own worlds:

Our conception of self and world, therefore, can only become critical when we appreciate the history of its formation. We are never independent of the social and historical forces that surround us—we are all caught at a particular point in the web of reality. The post-formal project is to understand what that point in the web is, how it constructs our vantage point, and the ways it insidiously restricts our vision. (p. 302)

Lastly, in *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era* (2006), Patrick Slattery offers a postmodern worldview that can inform a pedagogy concerned about contingency, disruption, multiplicity, and meaning-making. He believes in the transformational power of deconstruction to problematize, interrogate, interrupt, contextualize, challenge, historicize, etc., the comfortable metanarratives that students bring into the classroom and that school generally reconfirms. He foregrounds the mechanism of deconstruction to return what a positivistic hierarchy has excluded from its constructs, to transcend modernity's illusions of a static and ordered world, to generate

zones of non-rationality and uncertainty where critical thinking and reflective intuition can take place, and to reenchant and rehumanize a mechanized world.

A completely different philosophical relationship with knowledge comes into being with a postmodern understanding that truth is always in process, conditioned by standpoint, and determined by question asked and question-asker. The person who believes that there are universal and objectively verifiable truths and comprehensively applicable systems lives in a different universe from someone who recognizes that there are a multiplicity of truths and constructed, contingent systems. Sometimes caricatured and dismissed as a nihilistic and chaotic worldview, postmodernism in fact rejects a blindly and stubbornly maintained insistence on a false and destructive construct of how reality works—the vertical hierarchy—and both notices and promotes a more true and more healthy vision of reality as a web, a network, interconnected horizontally, in which all are striving for meaning. While modernists despair that postmodernism has destroyed meaning, what it has in fact laid waste to is the illusion that there is an absolute answer and that someone on top of the hierarchy has access to it. Slattery says that “Curriculum development in the postmodern era deconstructs prejudice and hegemony by challenging the dominance of logical positivism in the study of history and the construction of time as simply a linear series of events” (Slattery, 2006, p. 40), a familiar theme from my critique of the traditional representation of the world’s religions as a logical march through time from founder through text to doctrine. Referring to Jean-François Lyotard’s argument that postmodernism is inseparable from an incredulity toward metanarratives, Slattery

says this is so because their “moral and epistemological theories propose that knowledge, truth, and justice exist independent of contingent, historical practices” (p. 40).

Education in this postmodern universe creates meaning differently when freed from the segmented march of linear time. When all times are now, education can understand “time and history as proleptic, that is, as the confluence of past, present, and future in the synthetical moment” (p. 64). Slattery connects this idea philosophically to Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence and pedagogically to Dewey’s idea that it is a mistake that school consists of doing things in the present in order to prepare for the future (p. 86), the deadening constant waiting that we earlier saw Shapiro describe as a cause of the disheartened alienation of students from their education. Slattery says that “We must find a way to create meaningful connections in each present moment rather than imposing a rationale for delaying meaning and purpose. This is the proleptic task; it is also the urgent ethical mandate of contemporary living” (p. 86). Bringing together elements from across space and time so that they can come to life in the classroom “is one of the purposes of education: to enfold within each present moment the past, the present, and the future so that our lives will be illuminated with deep understanding” (p. 87).

The political quality of cultural foundations has a philosophical underpinning in postmodernism in multiple ways, notably in Derrida’s explanation that deconstruction is specifically characterized by the return of the thing excluded to question and dismantle the construct (Slattery, p. 4). Although deconstruction has a literary reputation as the iconoclasm of a heroic male intellectual breaking down meaningful stories into fragments of signifiers without anything signified, when considered as an educational project

involving those marginalized and written out of history returning to interrogate and disassemble a false and oppressive construct, deconstruction suddenly appears as a healing and transformative process.

The disruption, the discomfort, and the creation of knowledge are integral to this pedagogical model. Slattery says

Postmodern (dis)equilibrium is the acceptance of permanent psychic discomfort as the best understanding of consciousness. This (dis)equilibrium and (dis)comfort can inspire social change and political action. Ambiguity and complexity are not destabilizing, they are generative. (p. 6)

Critical pedagogy does have to have the fortitude to keep students uncomfortable and not compassionately rush to a premature reconciliation and artificial closure of the conflicting situation at hand. The learning edge, where we are in contact with both what we know and the new (Bettez, 2012), is a place of unease and even pain, but authentic knowledge has to come not from the teacher's tidy resolution of the problem presented but from the students' struggle.

At this point, it is hardly necessary to reiterate the themes of my World Religions pedagogy that Slattery's postmodernism supports. Most notably, the understanding of the world and of making meaning of it as a horizontal network rather than a vertical hierarchy shapes my vision of a course that rejects positioning students as hovering over the landscape of the religions of the world and gazing down upon them, and instead positions them in that landscape, among humanity, on a journey of discovery together with diverse others—*seeing with* rather than *looking at*. Other themes that we have seen

throughout my argument that are grounded in a postmodern pedagogy are the return of thing excluded, whereby the Western Christian constructs of what religion is and how it is to be codified are broken down in an encounter when the no-longer-imaginary Other becomes present; the personal and political transformation called for by critical pedagogy, which deconstruction demands by shattering oppressive constructs; and the commitment to truth-telling and authenticity in these encounters, which includes a call to courage for teachers so that they have the heart to hold students to and through the discomfort of transformation. The unmasking of positivistic metanarratives that present a tidy, essentialized story of the religions of the world reveals a kinetic and messy world of people making their way through contingent and temporal lives. This kind of meaning-making may sit uneasily in the environment of schooling, but because at “the root of modernity and its discontents is a disenchanting and mechanistic worldview that denies to nature the qualities of subjectivity, experience, and feeling” (p. 277), the reward for the pain of ripping away the comfortable encasement of metanarratives is the re-enchantment of the world.

## **V. Conclusion**

In weaving together many of the concerns in this chapter, we see commitments to bringing students to a place of learning and speaking honestly about the complex interplay of personal views, emotional truths, religious and political institutions, and relationships between people and between groups, all within a framework of and movement towards national and world citizenship and cosmopolitanism. We then can see that these commitments constitute an integrated position regarding humanity and our

timeless quest to escape from, reconcile with, and shape history. Paolo Freire has in mind the web of knowing and history, of what and how we know, of teaching what and how to know, of producing more knowledge and more history, and of the ongoing historicity of knowledge as he considers the great value of our unfinishedness. He says

Historical as we are, our knowledge of the world has historicity. It transmits, in addition, that our knowing and our knowledge are the fruits of historicity. And that knowledge when newly produced, replaces what before was new but is now old and ready to be surpassed by the coming of a new dawn. Therefore, it is as necessary to be immersed in existing knowledge as it is to be open and capable of producing something that does not yet exist. (Freire, 1998, p. 35)

In this cycle of knowing and not knowing, “the future is seen not as inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history. It’s the knowledge that sees history as possibility and not as already determined. The world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming” (p. 72).

Slattery too sees this need for open-endedness, for not only comfort with but embrace of the absence of the kinds of closure and certainty we normally expect and enact in school, as being essential for new things to happen and for the citizens of the world, who are going to have to find ways to live together on this small planet, to come into being. He puts it that “The postmodern curriculum encourages chaos, non-rationality, and zones of uncertainty because the complex order existing here is the place where critical thinking, reflective intuition, and global problem solving will surface” (p. 273). Slattery expresses the values of my World Religions pedagogy and brings together the themes of this chapter when he says

In short, the world is my classroom, and the arts are my vehicle for exploring the terrain. My goal is to challenge students to connect the subject matter of the curriculum to the lived world experiences of their surrounding community. I ultimately hope to inspire them to become prophetic voices for justice in schools and society. I reiterate my belief that education is a prophetic enterprise seeking justice, that curriculum is a public discourse seeking transformation, and that teaching is a moral activity demanding compassion and understanding. (p. xxii)

On the threshold of Chapter Four, in which we will explore my World Religions curriculum and consider how these ideas can be specifically enacted, let us look back to what has brought us to this point. All in all, a more liberatory and humane World Religions class must listen to the voices of academic religious studies and of civics, cosmopolitanism, caring, and criticism, and evaluate their competing goals and values. The overwhelming critique of the Western category “religion” and of the World Religions construct in particular as ethically compromised by their origins in and multiple complicities with emotional, intellectual, and literal colonizing must inform a project committed to presenting the peoples of the world on their own terms. On the other hand, the overwhelming call to care for, cultivate, and inform a new generation of cosmopolitan people who want to live lives of meaning demands that intellectual stringency be tempered by honest considerations of what students bring to their study of religion and what they hope to gain from it. In between, we have heard a small body of academics and popular writers venture concerns and tactics relating to choosing materials and training teachers, to adding civics goals, and to problematizing the constructs they teach.

The instructor who does not wish to crush beginning students with highly sophisticated understandings of religion but who also takes seriously the point that

discourses of pluralism and of “many roads to the same mountaintop” mask oppression, and who wishes to meet the students Walvoord describes on their own ground and to cultivate conversations about personal meaning, but who also is wary of the class devolving into counseling and devotional affirmations, is entering a difficult and largely unmapped territory. Postmodernism invites the teacher to rejoice in the unmappedness of the territory, though, and to have a strong enough commitment to complexity, openness, contingency, and disequilibrium to take students on a journey in which those qualities are both means and goal, in which the process is the product. The road goes ever on, and it is a path of boulders across a river, requiring the teacher to have the knowledge and confidence to hop from imparting facts and information about some of the religions of the world to actively deconstructing those same facts, from structuring ways for students to bring their concerns into the discussion to insisting on bracketing faith when looking at religions, and from both teaching about and enacting structures of control to problematizing and surrendering control.

## CHAPTER IV

### A WORLD RELIGIONS CURRICULM

In Chapter One, we saw a critique of the standard World Religions paradigm as an essentializing and foreignizing pageant of the people of the world, created by men whose Christian worldview informed their assumptions about what religion is and how it should be described and what knowledge is valuable, and inundating students with data that neither prepare them to understand much about the ultimate concerns and behaviors of people they share a nation and a planet with nor invite them to be personally present with their own thoughts and concerns. Chapter Two looked at the small academic conversation around these problems and some of the tactics instructors are employing to counter them. Foregrounding lived practices, emphasizing civics and globalization, and problematizing religion and the study of it are all ways that instructors have pushed against the constraints of the usual course structure and approach and brought more life, more justice, more critical thinking, more cosmopolitanism, and more caring to a survey of the religions of the world. In Chapter Three we turned to theoretical groundwork for an approach to religions that is concerned with national and global citizenship, that makes room for the students as humans engaged in personal, intellectual, and emotional development, and that critically interrogates disembodied, unauthored narratives, that is conscious of the etymology, pattern, process, and contextualization of knowledge, and that has a heart for the transformative power of deconstruction.

Throughout, and especially in the concluding pages of the previous chapter, I have said many things about what a World Religions class could be like, what qualities and commitments it should have. In this chapter, I will present an overview of a curriculum based on all that we have explored, one that along with imparting honest and vivid information about some of the religions of the world also strives to foster attitudes in the students towards the beliefs and practices of humanity that will help them be more just and empathetic in their personal lives, as Americans and as global citizens, and to liberate students from their alienation from the humanities and the larger world. To have the ineffable emotional experience of understanding another person to be as fully and genuinely real as oneself and to understand their experience of the world as being as real as one's own is integral to becoming more human and more humane. Part of trying to realize this aim of emancipating students to meet new information in a genuine encounter between it and them is to get out of the way myself as much as possible and put them in touch with information that calls for a reaction from them rather than mediation from me, and part is communicating a sort of hearty enthusiasm for messing around with the materials, and, whether the material is an ancient text or a magazine article, positioning the students as interpreters with a right and a duty to critique and engage.

Moving from more general language, I now offer more specific goals for a religion survey course that can bring to life the principle I have been advocating:

- To give the students information about the doctrines and practices of several religious traditions, representing a variety of cultures and places and ways of being.

- To require the students to reflect on the roles that religion plays in the lives of individuals and in the functioning of entire cultures, whatever those religions may look like.
- To suggest to students methods of inquiry that include bracketing personal beliefs while engaging in hypotheticals and explorations.
- To create experiences in which students encounter the nonverbal and indirect aspects of religions, including music, architecture, meditation, poetry, and art.
- To engage the students in examinations of larger religious issues, such as forgiveness, mysticism, ethics, and justice, that integrate outlooks from multiple traditions and from the students' own perspectives.
- To situate religious beliefs and practices in the contemporary global community and to examine the kinds of conflicts that can arise, especially in pluralistic America.
- To provide space for students to state and reflect on their personal opinions and beliefs, in a way that both brings their inner life to center stage as a valid source of knowledge and object of study and also clearly is not for the purpose of validating or dismissing the opinions and beliefs of others in comparison.

### **I. Introduction to a New World Religions Curriculum**

My evolving design for a course that works towards these goals is most succinctly described as a set of ten units, each one featuring a religious tradition or conceptual topic. In each unit, there is a core of themes that characterize a particular religion/topic, surrounded by an assortment of readings, activities, and experiences designed to enhance

understanding of what that religion is like, how it might feel from within, and what the complexities of some key features might be and imply. Embedded within each unit is also at least one exploration of a special topic that spans multiple religions as well, a way to make sure the students have an opportunity to contemplate religion as a phenomenon and to think both sociologically and personally about how it functions and what avenues are open and why.

To elaborate on the ten units, the idea of themes, and the idea of special topics, the choice to structure the course this way is driven by all that has brought us to this point. The ten units are an Introduction featuring the First Amendment, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Indigenous and Minority, Religious Extremism, Universalizing Religions, and Non-Religious Lifestances. Considering the critiques uncovered in my first chapter about the essentializing constructs of the tradition World Religions paradigm, an instructor might well design a course that breaks those barriers by surveying multiple religions across big issues, so that units might instead be things like Creation Stories, Death and the Afterlife, Sacred Texts, Moral Systems, Modes of Worship, and so on. Such approaches do exist, but I have chosen differently for several reasons. Regardless of the hand of the West in creating the standard way we think and talk about religions, they *do* exist culturally—people identify as Hindus. Rather than pretending we in the West can start all over with encountering religions in the plural and designing a course as if we could encounter the people of India with no preconceived ideas about their religions, I think it is more honest and more effective to encounter these religious traditions as we commonly know them and use the kinds of language and

methods I have been arguing for throughout to undermine essentializing and othering. Organizing units by large qualities of religion instead of by religions would be a cosmetic fix, not a genuine change in how “we” talk about “them.” Furthermore, those large qualities are themselves Western, Christian-based boxes into which all religions do not necessarily fit, and so using them in the name of avoiding the faults of the traditional paradigm is still reinscribing a Christian worldview and asserting its ownership of religious qualia. Lastly, organizing something that is meant to be a survey of the world’s religions by religion best serves my overarching goals of empathy and citizenship in a world of lived religions. It would be counterproductive to expect young people to develop much of a sense of who their Hindu and Jewish neighbors are if they have to piece together information from a course organized by large qualities. My ten topics confound the Big Five paradigm not only from within but also by including three worldviews that are not normally given parity with them. We will see what the priorities of these ten topics are in more detail below when we examine them individually.

The ideas of themes and special topics also are shaped by the concerns explored in the previous chapters. Characterizing religions by themes offers a way for students to think about them other than through the linear approach of text, doctrine, and practice critiqued earlier, and serves the goal of helping young people who may never study religions again leave with some memorable way to grasp what is likely important to and influences the lives of the practitioners of those religions and lifestances. There is no doubt that there are both practitioners and scholars who would disagree about the themes I have chosen, and no doubt that the themes oversimplify complex worldviews and

human experiences. However, it is nonsense to argue that people must understand things either in their full complexity or not at all. This is an introductory course, and its priorities are different from those of an advanced study. Its constituency is the beginner, whose experience in encountering unfamiliar religions in the classroom and whose life in the world after the course ends are of utmost importance.

The use of special topics addresses some of those same concerns that using themes does, of disrupting linearity and essentializing and of practicality for comprehension by beginners, and also offers a way of working with another problem mentioned earlier. The difficulty that plagues any introductory approach to religions is finding ways to neither present a religion in such a distinctive, unique way that it remains too foreign for students to enter and empathize, nor to engage in the homogenizing “many roads to the same mountaintop” discourse that is inaccurate and dishonest. By embedding special topics that involve the main topic at hand in any unit, and multiple religions, and religion as a phenomenon, and the lives of the students, I am creating a means for looking at the commonalities across religions, the issues that religion per se grapples with, and the concerns that students bring to a study of religion. In this way, the religions are treated as the discrete entities that they are, and religions can still be seen as having things in common, and religion as a phenomenon gets some treatment. Students move back and forth throughout the course between religions in their lived specificity and several larger religious concepts, breaking boundaries without blurring differences.

I do not want to give the impression here or in the descriptions of each unit below that the study of each religion comprises only the themes, activities, and special topics.

Each unit also includes a core of information that I have chosen as the truly necessary aspects of the history, doctrine, and life of the religion, things that it would simply be disgraceful for someone who has putatively studied that tradition not to know of, for instance, Passover, baptism, or Mecca. Another teacher might choose different items as their rock-bottom data, based on their own experiences, emphases, available resources, etc. I merely wish to ensure that no one infers that I am advocating for an approach that engages students solely with the big themes and neglects important information. These details of lectures and readings are not necessarily apparent in the descriptions below, as I am not presenting every single thing that happens in the classroom here, but rather am focusing on the aspects of my approach that are more innovative and disruptive. What appears below for each unit is a discussion of the themes and special topics, in order to make a case for why they are representative of the religions and important for the students to work with, and how they function in concert with each other in the context of the entire curriculum.

The methods for working with these themes and topics have already been indicated in the two previous chapters. We saw a number of rationales for specific activities and classroom components, like Locklin's priority for site visits, or Carp's preference for material culture over verbal representations. A number of useful tactics emerged, like Lester and Roberts's findings concerning situating the study in ownership of religious freedom, or DeTemple's perception of a need to disrupt insistent student belief in one essentialized, pure, correct version of a religion, and Ramey's use of set theory to fracture that view and make internal diversity understandable.

One tactic that is central to envisioning how a class actually works with themes and special topics relates to Hill's insights around the idea that praxis precedes, rather than derives from, theology. In order to disrupt that traditional implication that religions progress in an orderly intellectual development from text through doctrine to practice, and to place students in the middle of the learning process instead of at the bottom of it, the study of each theme and special topic begins with engagement with a mosaic of substantive data. Students read, see, analyze, and discuss a variety of verbal, visual, and experiential pieces relating to a topic—ancient texts, newspaper articles, videos, visits—and then work outward from that corpus to doctrines, theology, and principles. This tactic creates an environment that is both more honest to how religions are really lived and more welcoming to the student as discoverer and synthesizer of knowledge. It is not news to any instructor, from their teaching experience and their own student days, that frontloading a topic with lectures and notes before students are allowed to get their hands on anything real kills any enthusiasm they might have for the subject at hand. In *The Passionate Teacher* (2001), Robert Fried works at length with the problem that “when students are given lots of background content before they actively engage in concepts, they develop passivity and resistance” (p. 67). He situates some of the problem with instructors whose sense of teaching's being about them and their expertise prevents them from positioning themselves as fellow learners sharing their passion in a group exploration of something worth caring about. This resonates with concerns touched on many times in previous chapters about changing a vertically-oriented classroom where teachers hand knowledge down to passive students and where students in turn look down

upon the landscape of religions arrayed for their inspection, to a horizontally-oriented classroom where instructor and students are together looking around at a religious landscape that they themselves are in the midst of. Fried's summary of his argument is very much like what I have been advocating for in abandoning the traditional effort to bury beginners with an avalanche of facts and instead engage them more deeply with fewer, key, themes and topics:

Rightly understood, engaging students in content requires us to change our pedagogy by *limiting the amount of stuff we teach*, so that our students learn the important things well and dig deeply into the subject; by *posing interesting questions*, setting up a framework for inquiry; and then by *getting out of the way* to let the students do the work. (p. 57)

Lastly among the many ideas that we have seen in earlier chapters about what can actually happen in the World Religions classroom, this curriculum is shaped by several overarching commitments. Queer Theory's priorities for breaking down binaries and bringing in multiple voices and Kincheloe and Steinberg's emphasis on problem detecting also inform the array of materials that launch inquiry, as seen in the previous paragraph. The need to problematize sources of authority, the study of religion itself, and the student's knowledge, is not just part of curriculum design but is an ongoing interrogation that the instructor undertakes in every class session. Kincheloe and Steinberg's thoughts about knowledge as patterns shapes the pursuit of understanding a religion by means of themes and special topics, and interweaving them within a unit and across the entire course. The generative potential of deconstruction, as seen at the end of the previous chapter, in Slattery's work, does not just function as the instructor's

worldview but as a dynamo driving a daily commitment to lessons that complicate rather than simplify, to resisting tidy answers that shut down conversation and thought, to keep choosing “this *and* this *and* this.”

My curriculum design is intentionally modular and open to revision and adaptation. The core-information piece is always debatable and in flux; instructors can differ about what the indispensable facts about a religion are. I feel strongly that the armature itself of themes and special topics is sturdy, but an instructor with a different background or with a different community of students might find it more true or useful to choose different themes or special topics. One might certainly disagree with me, for instance, that characterizing Judaism with law, Christianity with belief, and Islam with praxis is correct or best. As was clear in Chapter One, the potential content of a study of religion is all but infinite, and there is no one definitive set of choices for the very few days available to acquaint students with a tradition no one can master in a lifetime. Special topics could be changed to reflect student questions, an instructor’s own strong interests, or his/her perception that certain aspects of religions are not adequately dealt with within the structure of the units by the materials and resources at hand. For instance, I have tried to deal with the marginalization and objectification of women in religion/religions by means of tactics I am employing generally, such as including feminists critiques of religion as part of the ongoing problematization of religious authority and religious studies, and attempting to present men’s and women’s roles with parity, not treating the latter as an addendum. However, an excellent special topic not included in my current curriculum would be ways religions have positioned women and

the ramifications for actual women. In the eyes of religious authority, women have been property, have been defective men, have symbolized the soul, have embodied the body, and so on. Should women strive to be Jeanne D'Arc, warrior maiden and obedient servant of God, and know the reward is being burned at the stake? How can women live the paradox of virgin mother as a role model? How can Hinduism exalt conquering goddesses and be complicit in bride burnings and honor killings? Carefully crafted, this special topic could be affirming for students and could add some nuance to understanding the harm religion has done routinely, short of the kinds of harm encountered in the Religious Extremism unit.

The other components are intended to be flexible: in any year, depending on the instructor, students, current events, time available, etc., activities could be used or not, done more or less briefly, or modified in other ways. It seems almost comical to present a curriculum and then say that any aspect of it can be changed; however, every instructor, every group of students, every community, and every school year is different. A teacher who has lived in Korea or who is Armenian Orthodox, a student body largely Cuban or Mennonite, a school in Brooklyn or Boulder, all matter in making choices about what the most important things to know about religions are and how best to experience them. A school year when there is a refugee crisis, a terror attack, or a new pope will foreground different themes and assignments from a year when the Supreme Court rules on Westboro Baptist's speech or a controversy erupts locally about a Hindu temple. All of these factors are exactly why this is a curriculum, an approach, with arguments about methods and means, and not a textbook; there can be no one right textbook for a World

Religions survey, but only an armature and a commitment to goals of citizenship, of presence, of breaking down us/them walls, of live encounters.

To speak further of adaptability, students of the religions of the world might be ninth-graders, seniors, undergraduates, or adults engaged in continuing education. Although curricula are normally created with an emphasis on the developmental stages and particular needs of various age groups, teaching people who are 13, 20, or 40 is not as different as we might like to pretend. In my own experience with people in middle school, high school, graduate school, and continuing education, beginners are beginners, and everyone responds well to being presented with interesting ideas and information that invites their analysis and emotional investment. I have had excellent conversations with middle schoolers who took an interest in what was left on the board from World Religions when they came in for Latin class. The values and goals I have been arguing for in my approach are what determine the kind of World Religions experience a student has, not how old that person is.

The curriculum I am outlining below is written with a year-long class with high school seniors in mind. I believe that in presenting a proposal for a curricular shift that is so driven by higher-order concepts about the nature of religions, the purposes of education, and the needs of students, it is necessary to bring concrete examples to the argument—especially pertinent in an approach that so values embodied and experiential knowing. Therefore, I am describing this particular iteration of my curriculum and giving my rationale for what is emphasized in each unit and what kinds of assignments and experiences can bring this into being. I am not cluttering up every statement and

assignment with disclaimers about their adaptability to circumstances and the importance of taking a different approach given a certain student profile, and so on.

Rather, I will make now a number of remarks pertaining to the curriculum as a whole, prefatory to describing it in more detail. Particularly, I want to mention several things relating to practicality, lest this all be dismissed as irrelevant to other circumstances or too specific to certain places or students. I do realize that having a year rather than a semester is an ideal situation; however, better to present the fullest version of this course so that an instructor can understand it and adapt it as needed rather than a compromised version and suggest it could be expanded. I also realize that this course is most commonly taught to college freshmen and sophomores. World Religions is essentially the same course whether students are 18 or 20, and in fact I make a point of telling seniors that they are getting a preview of college-style seminar interaction and research tactics. The main areas in which I see difference are that I would expect longer reading and writing assignments in college and that fewer class meetings mean that assignments must be even more strongly preparatory to entering into discussions. Another practical concern is the recommended length of each unit mentioned below; these reflect in part where school holidays fall and how the puzzle pieces of the units can be fitted together into a semester. An instructor who wanted to use only some of the units, or to craft them into two separate semesters that could be offered independently, would want to adjust the weeks-per-unit accordingly. One year, when my World Religions course was a semester long, I had a few students who wanted to learn more, and I was able to create a Special Topics in Religion semester. We brainstormed phenomena that

they wanted to learn more about, and then I chose a few that I suspected would be especially pertinent, and they pursued those topics in a research/present/discuss format. They learned more about doing valid research, and we all learned a great deal about Just War theory, France's commitment to laïcité, modern hate groups, and more. So, the units and topics that I am offering in this curriculum could not only be abridged but also could be rearranged to form specialized semesters on the Abrahamic religions, for instance, or on special topics and concepts.

An important point about adapting this to other circumstances is that I want to clearly state that I am not presenting white Christian students as a norm and implying that they are the real objects of education and everyone else is an ancillary Other. Again, I am describing a specific embodiment of this curriculum and am trying to avoid adding a “yes but” after every assertion. An instructor in Dearborn, Michigan, with a classroom of Muslim teenagers or in South Dakota with a primarily Native American group is going to talk about many things with a different emphasis than I have done with a class of Southern Protestants. These differences might include the examples one uses, the comparisons one makes, the assumptions one is trying to counter, the privilege one is trying to make visible, the disempowerment one is trying to dispel, and the emotional needs and personal development one is concerned with. On the other hand, an instructor should never assume that students are well informed about the religion they belong to and that the background of a group of students determines the course content in that sense. Nor should an instructor be using us/them language with any group or ever implying that there is a default, normal group. A Christian instructor with a Christian class, for

example, should examine Christianity in the third-person in the same way as with another topic and never speak of any religion as doing something one way as opposed to the way “we” do it. The make-up of a class group and a school’s culture may affect the content of a class—ensuring that Native practices are foregrounded, that Santeria is demystified, that Eastern Orthodoxy is centered—but not its attitude that we the class are relinquishing our personal standpoints and embedding ourselves among the religions of the world.

A related component here is that student background can be a part of the course resources, but this must be approached with forethought. I use a very short questionnaire that asks students about their religious background and gives them the options of checking that they would rather not answer at all, of telling me what it is but that they do not want it mentioned in class, or of telling me what it is and that they are willing to talk about it in class. No student should ever be positioned as a representative of an entire religious tradition, and no one should ever be put on the spot to explicate or defend some belief, behavior, or action of their co-religionists. However, students are often happy and even proud to contribute what they know about their tradition, and this can make it more vital and present. Students from a minority tradition often appreciate having their faith demystified for the other students and made a valued object of study. An instructor committed to the safety and welfare of the students will always be aware that in talking about religion, we are always talking about people who are present in the room and talking about very personal matters. Avoiding norming or alienating language is a necessity, both for the emotional well-being of the students and for the entire course priority of positioning the students among the religions of the world, not separate from

them. No amount of planning and care can obviate every hurt, conflict, or unpleasantness that can occur among a group of people who are striving to be present to each other. A wise and kind instructor will use these occurrences to model how we talk about religious disagreements respectfully and productively, how we apologize, and how we continue to interact with people we do not agree with. The goal is a safe real place, not an artificially insulated place.

Likewise, the instructor brings his/her own positionality into the room as well. In my case, for instance, that means that I am teaching about religion from the point of view of a white person of means and education who was raised in the Episcopal Church. There are two significant considerations stemming from the instructor's positionality. One is the instructor's responsibility to look deeply and repeatedly at how that background and worldview, especially a personal religious worldview, might be informing his/her representation of religion/s, which is difficult since of course one's own standpoint tends to be invisible and one's worldview tends to seem natural. The other important consideration is deciding how the instructor's positionality is appropriately brought into the live encounter of the classroom. With the commitment to a critical approach to authority and the contextualizing of information and the honest presence of the participants, the instructor cannot retreat behind the veil of faceless authority and claim to be unquestionably removed from any kind of personal life and point of view. However, the instructor is not an entirely equal member of the learning community and has a duty not to influence students by expressing religious beliefs that might lead students to infer that there are sanctioned answers, stifling the conversation and reinstating the schooling

model wherein the student tries to discern what the teacher wants and repeat it. So, the teacher has the difficult task of being transparent about his/her positionality while downplaying it as much as possible and certainly declining to get drawn into more doctrinal discussions about what they believe is “really” true.

Another practical matter is the resources and materials available to an instructor. I realize that my emphasis on video resources will be viewed by some as routine and by some as a luxury. The latter is certainly unfortunate, as a Smart Board literally brings the world into the classroom and costs the same as about 40 of the textbooks it replaces. Schools of course do not make financial decision on this basis, though. An instructor who has less easy or no access to video in the classroom is going to have more difficulty making the peoples of the world present to students and will have to strive to make the student experience as vivid as possible through the readings, activities, guests, and visits. I also believe that for the goal of the cultivation of long-term attitudes of empathy and neighborliness towards diverse religions, the language and attitudes expressed by the instructor throughout the course may be even more influential than seeing people as real by means of video presentations.

Likewise, the possibilities for guests and field trips will be specific to the circumstances of any individual locale. I am fortunate to be in a medium-sized college town and to have a number of people willing to give their time and presence to religion students, and a school that has allowed me to drive an activity bus several times a year. These components of the students’ experience of this course are worth making the utmost effort to procure. Students who are standing in a Zen garden or doing tai chi are learning

about life outside of their own standpoint in multiple ways. There are some caveats relating to guest speakers, who must be selected for their ability and willingness to talk about their own personal experiences and points of view without a hint of proselytizing, and to engage the students and draw them into dialogue without badgering them to agree or being overbearing. On their part, students must be reminded that one person never represents an entire group. The benefits of a class seeing that someone who had been only an abstraction or stereotype could be a person they know and who is their neighbor are more than worth the preparation and risks.

Nothing is risk-free, and in K–12 and college instruction, in public and private schools, there is always the chance that an activity or piece of information will be objectionable to a parent, who may launch a social media or legal campaign against it. In the Linda Wertheimer book *Faith Ed.*, that we saw at the end of Chapter Two, parents felt letting students try on Muslim garb was indoctrination, as did parents of incoming students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who were assigned a book about the Qur’an. All that an instructor can do in choosing course content, readings, guests, activities, and trips is have a solid theory for what he/she is doing, carefully think through the ramifications, and be ready with calm explanations to counter any objections. Building trust with students, parents, and administrators by being forthright and communicative from the first day is an important part of having one’s judgement respected. In the context of thinking about some of the more sensitive aspects of talking about religion, I also want to mention here that I feel strongly that all instructors, whether at public or private schools, whether with teens or adults, should be guided by First

Amendment principles. While, for instance, a private Catholic school may teach about religion from a faith-based point of view, and normally does require formation and devotional classes, if it is teaching a course about the other religions of the world, norming Christianity and presenting others as in need of evangelizing is contrary to all the goals of citizenship, cosmopolitanism, and empathy that I have been advocating. Being outside the reach of legally having to adhere to the establishment clause is not a license to be careless and hurtful. A lesson that passes muster for public high school students will also be fair and just for students at a private college.

I will conclude this section of commentary on issues pertaining to the course as a whole with some remarks about materials and resources. For the basic background reading about religious traditions and certain people and phenomena, I find that the articles in databases that my school subscribes to are excellent resources. Rather than buying a \$140 textbook, students can access the Gale database that the school is already paying for and read assignments in the Encyclopedia of Religion and the World Religions Reference Library. I also make heavy use of the LMS to share assignments, such as links to newspaper articles, and incorporate guiding questions into the assignments, which I can then use as conversation starters in class, calling on students to elaborate on things I know that they are already prepared to talk about. I can incorporate shorter writing pieces and quizzes into LMS assignments, which provides opportunities for frequent, lower-stakes grades and constant feedback on whether the student is meeting standards for writing and analysis. These are important considerations in high school, especially in a course that is asking students to step outside the norm of being rewarded for showing on

a test that they have memorized study sheets. It is not fair to punish seniors, or college students, who have been institutionalized to how we do school for not immediately understanding how to show that they have engaged with a piece of information and to react to it thoughtfully.

Using the Smart Board is central to my teaching, and it allows me to constantly keep ideas and abstractions real and interconnected. There is imagery and video for practically anything imaginable; if I am bringing up Thoreau in connection with the chain of ideas about nonviolence that goes from Jainism to King, then we can hear five minutes of Mark Ruffalo reading from “Civil Disobedience.” This approach means that even the portions of the course that involve the instructor presenting information embody a human web of connections rather than one expert owning the only authority in the room. I prefer to express my expertise by crafting these experiences, not by droning on about what I know and shutting out any challenges to my interpretations.

However, technology is not required for my most important teaching and curriculum-design resource. My primary source for our explorations of the religions of the world is paying attention to the news, magazines, online media, books, conversations, and every source of input I can take in. Although I love teaching with the Smart Board, own many books, always play music pertinent to the day, and have a number of posters and objects I like to bring in to class, I feel that I could enact a reasonably good version of this course equipped only with the ideas and goals I have been arguing for and my clippings file. Not a day goes by that I do not read or see something that I do not bring into class or file away for future use. In today’s paper, for instance, there was a piece in

the business section about the growing interest in meditation in the business world and a piece in the op-ed section about the commercialization of the concept of mindfulness; right there is a worthwhile class discussion, and it is contextualized in contemporary American concerns. When Malala Yousafzai tells Jon Stewart about being a young woman in Pakistan or Bill Nye debates Ken Ham about evolution, the clippings and links go into the file, or if they are especially newsworthy and the students are aware they are going on (they were very excited about Bill Nye), there is no reason not to take time out from the topic at hand to look at and think about these things. No one is going to get confused by pausing in the midst of studying Buddhism to talk about why the pope is on the front page, and taking ten minutes to learn about St. Patrick's Day or Purim on the actual day is part of creating a sensibility that the religious concerns of Americans and people all over the world are always shaping what is going on in our real, actual lives.

What follows now is an overview of the curriculum for the year. For each unit there is a description and rationale of the themes that characterize each faith and that drive my choice of readings and activities, and of one or more special topics, which are the larger, trans-unit concepts. Following that, there is also commentary on the kinds of materials, guest speakers, and site visits that pertain to that unit. A more detailed close-up of one of the units, Judaism, is attached as an appendix. This includes the activities and the assignments, in order to present a very specific picture of what this kind of study of World Religions looks like.

## **II. World Religions Curriculum Overview**

### **A. Introduction**

Two weeks

This unit is meant to introduce students to the academic study of religion and to set the tone and establish the parameters for the course. Priorities include clarifying the difference between studying about a religion from within a position of faith and from the outside, learning some terminology that is specific to or used differently in the study of religion, and situating the course within the framework of the First Amendment. The first two of these goals pertain to the need to be explicit about what the academic study of religion is and to prevent students from proceeding into the course with unspoken assumptions. In my experience, students are willing to bracket their personal beliefs and worldviews for the purpose of study, nor do they feel threatened by this; however, for many of them this is something they truly do not realize they can do until it is explained to them. I have also found it important to say in so many words that, while religion is sensitive and personal to individuals, as a phenomenon it is extremely sturdy and there is nothing we will be able to say in that room that will hurt it; this is reassuring and helps dispel some of the magical thinking people tend to have about religion.

The most time is allotted for the last of those three priorities. As discussed at length earlier, it is central to the citizenship goals of this course that students contextualize their new knowledge about other religions on the grounds of free exercise and freedom from establishment. The students who are the most critical to reach, those whose religious worldviews are exclusive and intolerant, may be more uncomfortable

with the beliefs and practices of the religions of the world than their more open-minded classmates, and may never want to go as far as to feel that multiple religions contain legitimate approaches to the ultimate. However, with a strong positioning of religious freedom as a defining American principle, these students are prepared to understand others as living alongside them sharing important civic values, rather than in opposition to them and holding incompatible values. Nor is this context important only to facilitate this course of study for the more resistant students; students who are eager to embrace other cultures and who are comfortable with multiple truths also need clarity about what free exercise and freedom from establishment really mean and why they are so important in a pluralistic democracy.

Materials for this study are easily available, with the First Amendment Center providing a plethora of information and activities on their website, for instance. This unit is also where the instructor establishes the norm of classroom conversation, setting a standard of student-driven and instructor-guided exploration of ideas that combines an atmosphere of students being heard and personally valued with the visible pursuit of academic goals. Using primary sources from the founding of the nation, Supreme Court cases, and other real-life scenarios involving the defining of exercise and establishment, the students can engage in private writing, discussion, and formal debates designed to help them arrive at and articulate those definitions themselves. These activities are essential for the success of the entire course, because achieving personal clarity about this, as opposed to simply being told what the appropriate attitude is that they should display, means that students are invested in the legitimacy and rights of a variety of

religious expressions. These activities also are the first of many that are intended to nudge gut feelings, unexamined opinions, and things “everybody knows” aside, and replace them with information, legitimately informed opinions, and a spirit of calm, engaged inquiry.

Another purpose of this first unit is to introduce students to most of the sources of information and types of interaction the class will be using, including subscription databases, newspaper articles, podcasts, the LMS discussion board, videos, in-class writing, and handouts. While we may hope that high-school seniors and college undergraduates know how to access resources, this is not always the case, and a wise teacher sets them up for success with a series of lower-stakes assignments requiring them to use whatever media are planned for the course. Students should not discover while trying to do an important assignment that they cannot access the LMS from home or that they misunderstood the grading expectations applied to their writing. This also is part of being clear from the beginning what the course will be like and what is expected from the students, so that students who are assuming they will be on social media during lectures and doing minimal reading before exams understand what will be happening. Showing them how the course works and being explicit about how to succeed in it are only fair when asking students who have been schooled to keep their heads down and assume the only important aspect of a course is the grade to step out of their comfort zone and personally engage a topic, handle ambiguity and subjectivity, and take risks in the classroom.

## **B. Judaism**

Four weeks

*Themes:* Exile and Deliverance, Law, Wrestling with God

*Special Topics:* Wisdom Literature, The Problem of Evil and Suffering

Normally, this kind of survey course is done in chronological order, with Hinduism first as the oldest of the major religions. I have found that Hinduism is a more difficult topic, enormous and amorphous, rendering the students confused and fearful right at the start. There are advantages to the chronological approach and looking at the three Abrahamic religions later in the course, primarily in that most American students are likely to be more familiar with and have opinions about them and so may be able to view them more objectively later on, after more experience in the academic study of religion. The argument that students are more likely to take the more contentious Abrahamic religions in their stride after the patterns of study are well established is certainly valid, but equally so is the point that beginning with Hinduism is daunting and disconcerting and compromises the creation of a collegial and confident classroom. This question is an example of the decisions available to individual instructors in using this modular curriculum, and the order can be adapted to the needs of a specific instructor and student body.

The Judaism unit focuses on key stories from the Torah, on story being how people understand themselves, on law and interpreting law, on the expectation of deliverance and how that manifests in history, and on the experience of being Jewish in America. These themes arguably characterize Judaism, and meet the course's goal of

both learning about truly basic concepts from a religion and entering the world of that religion in a more experiential way. Students, for instance, learn about Abraham and Moses, understand their stories as the narrative of Judaism that defines it across time, and connect these stories to their contemporary implications in the founding of America and the Civil Rights movement. This is the unit chosen for detailed examination in the appendix, so more information is available there.

The two special topics are concepts that cross multiple traditions but that are also particularly at home in Judaism. Working with wisdom literature is a non-threatening introduction to seeing that many religious traditions incorporate similar ideas for similar reasons, and that for many of them, secular concerns become situated in a religious context. Furthermore, seeing the advice given in the book of Proverbs replicated in ancient Egyptian wisdom literature begins the process of making students aware of the historicity and situatedness of religions. One of the overarching goals of the course is to replace students' vague impression that sacred texts exist in a free-floating definitive form with both knowledge and acceptance of their origins in specific places and times. Reading Proverbs side-by-side with The Instruction of Amenemope situates the book from the Tanakh/Old Testament in the ancient Near East and changes what it means for a student to say "The Bible says . . . ."

Both of the special topics involve working with one concept over a robust variety of sources and both include a place for the student's personal opinion and interpretation. The problem of evil and suffering is of course particularly germane to Judaism, but is also foundational to Buddhism for instance, and can be thought of, in a sociological

approach, as a key reason for the existence of religion. This weighty topic, which is dealt with by means of several different texts, including Job, memoirs, and films, and a culminating brainstorming/analysis session, models an essential method and goal of the course, which is student-generated knowledge, where their own opinions and interpretations are centered, but after they have primary sources and real information with which to form them. This topic is also valuable early on, as it takes something students think they have already dealt with thoroughly at school, the Holocaust, and provides them with different information and a different lens, making the point that a religious perspective is a necessary part of interpreting human events.

We will see all of the materials for this unit in the detailed look at it in the appendix, but they include extracts from the Tanakh, video of Jewish a cappella groups, newspaper articles, video from Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, PBS's *The Jewish Americans*, Viktor Frankl, and *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*. Material culture is represented with, among other things, bagels (which most of the students do not know are Jewish), a mezuzah, and hamantaschen. In the early years of my course, I invited the rabbi of the local Reform congregation to visit, which was very successful, as he is a teacher used to engaging with young people and who particularly likes to do outreach and interfaith work. He had lived a year in Jerusalem, which brought that somewhat mythical place to life for the students. However, being able to make a site visit to Temple Emanuel and see him there was vastly the better option. For most of the class, this visit brought an abstract idea into three real dimensions, and, in seeing stories they had read embodied in symbols in stained glass and the ark opened to reveal the Torah scrolls, they were able to

grasp the core idea of Judaism as narratives lived by a community throughout centuries, simultaneously historical and contemporary.

### **C. Christianity**

Four weeks

*Themes:* Sin and Salvation, Belief

*Special Topics:* Church and State, Forgiveness and Reconciliation

We saw in Chapter Two that there is a wide range of “normal” classrooms, and instructors of this course will constantly be making choices based on what their students are bringing into the room. However, there is in American public life an overwhelming discourse of unexamined Protestant Christianity with its emphases on salvation and on textual authority, and I do foreground the need to confound that. The major pieces of this unit are the experience of reading the Gospel of Mark, differing interpretations of the meaning of Jesus, the encounter of an exclusive religion with a plural world, and the internal diversity of Christianity.

Because the students I have typically come from Southern Protestant backgrounds, and tend to think that they are more knowledgeable about Christianity than they actually are, this unit begins with a section on history and text, including reading the Gospel according to Mark. Despite the Protestant emphasis on biblical authority, students—and adults—typically “know” the Bible but have not read much of it. Going back to the source material and reading Mark is a powerful entrée into grappling with what the basis of Christianity is, where the texts come from and how they have changed over time, what happens when a text is translated, and why the defining quality of

Protestantism is direct, unmediated access to texts. Following that up with the multiple and conflicting Christologies that have existed further problematizes the easy assumption that all one has to do to be a Christian is read the Bible and follow Jesus.

The other major component of this unit is a look at the wide variety of American and global Christianity. In parts of the country, students will already be at least partly knowledgeable about what delineates different denominations of Christianity, but in the South, even many Catholics practice a sort of generic Christianity, in ignorance of the bitter divergences that once tore apart communities and got people executed. Therefore, a priority in a course aimed at undermining the norming of (their) Christianity as a worldview is to help students explore the range of outwardly dissimilar manifestations of Christianity—New England Quakers, Russian Orthodox, South American Pentecostalism—and contextualize American Christianity as just a piece of the global mosaic. Hearing from an African Christian, reading about the Catholic underground in China, and seeing Coptic worship are as surprising and effective ways of making the stranger real in the classroom as are encounters with non-Christian religions.

One of the two special topics embedded in this unit relates to the overarching course goal of empathetic citizenship. Building on the introductory work on the First Amendment, the students examine a number of Church/State conflicts, a broad topic particularly at home in this unit with so much political enmeshment with Christianity in America. The clash between competing goods involved in many of such problems raises important questions for young people to be asking in a country where personal freedoms and public security are often at odds and decisions have to be made. Using news sources

and current events, the students learn about conflicts—a strong one to explore with young adults is parents’ refusal of medical treatment for their children for religious reasons—and subject them to First Amendment criteria and work through how to adjudicate between competing goods. One technique useful here and throughout the course is the formal debate, in which students must advocate for a position regardless of their own personal opinion, which is very useful training in separating the merits of a position from one’s feelings about it and in experiencing another person’s point of view. Conflicts to study can include instances in which Mennonites’ beliefs have clashed with the interest of the state in people’s having driver’s licenses and insurance, schools have refused to accommodate prayer rituals, and private employers have refused to allow certain dress or hair styles. With the recent advent of legislation in several states to protect businesses’ refusal to serve people based on religious convictions, it is increasingly important for students to grasp the subtleties of this topic.

The Forgiveness and Reconciliation special topic provides a culminating portfolio-based activity that links global awareness, personal issues, and Christian ethics. Beginning with an LMS-based personal reflection on the parable of the Prodigal Son, students work through a variety of resources, including films about South Africa and Israel/Palestine, to try to put into words specific functions, motivations, qualities, and outcomes of the Christian virtue of forgiveness, whether interpersonally or between nations, for a personal slight or a crime against humanity. This special topic weaves together ideas about religious commitments demanding action in one’s own life, large national forces being affected by profound emotional and spiritual individual encounters,

and more nuanced appreciation of one of the many large religious concepts that are commonly used simplistically.

Examples of the materials for this unit include the Gospel of Mark, Woody Guthrie singing “Jesus Christ,” the Nicene Creed, a biography of St. Paul in an academic database, news articles about Pope Frances, video of Bill Moyers and Desmond Tutu, and a Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly news video about Northern Ireland. The kinds of class visitors who have brought another dimension to this unit include a Protestant minister who is intensely engaged with ecumenical initiatives, who created a sense of safety and familiarity from which students could understand what encountering other faiths on common ground could be like; a lawyer on the staff of my school, who lent authority and authenticity to our Church and State debates (an important component, as students need to see that these opinions as held by people like themselves are what shape policies and laws); and a costumed interpreter from Old Salem, who led students in a Moravian Love Feast, which gave them basic information about the religious sect that founded our town.

The Christianity unit coincided with the Day of the Dead, and we were able to visit an outstanding exhibition about that at the Museum of Anthropology at Wake Forest University; this was part of addressing a great need to help students understand that the Christianity of most of the Western Hemisphere is a Latin-inflected Catholicism and Pentecostalism that has little to do with their Southern Baptist definition of Christianity. We also made an extremely effective field trip to a large, stone, Gothic-style church, for the purpose of asking what the experiential quality of a worship space is wordlessly communicating about that religion and one’s place in it. Most of the students had not

been in this kind of space before and wrote very perceptive pieces about its paradoxical effect of intimidation and uplift; they were also interested in the idea of a nonverbal vocabulary being in play. Taking a group of largely Christian students to a church might seem to be an unwise use of the time and money of a field trip, but its strength illustrates the need not to make assumptions about what students know, the validity of this course's emphasis on religion as lived experience, and the power of the mission of all academia to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange and thus make the fullness of things come alive.

#### **D. Islam**

Four weeks

*Themes:* Praxis, Everything is Sacred

*Special Topics:* Ecumenicism and Exclusivity

This unit makes visible my overall emphasis on making imaginary strangers present and on religion as a lived experience. Islam is normally very unfamiliar to students, except as a caricature, or increasingly, a scare word. Therefore, this study of Islam uses video sources heavily, and guests and visits if possible, and focuses on praxis, in order to bring it into being as a lifestance of a billion people and not an abstracted “problem.” Spending time working with praxis is also part of communicating Islam's characteristic quality of not dividing the sacred and the secular. While doctrinally part of the other Abrahamic religions as well, this view of everything as sacred is a useful distinction to make in the more familiar context of an American Christianity that is largely accepting of a secular public sphere. In approaching Islam, it is probable that

students will raise questions about terrorism, in which case the instructor should tell them that the class will inquire into religious extremism later in the course and that they will certainly talk about it then. Downplaying or denying students' concerns, especially if there are particularly inflammatory events in the news, risks a loss of credibility for the instructor and the whole course. Studying religious extremism as a phenomenon brings together a number of different ideas, events, and movements, and allows the course to be honest about the negative qualities of religion and religiosity and prevents any implication that any one religion is particularly wrong, evil, or at fault.

Among the themes and activities available for this unit, I will feature here praxis, Islam in America, and African-American Islam. In contrast to the Christian rhetoric about belief, Islam's emphasis on actions provides a theme that students can grasp, and this is illustrated with repeated reference to what people their own age would do in the context of family life. Featuring religious praxis is part of my intention to give students a feeling for what is most distinctive about a religious tradition, and, while obviously praxis could be singled out in any unit, it is indeed highly characteristic of Islam and provides a reasonable characterization, especially in contrast to Christianity's overwhelming emphasis on belief.

As with the Judaism unit coinciding with Rosh Hashanah and the Christianity unit with the Day of the Dead, the Islam unit may begin in Ramadan, depending on the calendar, and this is a good place to start. Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly has several videos on Ramadan and on fasting in other traditions, including Yom Kippur and Lent. Having students watch those and do some informal writing in response to those videos

and to some questions about them begins the process of creating a living picture of what being a Muslim is like, and does so by involving a praxis that is found across religions and that students can legitimately bring personal feelings and experiences to. Another foundational praxis of Islam is haj, and this is also an experience that connects to pilgrimage traditions in other religions and to ideas and values that the students can personally engage with. There are many video resources that feature the haj stories of individuals, and carefully choosing among these can further the goal of being clear that Islam is a global religion and Arabs constitute only about 15% of Muslims, as well as focusing on haj as a lived religious commitment that is both shared communally and particular to each person.

Working with religious praxis can be a meta-topic as well. When students are asked to try to articulate the phenomenon of direct experience per se as providing unique and irreplaceable knowledge, that for instance one learns something on a pilgrimage that cannot be read about or explained instead, they are learning that religion is more than doctrines and institutions. There is no need to keep this goal and method of the curriculum implicit, and being plain that we do not understand religions if we only know a checklist of facts and have never tried to place ourselves in the place of others can be part of this unit's emphasis on praxis. Likewise and on the other hand, students may also need frequent reminders throughout the course that we are no more than respectful travelers in lands not our own and that our brief visit does not make us experts.

A particularly ineffable kind of praxis to bring into this study is mysticism, and this too offers chances to build connections to other religions and their mystic traditions

and to let students center their own interpretations of the figurative. Working with a selection of the poetry of Rumi and seeing the meditative movements of the Sufi dervishes are ways that students can understand a little of Muslim mysticism, and as well as briefly looking back at Christian and Jewish mysticism, this study leaves a door open for concepts to come in later units on Buddhism and universalism.

In conjunction with our emphasis on more neighborly American citizenship, the praxis of keeping halal can be situated in the context of being an American teenager. I have made use of *The American Muslim Teenager's Handbook* (2009), a teen-to-teen paperback that is a friendly guide for navigating the differences Muslim teens may face in a mainstream American environment. Its familiar teen-magazine format makes it and the problems it deals with instantly recognizable to non-Muslim teens, and in using this and other materials about American Muslims, students can both learn about what it means to keep halal and also engage in an empathetic conversation about all the ways that any teenager has to manage conflicts between the expectations and norms of their family culture and the temptations and possibilities of the larger culture. In this simple assignment, students are learning facts about Islam, exercising empathy, preparing to be both knowledgeable and empathetic in future encounters with Muslims, understanding that Islam and religion in general is experiential, and considering through a specific example the larger point of tensions between religion and other aspects of culture.

Talking about the experiences of American Muslims provides a transition to another featured topic, the African-American involvement with Islam. A large percentage of American Muslims are not immigrants, Arab-Americans, Indonesian-Americans, etc.

but are African-Americans, and outside urban areas, a town's mosque is likely to be primarily African-American, so it is important, in our triage of all that we could address, to spend some time on this. Encountering the iconic Malcolm X through video of him and unpacking some of the complexities of this movement deepens the understanding of the role of religion in the Civil Rights era that began in the Judaism unit. This section then segues into the special topic of Ecumenicism, as we observe Malcolm X's journey from racial separatism and black nationalism to an embrace of a global Islam that recognizes all Muslims as one. At this point the class can explicitly deal with a problem that all the Abrahamic religions share, which is the tension between exclusive truth claims and the will for ecumenicism. Muslim youth leader Eboo Patel provides some excellent material on this in the podcast *On Being* and elsewhere, and students can work with the questions raised in the interfaith section of the Christianity unit and the social engagement section in Judaism, and be prepared to take it further in later units.

Some of the materials for this unit include videos from the *On Being* podcast and the Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly video bank, both sources used throughout the course. The latter tends to offer information that connects directly to the lives of individuals and that feels vivid and relevant, as opposed to videos created specifically to be instructional. *On Being* has a large library of interviews and ancillary materials, and also communicates relevance, as the interviewees are usually people involved in creative initiatives, grassroots movements, etc. More deliberately educational videos have their place as well; a quarter-hour hearing about the life of Muhammad accompanied by rich visuals in the History Channel documentary *Inside Islam* is well spent. Being able to interact with

information of all kinds on a Smart Board, whether distantly historical or the day's news, counteracts the tendency in a classroom for the objects of study to fade away into verbal abstractions. Actually seeing the Saudi Ministry of Haj's exhaustively helpful website adds a dimension of reality to the idea that people all over the world have to make travel plans to undertake a religious commitment. Much of the reading material for this unit can be shared and commented on within an LMS, such as links to Rumi, extracts from the Qur'an, and newspaper articles.

Visitors and field trips are highly desirable for this unit of study, and of course in all cases what is available to people varies. In my own teaching, I have been fortunate to have been able to invite a Muslim friend to visit who has teenaged children, brings food, does not cover her hair, and is indistinguishable from the mothers of many of my Southern Christian students. However, she does come from Lebanon and speaks passionately about the Sunni/Shia conflicts and about the importance to her of following the teachings of Muhammad and not being drawn into partisanship and political stances. For students in very homogeneous environments, meeting a Muslim may be one of the most important pieces of this unit. If a site visit to a mosque is not possible, spending some time on a virtual visit online would be valuable, as many Americans are completely ignorant of what a mosque is and is not. Furthermore, seeing the variety of mosques is a priority here, as other kinds of internal variety is in all the units. An introductory survey course is always balancing the presentation of graspable and memorable characteristics with the communication of complexity and subtlety.

## **E. Hinduism/India**

Three weeks

*Themes:* Epic Narrative, Karma, Reality vs. Illusion

*Special Topic:* Nonviolence

Hinduism is difficult to encapsulate for students. The oldest of the major world religions, its nearly four thousand years of history is vast and sprawling, not least because it is not a single movement with a founder and doctrines and governing institutions, but rather a collection of practices, traditions, and beliefs from all over the Indian subcontinent. As we saw in Chapter One, our current impression that there is such a thing as Hinduism is the result of the census-keeping practices of the British Raj—everyone who was not Christian or Muslim was a “Hindu.” The academies of the West interpreted texts and information from India and defined the religion of that nation for its people; however, it would not now be possible or true to try to understand the religions of India as if this had never happened, as now this framework is part of how Hindus define themselves. “Hinduism” may be an ill-fitting garment to cover this collection of ancient beliefs and practices, but the answer is not to ignore it but to decide what to emphasize and how to create some kind of coherent classroom experience.

One response to this conundrum is to do more with fewer topics. This is the approach I am advocating for this entire curriculum—to communicate the truly basic and essential data about a religion but to spend the majority of the time on a few characteristic phenomena. In the case of Hinduism and the religions of India, though, making these choices is a more dramatic process. There is an overwhelming array of deities,

terminology, practices, and historical developments, and any choices an instructor selects as basic facts or characteristic practices will be at least as contentious as those for other traditions. It is also the case that an American instructor may feel even less qualified to represent Hinduism than some other religious traditions, and so is even more likely to resort to the traditional parade-of-facts paradigm, leaving students frustrated and feeling that Hinduism is an incomprehensible jumble of deities and terms. Throughout the years of teaching and continual development of this course, any World Religions instructor must be committed to an ongoing process of reading and conversations aimed at gaining as much knowledge and insight into the religions of the world, especially as contemporary cultural forces, as possible. We certainly saw in the first chapter that no one is an expert on all religions; one can barely be an expert on a single religion. An instructor can always strive to gather information and ideas, though, and to integrate them into an evolving understanding of how to help students have a more sophisticated and empathetic view of religions. One never knows on opening the newspaper if one will see exactly the piece of news about Buddhist violence against Muslims in Myanmar, for instance, that will bring needed nuance to the class's stereotypes of both Buddhism and Islam.

My choices are hardly definitive, but with an eye to all of my goals and criteria, they have included spending time on some of the more abstract dogmas of Hinduism: the belief in karma and the understanding that our world is *maya*, illusion. Both are so important and descriptive, and they are a way to lead a group of students into the lifeworld of Hinduism in substantive ways. Students often have heard of karma, and so in

keeping with one of my goals of being sure that we leave students equipped with better knowledge about things that they are most likely to encounter in the future, it is important to take karma out of the realm of slogan and into a deeper study. Working with *maya* is an opportunity to make the point that one important way to understand religions is that they can be the source of views about how the world literally functions that then penetrate other aspects of how we think about and act in the world. Foundational differences in worldviews are often invisible and unexamined, and bringing this fact to light explicitly is part of opening up a ground for students to be more sophisticated than and in the future about looking for the real sources of differences. As with encountering the idea that Islam does not see the world in secular/sacred terms, wrapping their minds around what it would mean if the world we know were in fact *maya*, a complete illusion, is a deep-level shift in perception that can equip students to understand and not just acknowledge higher-level beliefs, practices, and behaviors. Both karma and *maya* are topics extremely well-suited for powerful student engagement, and build a bridge to the next unit, Buddhism as well, preparing students to have a stronger experience with that.

One of the features of the more experiential side of getting a feeling for Hinduism is encountering the tales of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The students encountered in the Judaism unit the idea that narratives can define a people and give them (hi)stories to be part of themselves, and here this idea returns in epic form, opening up conversation about phenomena being the same but different. In trying to characterize Hinduism, it is both true and surprising for students to see the immense popularity throughout the culture of these stories and to understand them as both religion and

popular entertainment that give the culture a place to define and discuss who and what they are. Showing students some of the many televised versions of these tales provides a cultural experience unavailable through other means and generates discussion about the function of epic narrative, a discussion to which they can bring the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Tolkien, and *Star Wars*. One key narrative that brings together the goals of experiencing an important part of Hindu culture, understanding doctrine, and engaging in higher-level analysis of the worldviews of religions and their implications is the story from the *Bhagavad Gita* of Krishna's battlefield instruction of Prince Arjuna. A study of both the text and a dramatic television rendering invite a complex examination of the metaphysics and the ethics of Hinduism, in the context of a story that is genuinely popular and meaningful in the culture, rather than promulgating statements about what Hinduism really is generated in nineteenth-century universities.

In selecting practices to feature, there are of course many that can be presented through video and material resources, and ideally guest speakers as well. The very popular devotion to Ganesh would be a good choice, as would emphasizing *puja* as a home practice, countering the Christian expectation of needing to attend some kind of place of worship. One practice that I have brought into the classroom with mixed feelings but great success has been yoga. On the one hand, I am reluctant to use our limited time on things that are not actually that important to or representative of a religion; furthermore, anything that time is spent on gains significance in the students' minds. However, as mentioned above in the case of karma, it is a priority to inform about, demystify, and enlarge understanding of the aspects of religion that students are most

likely to encounter in their lives, and even a rural young person who has never met a Hindu and perhaps never will cannot escape the omnipresence of yoga as spiritual practice, as exercise, and as fashion. I have been able to invite a yoga instructor to my class who is ex-military, male, and personable, and who dispels stereotypes and speaks clearly about the spiritual and religious aspects of yoga. A class session spent doing yoga with him and listening to his perspective has been very valuable in contextualizing what is no doubt the aspect of Hinduism that is most well-known in America. Another productive part of thinking about yoga has been looking at the plethora of websites and catalogues offering yoga wear and equipment and the books and programs making claims about its effects, and considering the commercialism of religion and the cultural appropriation involved. Both of these ideas may be new to young people and can provoke thoughtful conversations that build connections across the religions (for instance, Christian theme parks and Native American dreamcatchers) and which may have a strong impact on their future choices about how to relate to the material culture of other religions.

Included with this unit is a lamentably brief look at Sikhism, another religion originating the Indian subcontinent. Frequently misidentified in the United States as Muslims or Hindus, Sikhs exemplify the need in a World Religions course to consider practical questions such as what information most needs to be shared or what misinformation dispelled when deciding how to spend class time. Americans know so little about Sikhs, and Sikh religious commitments like the turban and the kirpan are highly visible, likely to be perceived as threatening, and likely to engender the kind of

Church/State conflicts discussed in the Christianity unit. So, students not only need to know some basic information about Sikhs, but they also benefit from revisiting in this context the ways society does and should navigate clashes between religious exercise and cultural/legal conventions. Discussions about real-life incidents of an employer forbidding a turban, harassment by TSA agents, and the duty of a middle-school boy to wear a kirpan at a school can significantly advance students in the thinking begun in previous units. I have also used a police-training video about entering a Sikh home as a teaching tool; students actually learn about Sikhism from the police chief's explanation of the religious objects and places situated in a home, and they also learn a strong metamessage from his calm, professional demeanor and the idea that police need to be educated in and respect the religious aspects of the lives of all Americans.

The special topic for this unit, Nonviolence, involves an even smaller minority religion of India, the Jains. Although most Americans are unlikely to meet a Jain, in this case this is an important topic to make the acquaintance of because Jainism is the source of the doctrine of *ahimsa*, nonviolence, that was influential in Gandhi's thinking. In my experience, this has been a rich section for student engagement, as they run thought experiments on taking the Jain commitment to doing no harm as far as they can, creating a space to think about what it might possibly mean to live out one's religious beliefs completely. Nonviolence as a philosophy and a political, social, and personal life strategy is of course a large topic that can take up as much time as one wants, and it is progress just to give students the idea that it is a complex stance that does not begin and end with simply refusing to fight. Working with it enhances course goals of citizenship and

cosmopolitanism as they learn to appreciate the subtleties of the philosophy of nonviolence, and it builds connections across units, to the study of the Civil Rights movement and to Forgiveness and Reconciliation. When students see ideas moving from Jainism across the Atlantic to Thoreau and back to India to Gandhi and back to America to King and the Berrigan brothers, they see the workings of religious ideas on the world stage and they see religions not siloed but interacting with each other, with schools of thought, with private individuals, and with huge political movements.

Materials for this unit can include a wide variety of video sources: the opening of *A Passage to India* vividly establishes the imposition of the European gaze upon India, the video library of *Hinduism Today* magazine offers mini-lectures on key concepts, and YouTube has many video clips from Indian television productions. There is a choice of translations of the Hindu epics and the Bhagavad Gita to examine in looking for extracts to read. There is a large literature on nonviolence, including a key book by Mark Kurlansky, and depending on the time available, a brief reader or set of handouts could be created. I have brought in posters and statues of Hindu deities and other cultural artifacts to bring this topic to life through material culture as much as possible, and samosas and candies as well. I try to bring in food for most sections, feeling that the whiff of tourism involved (a common critique of shallow multiculturalism is to call it “food and festivals”) is a minimal problem compared to helping students understand that certain cultures are responsible for foods they take for granted, like bagels, and to the pleasure and embodied liveliness that food brings to a group of people.

I have not yet been able to arrange any site visits for my classes, because of the driving distances involved, but my students have enjoyed several different guest speakers, including the yoga instructor mentioned above, and a graduate student studying at Wake Forest. As an American with immigrant parents and very traditional grandparents living in a small village in India, and married to a Polish-American Catholic, this young woman really brought into presence our small planet and what life in twenty-first century America looks like. As with the study of Muslim teens, the students could all relate to family pressures and the need to be oneself while still loving one's family and being proud of one's identity and heritage. Any time students can experience religious principles as struggled with, embraced, compromised, and fought for in the life of an individual, it confounds the either/or definition of religion as a checklist of things a person must believe and do and undermines essentializing and rigidity. Hearing about the conflicting expectations and beliefs of her Hindu and Catholic and combined families and about how they did not magically disappear or resolve but were rather put into perspective by the birth of a beloved grandchild (who happily sat in our midst, also present) generated knowledge about the human and humane ground where interfaith love and cooperation can live, tensions not resolved but transcended, that no textbook could.

#### **F. Buddhism/China/Japan**

Three weeks

*Themes:* Suffering and Transcendence, Aesthetic Expression

*Special Topics:* Monasticism, Meditation

Clearly, this unit has an enormous scope—Buddhism as practiced from Tibet through Southeast Asia and China to Japan and Korea encompasses human lives that differ as much as do the lives of a Mormon family in Utah from an Orthodox Christian family in Azerbaijan. Furthermore, Confucianism and Taoism are folded into the unit as they are into Chinese Buddhism in life. I am not entirely satisfied with the level of development that my choices for this unit have reached, as I feel that the actual life of, for instance, a Thai Buddhist is not well represented. This is a shortcoming in my own knowledge and experiences, and as is the case with this entire curriculum, an individual instructor will have different resources and different emphases.

On the other hand, the more philosophical and intellectualized themes of this unit are consonant with the goal of crafting ways for predominantly Christian American students to experience religious worldviews that are unlike their own in fundamental ways. This kaleidoscope of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism also illustrates how different values and worldviews can together make up a complete vision of human life and society, and furthermore that people do not need to adhere to one tradition to the exclusion of all others, a point worth making to students accustomed to religions with exclusive truth claims. The major themes of this unit are both features that invite productive student thought, empathy, and creativity: the intellectual and philosophical side of the Buddhist engagement with the problem of suffering, and the artistic and sometimes wordless expression of Buddhist ideals and ideas through painting, calligraphy, poetry, tea, and landscape.

So, featuring Buddhism's Four Noble Truths does not strongly further my lived religions goal, but it is an excellent opportunity for students to understand that there can be deeply different answers to life's key questions and to work through some implications of those answers. The question of suffering—of why there is pain and death, illness and loss, dissatisfaction and sadness, and how to respond—has a very familiar answer in the Christian West, having to do with the will of God, the innate sinfulness of humanity, and the redeeming death and resurrection of Christ. This sin-and-salvation model for the relationship between the human condition and religion is so ingrained in the Western worldview as to be unquestioned, and one of the most effective tactics for furthering the overarching course goal of developing an open, neighborly cosmopolitanism is to make the most of opportunities such as this to make visible students' assumptions and acquaint them with some radically differing standpoints. Going with the Buddha on his journey of awakening and then analyzing the implications of the Buddhist diagnosis of the problem of suffering as being not sin but attachment introduces students raised on the premise of inherent and hopeless sinfulness to some surprising ways other people on the planet interpret life, ways they would not have intuited otherwise.

Since Buddhism has other answers than salvation to life's sufferings, this unit offers some scope for the class to consider ethical questions in a new light, not only non-Christian but also non-theistic, and ask about how we interpret ethics without a deity to define, command, reward, or punish. In considering the vociferousness of the public rhetoric equating religion with goodness, leading students through such an exploration

can bring complexity and nuance to their feelings that they will be acting upon as neighbors and voters. The Dalai Lama has been much in the news in recent years, including appearances at Madison Square Garden and the National Cathedral, and featuring his teachings in a study of Tibetan Buddhism can ground an inquiry into the nature and sources of compassion. Young people may be pursuing threads of right and wrong, duty and freedom, through a real exploration of motivations and choices for the first time, in discussions and essays based on the Dalai Lama's arguments for compassion. Both this and a study of Thich Nhat Hanh and his fourteen rules for good living later in the unit round out what had begun as a very theoretical approach to Buddhism and conclude it in ideas about engaged Buddhism and about the praxis that emerges.

The other large theme of this unit relates to praxis as well, and also is one that, while not necessarily representing the lives of the majority of Buddhists, does meet other goals of the course. In experiencing the aesthetic dimensions of religion as expressed in Buddhism, students encounter religion in a nonverbal, physical form and see that religious values can be enacted through other means than statements of belief, worship rituals, texts, and holidays. The prayer flags, prayer wheels, temples, and statues all illustrate a vibrant physicality that helps counter the abstractions of the study of the Four Noble Truths. However, it is in the Zen arts that students can have a more immediate encounter with an expression of a religious worldview that is not verbal but direct and experiential. Through video, visits, hands-on work, and demonstrations, arts including brush painting, ikebana, tea, poetry, and landscape offer an embodied learning about how

values, beliefs, and feelings can look and feel, as opposed to how they are verbalized. In the case of my students, they have had opportunities to see ikebana, raku ware, and brush paintings, handle tea ware, and read and write poetry.

The most transformative experience I have been able to offer has been a visit to the home of a landscape architect whose entire environment from the design, construction, and interior of his house to all aspects of its outdoor setting speak wordlessly of a Buddhist worldview. Actually moving within that environment taught students more than anything else we could have done—not only about a religiously based stance towards life and our place in it that was new to them, but it also opened up for them the idea that people have choices about how they want to live and what they want to surround themselves with. The house is situated in a very ordinary neighborhood of prefabricated-looking houses, which provided a means for a discussion the next day about what was available to the designer of the house that was not available to his neighbors; the students were able to conclude that people's lives are circumscribed not by what materials are available to them but by what thoughts and feelings are possible for them. Students who arrive on their own at an inkling of the value of becoming free to see differently have internalized something true about Buddhism and potentially personally valuable as well.

This study of aesthetics pertains largely to Zen Buddhism, and one of the disadvantages to that is that it is of course not the Buddhism of the vast majority of people. The aesthetics section runs a risk comparable to using Russian Orthodox icons as an exemplar of Christian aesthetics—students can infer that something not a part of the

lives of the majority of the followers of that religion is representative of it. However, icons do say something valid about Christian expression and the larger Christian worldview, and so the tactic should not be to avoid things like this but to overtly contextualize them for students. Furthermore, to return to the case of Zen, the form of Buddhism that Americans are most likely to see on the shelves of bookstores, to have active in their community, and to adopt themselves is Zen or an adaptation of it. As was the case with yoga, deepening students' understanding of aspects of a religion that they are likely to encounter in some form in their lives is a goal of this approach.

Zen informs the special topics of this unit as well. Spending a little time on Monasticism develops a phenomenon that had a brief mention in Christianity and invites broader thought about the implications of living out religious beliefs. Understanding monasticism is also essential to complicating perception of three of the forms of Buddhism Americans are especially likely to encounter in the news and in their lives. One would be the personal and political aspects of the American embrace of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism, another would be the political and cultural meaning of monks' engagement in protest in Myanmar, and the third would be the personal and religious implications of the fact that Zen is primarily a monastic practice. In Protestant-majority communities, students generally have little or no idea of what nuns and monks are, and so including a special topic on this kind of religious community is important.

The other special topic, Meditation, allows the course to include, and by inclusion, value, a very profound type of nonverbal, experiential learning. This is in part another case of wanting to expand understanding of something students are likely to

encounter; Americans do have some stereotypes about Eastern meditation, and as mentioned above, they are likely to adopt Zen meditation if they do convert to Buddhism or bring aspects of it into their lives. As with all the special topics, there are also connections to be made across the units, such as to Christian practices like walking the labyrinth. More importantly, though, given the central message of Buddhism that one cannot learn the truth simply by hearing about it and that the only path to it is to sit down and shut up, actually trying out meditation is the quintessential example of the need for experiential learning in a religion course.

This unit's materials include clips from the film *Little Buddha*, a colorful and engaging way to make the Four Sights narrative real and at the same time frame it as an archetypal tale. Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, PBS, and of course YouTube have many useful videos that allow the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others to become present in class, and Bill Moyers's interview with Huston Smith on Confucianism is very useful on a number of levels. Students have taken a real interest in the aspects of material culture in this unit, including statues, incense, prayer flags, tea ceremony equipment, I Ching cards, etc. Thus far, my site visits have been limited to the landscape architect's home as described above, as the closest Zen center is too far for a field trip and there is not a large immigrant Buddhist community locally. Class visitors have included a yoga instructor and a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. The latter is an Anglo convert, and not only has she brought to life the specificity of devotion to a Buddhist deity, in her case Tara, and the kinds of prayers, rituals, objects, and behaviors involved with actually being a Buddhist, she has also enabled us to think about an important aspect of religion,

which is the impact of one's chosen religious beliefs on relationship with family. Talking about religious conversion reminds us that complicated factors pertain in the web of the personal, family, and community religious commitments. We have also benefitted from the physicality of a class led by a tai chi instructor, tai chi being, like yoga, another popular American borrowing, in this case from Taoism, in need of contextualization.

### **G. Indigenous and Minority**

Two weeks

*Themes:* Colonialization and the Clash of Cultures

*Special Topics:* Syncretism, Tricksters

In the traditional approach to World Religions, there is an introductory chapter on what have been called native, indigenous, tribal, and primal religions. We have seen in Chapter One that this is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. The traditional exclusion or marginalization of religions outside the Big Five is not entirely due to prejudice and Eurocentrism, though. As an academic field, World Religions originally meant the study of religions that had transcended national boundaries, as opposed to *Landesreligions*, the national religions of specific peoples, and so the term referred to the study of solely those “great religions.” However, the term almost immediately became ambiguous, and today, most people assume that it means “the religions of the world,” and the latter is certainly what students expect and need and what I intend to teach.

The difficulty of course is that one cannot teach all the religions of the world, and so in choosing, one inevitably has the curriculum-as-text problem, that is, the implication that the things chosen are more important, and in juxtaposing minority religions in one

unit, one implies that all minority religions are the same in some way. Furthermore, just making these choices and teaching multiple minority religions require a wide expertise that few people have. At this point and subject to ongoing development and experimentation, I believe the best way to help students learn about at least some minority religions is to overtly problematize this situation with them, to make the encounter of minority religions with overwhelming transnational forces a theme, and to then choose a few very specific phenomena to learn about, rather than trying to make generalizations about tribal people, shamanism, and so on.

Since what minority/indigenous religions do have in common is their minority status vis-à-vis the Big Five and in most cases an ongoing struggle against oppression, conversion, and misrepresentation in the larger culture, this provides some grounds for creating a category, and arguably a more valid one than claiming that most have seasonal cycles, shamans, and nature deities as defining qualities, a largely discredited but persistent notion. We more advanced learners easily forget how little young people may understand about colonialism, and looking at some concrete examples of the encounter with Europeans of peoples in Africa, Australia, and the Americas can powerfully place students in the shoes of the Other and break down some of their taken-for-grantedness about social structures. Students accustomed to thinking of the subjugation of native peoples as being a matter of (antiquated) personal prejudice combined with inevitable historical forces have to shift their thinking when they learn about the deliberate and systematic eradication of indigenous culture by such means as kidnapping native children and placing them in boarding schools in America, Canada, and Australia. An important

move in this study is to place this clash in the present. It is one thing for students to learn, in this class or elsewhere, about the genocidal history of the encounter between Europeans and Native Americans and to find it tragic and reprehensible; it is another to hear testimony on film from people alive today about their abuse in church-run boarding schools, to read about native peoples' current struggles to reclaim artifacts from museums, and to see the results of state-sanctioned sects' persecution of those not put on the "official" list.

Which specific minority religions or phenomena that an instructor does choose to study might depend on what is most relevant for the locality, what is in the news at that time, what the instructor has the most understanding of, and what students have questions about, among many considerations. I feel that it is incumbent on the instructor to consider what is least well represented in the other units when making these decisions. Native American peoples should certainly have a place in a course that values educating future American citizens, and an instructor might select some religious beliefs and rituals of the tribal people of their part of the country, or perhaps choose based on what resources are available or on what aspects of religion he/she most wants to emphasize. Some kind of praxis, such as the Seminole Green Corn Dance or the Hopi kiva practice, and some kind of mythos, such as the Diné creation story, rather than trying to communicate an entire religious system, might be effective, always remembering the specificity that is an overriding value of this unit. Just as the intention is to break down any implication that indigenous religions are all similar, students should not be hearing about Native American practices as a generality.

Also not represented in the rest of the curriculum except for the Christianity and Islam of invaders are the continents of Australia and Africa. Aboriginal Australian art and the Dreamtime are possibilities for spending time getting acquainted with a different indigenous worldview, and again we have the need to be specific about which of the hundreds of people are under discussion. In the case of Africa, considerations such as personal expertise and available resources again figure, but I have chosen to feature the Yoruba people for three reasons. One is that Stephen Prothero (2010) includes it in his consideration of “the eight religions that run the world,” one is particular local resources, and one is the connection to this unit’s special topic of Syncretism. Regardless of the choice, however, the larger American culture has so reduced African culture to a National Geographic special and so erased it as a part of the human story that some significant effort to make an African people real to a group of World Religions students is mandatory.

This unit offers endless possibilities for special topics. Creation Stories, Visits to the Underworld, and Life-cycle Rituals, for instance, are important aspects across religions that could be foregrounded here, especially with attention paid to bringing out these aspects of the major religions and avoiding reinforcing the idea that myths and rituals are the defining qualities of quaint primitive religions—both important ideas in the effort to achieve some kind of parity among the “major” and “minority” religions. Two special topics that I particularly like are Syncretism and Tricksters. Syncretism zooms in closer on a particular aspect of the colonial impact that has already been raised, connects the train of thought back around to Christianity, and also meets the goal of increasing

understanding of phenomena that students are likely to encounter in life and to have misconceptions about. In the crucible of contact between the colonizing religion and the local religion, not only do we have the sad stories of suppression and extermination explored earlier, but we also see the vitality of religion and the human commitment to it when we learn about syncretism. The collision of Roman Catholicism with Yoruba culture created the New World religion Santeria, and this is an opportunity to develop the earlier study of Yoruba religion and to see the subversive ways that minority religions have dealt with the steamroller of the imposition of Christianity. The encounter of some other African religions with Christianity under other conditions created Voudou, and as both Santeria and Voudou have a presence in the United States and are widely caricatured in film and misunderstood as devil-worship, these are important topics. In looking at syncretism, it is also valuable to consider Christianity and to see how part of its life-force and global success has come from its ability to syncretize other traditions into its own mythos.

The other special topic that I have found to be a powerful way to look at a deep cross-cultural theme is Tricksters. This concept exists in a wide variety of folklore and popular culture, and is a very rich image for understanding humanity and its relationship to the transcendent world, and it also allows for some personal reflection by students on the human quandaries that religion addresses. A Fool, a shapeshifter, a psychopomp, a vagabond anti-hero, the Trickster is the more-than-human, less-than-divine intermediary being who carries the news back and forth between the realms, who is always out for the most human, embodied kinds of fun, who wins with words as weapons, who may not

have others' best interests at heart, who is always forgiven because he is full of love, who testifies in the divine realm through his very being what it means to be human in all its messy ugly beauty so that humans are represented before ultimate beings who can't understand our plight, and who testifies in the human realm through his border crossing and boundary breaking what we have the potential to be. Reading about and seeing a wide variety of tricksters engages students in this very personal aspect of religion—the frustrations of the asymmetrical power relationship between the human and the divine, the unfairness of it all, our ambivalence about being good—but also the potential for transcendence. As this concept gains clarity, students can think of many characters to add to a list that includes Bugs Bunny, Captain Jack Sparrow, Maui, Peter Pan, Anansi, the Cat in the Hat, Dr. House, Hermes, Mr. Bean, David Bowie, Loki, Ferris Bueller, Raven, and Charlie Chaplin, and then articulate the value of someone who tells truth to power in the lopsided encounter between the human and the divine.

Materials for this unit include many newspaper articles about specific incidents of clashes between minority religions and the larger culture, such as Native American campaigns to get artifacts and bones back from museums, incidents in which the material culture of African religions has been destroyed because what is not Christian is evil, and public conflicts over practices such as animal sacrifice or the sacred use of peyote. Testimony of First Nations people about the systematic personal and cultural destruction wrought in boarding schools run by Canada's state church is available online in the film *Unrepentant*. Video clips may be the only way to make minority religions a living presence in the classroom, but of course guest speakers would be highly desirable. In my

community, we have a Yoruba professor who is willing to make classroom visits, and he embodies an experience of being African in America which can significantly advance the cosmopolitan awareness of young people. Site visits always depend on practical matters; in my case we are able to visit the Wake Forest Museum of Anthropology and simultaneously experience material culture from a number of minority religions, including the Native peoples of this area, and also problematize the museum environment as an expression of majority ownership of minority narratives.

## **H. Religious Extremism**

Two weeks

*Themes:* Absolutism, Power

*Special Topics:* This whole unit is a special topic

This is one of the more experimental aspects of this curriculum. When there is so little time to spend on any one topic, even in a year-long course, the curriculum-as-text problem discussed above means that the few things one does say are *de facto* understood to be the most important things about that topic. Therefore, for instance, any work on Islamist political movements, ISIS, the Taliban, repression of girls in Pakistan, etc., gains undue weight for students who barely know the Five Pillars of Islam. On the other hand, spending a year on the religions of the world and pretending that religion is always a force for good is dishonest and far from consonant with the goals of the course. As an alternative, this unit conceptualizes religious extremism itself as force, rather than situating, for instance, Islamist extremism as something unique to and inherent in Islam. When students examine several kinds of religious extremism and interrogate them for

common principles and goals, and ask the material and each other if it is valid to find them similar and to ask how religions enable their rise, they are on their way to much more nuanced view of the relationship between religion and terrible actions and policies.

As American discourse about terrorism becomes increasingly alarmist and pervasive, confounding stereotypes about who is the oppressor, who is the terrorist, who is doing what to whom, is both necessary and startling. This quality of surprise generated by learning these stories and seeing them juxtaposed is an effective catalyst for curiosity and intellectual engagement, as the need to make sense of that juxtaposition draws students into an analysis. Unfortunately, there are many examples of religious extremism to draw from. An instructor might want to make some choices based on newsworthiness, local concerns, variety of groups, and specificity of anecdotes. In order to be able to talk about the motivations, values, and psychology that may be driving extremism, students need specific events, not overviews—stories that happened, not descriptions of groups. Not including different forms of Islamism would be unwise, as students would certainly suspect that the instructor was being dishonest out of misguided political correctness; of course, a concern for representing Islam well in the course is served by including Islamism here in the context of a human phenomenon of religious justification for the exercise of power and violence and not separately in the Islam section as representative. Examples might be drawn from Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, whose vicious purity patrols might be unexpected to students; Mormon polygamous extremism; any number of Christian Identity militia groups; and one of several cults, such as Scientology. A well-chosen assortment of data can provide students with a petri dish for pinpointing the

seductive aspects of religious certainty, the hunger for an absolute answer that perhaps is at the base of the attraction to extremist organizations and fuels much of the violence and abuse. Arriving at this insight may equip students with a more conscious position on the necessity for cultivating a comfort with uncertainty and relativism, which is a more cosmopolitan quality that will help them be positive forces in a diverse America and world.

For such a current-events–oriented topic, this unit’s materials are largely news articles drawn from a wide variety of sources, which has the additional teaching possibility of overtly inviting a consideration of sources and bias and how we evaluate what we are told. Charles Kimball’s books *When Religion Becomes Evil* (2002) and *When Religion Becomes Lethal* (2011) provide excellent scholarly insight, but when presented with a variety of cases, students often are remarkably able to discern the all-too-human impulses that drive nominally religious movements.

## **I. Universalizing Religious Movements**

Two weeks

*Themes:* Religion in Science and Nature

*Special Topics:* Interfaith Initiatives

This is a topic of my own devising, and I find it a useful way to think about traditions that are not normally grouped together, or taught at all, and to see them as having a key quality in common that tells us something we haven’t yet seen about what attracts people to religions. As discussed above, a taxonomy of religions is somewhat arbitrary even in the case of the major traditions, and trying out new ways of organizing

religions can make qualities visible that had previously been hidden by prior assumptions. In teaching and in scholarship in general, taxonomy is always a problem; it is both futile and untrue to present everything in the world as individual cases. We try to understand things by sorting them into groups based on similarities, yet the choice of categories is never neutral and, as we know, often reflects historically bound beliefs, unexamined assumptions, and political intentions. Once reified, categories determine what we are able to think and how we feel about the things in a category. So, taking an opportunity to twist the kaleidoscope and see new patterns is a productive tactic in trying to craft an effective experience with the religions of the world and the phenomenon of religion in general.

At this point in the course, students have had many different opportunities to analyze the religious impulse, what needs it meets, and how it can form communities that are both beneficial and destructive, that can interact well or poorly with the rest of the world, and that include and exclude. As a way of thinking more about these functions of religion, this unit addresses religions and religious claims that see themselves as extremely inclusive, not because, like Christianity and Islam, they hope to encompass the whole world by conversion, but because they see themselves as based in a more observable reality and/or not requiring the kinds of belief we usually see. Rather than revealed or esoteric, these universalizing religions see themselves as natural or scientific.

Juxtaposed in this unit are Unitarian Universalism, nature-based religions such as Wicca and Druidism, and science-based religious claims such as those of nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the Harvard psychedelic experiments. Unitarianism has roots in

Christianity but does not make the claims for salvation in Christ that define Christianity, and many members are thoroughgoing humanists. It is universal in that it involves no belief beyond at most an intuition that there exists some kind of transcendent aspect to reality, and so sees itself as a natural religion, imposing no dogmas onto the basic human sense that we and the universe may be more than we appear. Wicca and Druidism see themselves as part of the natural world, tangibly real rather than created by humanity, universally accessible to all. As modern revivals and reinterpretations of ancient traditions, they seem to me to be better placed here than in the unit on indigenous religions, and the idea of looking to nature for revelation and connection and seeing it as sacred in and of itself is distinctive and important. Furthermore, Wicca needs demystifying in the context of educating for citizenship, as it is widespread in America and not well understood. Lastly, although they may seem an odd pairing, the Spiritualist movement and the Harvard psychedelic experiments have the common basis of the search for the scientific phenomena behind the human religious impulse. Most active in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth, Spiritualism saw itself as part of the rise of science, and while its trappings of séances and spirit photography seem comical now, it strove to measure and document the reality of the unseen world. Spiritualists thought they had uncovered the actual natural science underlying human-made religious constructs, the universal truth apart from the cultural expression. Likewise, the designers of the midcentury Harvard psychedelic experiments—Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil—attempted to induce and document in controlled circumstances the human spiritual experience, as a

both physiological and spiritual phenomenon separate from the institutional religions that they suspected were only the traditional context for something that was an innate universal quality or ability. A related phenomenon that I have included in this study when it was timely is near-death experiences, which also involve an evidence-based attempt to assert the reality of a transcendent world. Movies and books, one by a local neurosurgeon, made this a topic of particular interest in recent years.

I have located within this unit the special topic of Interfaith Initiatives, as being particularly apt in a consideration of efforts to find underlying similarities and common ground among religious views. In light of the concern I expressed in earlier chapters about undercutting a simplistic rush to position all religions as essentially the same thing in different cultural dress, I think it is important to wait until the students are more sophisticated thinkers about religions before looking at this. News and analytical articles about how and why interfaith groups come together are plentiful, but the primary portion of this inquiry should be guest speakers from at least one of the interfaith initiatives/fellowships that might be operating in any area. This is such a human, embodied, constantly negotiated, and felt-through enterprise that centering a study of it in live dialogue is the most genuine and productive way to handle it. As the course draws to a close, it is timely for students to sharpen their thinking about what it means for religions to cross or ignore or eliminate boundaries.

Materials abound online and in books about all of these topics, including Don Lattin's *The Harvard Psychedelic Club* (2011). There is the caveat that paganism can be a fraught topic in certain communities, and so an instructor needs to research the most

reliable and substantive representations of Wicca and Druidism. Site visits seem unlikely in this unit, due to time constraints as well as availability, but all efforts should be made to secure a speaker who is involved in interfaith work.

## **J. Non-Religious Worldviews/Lifestances**

Two weeks

*Themes:* Reason, Empiricism

*Special Topics:* Ethics

In my opinion, it is incumbent on a religion survey course to include an exploration of other organized and individual ways that people respond to the needs and questions that we have seen religion addressing. This adds dimension to the many cross-religious considerations of those needs and questions that have occurred with increasing depth throughout the course, and it is also fair and necessary in an America that tends to reflexively valorize religion as the source of values. Students should not emerge from a course purporting to help prepare them for participation in a diverse nation and world still able to assume that non-religious people are ill-intentioned, suspect, immoral, or disqualified from holding public office. Furthermore, the common terminology is both confusing and loaded with negative connotations, so students do indeed need to be familiarized with the landscape of non-religious lifestances. Lastly, in a survey of the religions of the world aimed at cultivating a comradely understanding of others, how could we not include the third-largest “religious” position in the world?

In approaching this topic, students need to understand the differences between agnosticism, atheism, and humanism, and to understand what these stances mean, how

they might be significant in someone's personal life, and why the political function of non-religious lifestance organizations is important. The American Atheist and the American Humanist associations and the Freedom from Religion Foundation are among the many organizations with websites replete with information—FAQs, videos, text, magazines, and more. In learning about what people who identify as atheists, agnostics, and humanists do and do not believe, the class also encounters issues that return them to Church/State topics. There are many past and present news events revolving around the First Amendment and public displays of religion in which people holding non-religious lifestances are cast as troublemakers. When a teacher leads a class in prayer, when a public veterans' park displays a Christian flag, when a large cross is erected in a national park, it is usually a non-religious person who raises objections and initiates lawsuits. This allows the controversy to be cast in terms of an atheist's being offended by religion rather than an unconstitutional instance of establishment. In teasing out the difference between being hostile to religion per se and objecting to state-sanctioned religion in public spaces, students can conclude their study of the religions of the world by returning to the opening topic of the First Amendment with an informed and strengthened capacity to be citizens of a nation in which everyone shares the right to the religious exercise of their choice free from government coercion.

The special topic for this unit looks at the common criticism of atheism as morally empty and the concurrent discourse of religion as the source of morality. Students will have noted on the associations' websites that this is a particularly heated topic for atheists and humanists, who tend to bitterly resent religious people's using morality as a club

against them, and who are quick to note the violence and abuse wrought in the name of religion throughout history. The so-called New Atheists have been very outspoken about the wrongs of the heavy hand of institutional religion and have defended a non-religious worldview as the only rational human stance. Readings from Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and others can be brought into this conversation, and there are many video clips of them explaining and debating their points with brio. One source that young people may find less confrontational and that keeps the focus on the question of ethics is Greg Epstein's *Good Without God* (2010), which can be a useful part of an exploration of where ethics can come from. In a place and time where the Chief Justice of a state Supreme Court can install a stone monument carved with the Ten Commandments in the judicial building and have that hailed as a return to morality, it is important that students have had enough of an informed conversation about ethics to question the assertions that the fear of God is the only thing preventing American citizens from committing murder or that the state should have an interest in citizens' Sabbath observances or envy of their neighbors.

The materials for this unit feature the above-mentioned websites of atheist and humanist associations, and the Epstein book. I have also successfully initiated the unit by destabilizing religion by screening the film *Kumare*, about a young man who sees how far he can take being a fake guru and what the consequences are of doing so. The ensuing discussion about the truth of a religion's being situated in the believer and being separate from the legitimacy of the institution opens the door for pursuing the non-religious critique of religion as solely a human construct. Since most young people have not had

the opportunity to undertake a formal study of ethics, it is helpful to provide an outline of some of the key considerations to add to the points gleaned from the non-religious lifestances and from their own consideration of the topic.

### **III. Conclusion**

This overview has been meant to make apparent the rationale for these specific ten units, out of all the many potential objects of study and possible taxonomies of them; for the themes chosen to characterize religions in this effort to both do justice to religious traditions and construct a suitable introduction for beginners; and for the special topics that offer opportunities to think about larger religious concerns. I hope it is clear that as a group of learners—including the instructor—moves through the course, they are continually building new connections to previous sections and are weaving a complex tapestry of ideas and information. This tapestry and the process of creating it demonstrate to students experientially that religions overflow efforts to describe and contain them within one unit of study and that they themselves are the builders of connections and authors of higher-order knowledge.

For further insight into how materials and students might be brought together to generate and analyze knowledge about themes and topics, I have provided an appendix with a more detailed look at the Judaism unit. Assignments and activities are included to provide a sense of specifically what could be done to bring into being the goals and commitments I have been arguing for throughout. As mentioned above, I do not mean for this to be prescriptive and I do not wish to create a textbook or packaged curriculum; however, practical examples are very illuminating after theoretical exposition.

The questions raised in the process of researching the traditional World Religions paradigm that I found so unsatisfactory a decade ago, of searching for scholarly support in taking a new direction, and of developing a more civics-forward, cosmopolitan, empathy-driven, and critical approach, are no less compelling than the ones that led me to undertake this enterprise in the first place. In my concluding chapter, I will offer a few thoughts about some of these new questions pertaining to how we can teach about religion in college and high school, and to how we talk, think, and feel about religion.

CHAPTER V  
LOOKING AHEAD AND DWELLING IN POSSIBILITY

At this point, I hope that I have persuaded the reader that there is an unfortunate wasted opportunity to situate young people as empathetic, engaged, and informed members of a nation and planet of neighbors with diverse religious practices, worldviews, and lifespans. The standard World Religions paradigm has reinscribed Western privilege and a foreignizing, arm's-length stance towards Others, and this has been perpetuated by simple inertia and a lack of interest among Religious Studies scholars in an introductory course for non-majors. Having answered my questions about how this odd fossil has been able to carry on nineteenth-century discourses long abandoned by the rest of the discipline, and about whether there is any critique of or impetus to change it expressed in the academic literature, I then inquired into theoretical foundations for a more cosmopolitan, caring, and critical approach that would center students in building knowledge and welcoming multiplicity and uncertainty. Now that the answers to all these questions have informed my transformed World Religions curriculum outlined in the previous chapter, from this new standpoint, new questions come into view.

In this concluding chapter, I will explore some questions raised by my work, concerns about the prospects for implementing this curriculum in colleges and universities and in high schools. Some issues are specific to post-secondary education and some to high school, and some are more universal, and this exploration culminates in

a consideration of teacher education. Lastly, throughout this enterprise, we have seen concerns, both stated and implied, that unique issues are in play when religion is an academic subject and that talking about it must be done differently in some ways than, for instance, literature. Religion is a complicated topic, fraught both personally and politically, and so I will conclude with some thoughts about how we characterize religion in the classroom.

### **I. Implementation in Colleges and Universities**

Implementing in colleges and universities a curriculum such as I have described in Chapter Four should be possible, considering what we learned in Chapter Two. We met representatives of a community of instructors, in large public universities and in small private colleges, who have identified a number of ways in which they are dissatisfied with the traditional World Religions paradigm. They wrote about their sense of the misrepresentations of religious traditions, of the marginalizations and exclusions of women and minority groups, of the stultifying effect on students, of the reinforcement of a colonializing worldview, and of student alienation from the topic. We saw them respond by problematizing the authority and constructs of the books they were using, by challenging students' grasp for one simple answer, by using site visits and material culture to make the Other more present, and by bringing student positionality into the arena of study. Some people who teach World Religions already feel a need for a different approach and may well welcome a new curriculum that aligns with their concerns.

Furthermore, college and university instructors usually have the personal freedom to implement courses of their own design or choosing, as opposed to having to enact a mandated and tested curriculum as teachers do in public K–12 education. Individual instructors can make the change to their version of my curriculum without a cumbersome institutional approval process, and without having to review and order textbooks. On the other hand, the fact that World Religions is not a discipline, that no one “owns” it and few write or speak about it, which we saw as an explanation of how it has gotten so out of sync with the rest of Religious Studies, also means that there is no robust medium for promulgating change. There is no one to exclaim over having a new option, nor specialist academic society to promote its use. So, while there is unfortunately no systemic means of breaking the inertia that has kept the traditional paradigm in use, it is an advantage that the individual teachers who want to adopt this curriculum can do so if they choose. While a global approach does sound like it would have been an appealing one-time solution, systems are very resistant to change even if that were an option; changing one instructor at a time, instructors who are dissatisfied and want a new model, is the most realistic and ultimately effective means for a new curricular approach to World Religions to gain a place in colleges and universities.

In considering the needs of college students, I believe it is clear at this point that no instructor should imagine that college students are intellectuals and scholars above this kind of citizenship- and empathy-driven approach. Treating a course for non-majors as if it were introductory material for future specialists simply frustrates and alienates students who thought they were going to gain some understanding about the religions of the

world, leaving them if anything even more likely to believe that other people's religions are incomprehensible. Assuming that college students in an introductory survey have both a base knowledge about religions and the emotional sophistication to not need raw data situated for them as part of their own and humanity's experiences is willful dogmatism. If personal perception is inadequate to establish the truth of this, survey information abounds about the lack of religious knowledge and understanding among Americans of all ages, ironically paralleled by a strong religious commitment. In an extensive study of teenagers, UNC-CH researcher Christian Smith found that while substantial majorities of teens believed in God and miracles, prayed, and attended worship services, they were unable to articulate anything coherent about their religion. Characterizing the teens' knowledge as "meager, nebulous and often fallacious," the researchers remarked that "Many were so detached from the traditions of their faith . . . that they're virtually following a different creed in which an undemanding God exists mostly to solve problems and make people feel good" (Associated Press, 2005).

This is the case with Americans of all ages; not only do they know very little information about religion (the Pew Research Center [2010] found that the average respondent could answer only half of their questions correctly in their survey of religious knowledge), but Americans in general are prone to concocting their own creed based on free-floating impressions about religion. This phenomenon is widely known in Religious Studies as Sheilism, after an anecdote in Robert Bellah and Richard Madsen's 1996 book *Habits of the Heart*. Sheilism is a convenient way to talk and think about the propensity of Americans to hold nebulous and unexamined religious beliefs, picked up

from the culture and idiosyncratic to each person. So, in deciding what college students know and need, the standpoint of the students in the room—their actual knowledge, feelings, and beliefs—needs to drive decisions about how to involve them in a study of the religions of the world, not the assertion that they *should* be more mature and more knowledgeable, nor the assertion that it is the business of college simply to impart information that students can do with as they will.

One area of college and university life in which we see institutional acknowledgment of the need to help young people into the world of intellectual inquiry, through the potential emotional turmoil of encountering discomfiting and challenging information, and into the procedures and values of group exploration and discussion, is the increasingly widespread freshman seminar, or freshman academy, among other terms. Many colleges and universities now require first-year students to participate in a semester- or year-long study, usually of a particularly engaging topic, in order to establish a model for group academic inquiry. A modified version of my World Religions curriculum would be useful for this kind of course, since it would be personally meaningful to young people on the threshold of higher education and it includes a strong component of constantly reinforcing the commitment and the skill to move back and forth between personal stances and opinions, and academic understandings and group encounters. As institutional concerns about students' emotional health increase and discourse about trigger warnings permeates the world of colleges and universities, an instructor who is concerned about guiding students through an experience of encountering complex and personal human concerns could adapt this curriculum for a

freshman seminar that would very explicitly work the boundaries between encountering abstract knowledge and emotionally processing difficult knowing.

## **II. Implementation in Secondary Schools**

Turning to the prospect of implementation of my World Religions curriculum in high schools, other interesting questions arise. Only about a third of Americans go to college, and my concerns about empathetic and informed citizenship point to a priority for World Religions instruction being as widespread as possible. We saw above that there exists a public conversation about the problems in our culture that can be traced to religious illiteracy, as exemplified in the works of Stephen Prothero and Linda Wertheimer that we saw at the end of Chapter Two. Both of these authors, one a professor of religion and the other a journalist, prescribe a course in World Religions in the public K–12 setting as an antidote to misinformation and prejudice, and the oppressive and misguided public policies and personal behaviors stemming from them. Diane Moore's work, mentioned above in Chapter Three's consideration of education for democracy, is particularly focused on the need for high school students to be religiously literate and to practice the critical thinking skills to handle this information, in order to be good American citizens. She believes

that the purpose of education in our multicultural/multireligious democracy is to foster the skills, values, interest, and confidence in students to be able to participate as active moral agents in the conscious social reproduction of society in its most inclusive form. (Moore, 2007, p. 24)

The assertion that learning about a variety of religions is important for young people getting ready to take on adult roles in a pluralistic democracy is not so controversial, but how exactly that is to be done when religion is so contentious is more complex. Anecdotes about teachers who have become caught up in controversies even though they are explicitly not trying to indoctrinate students are the large part of the evidence Wertheimer offers to make her case for the urgent need for teaching World Religions. In his book *God on Trial* (2007), Peter Irons recounts tremendous upheavals over conflicting perceptions of the role of the school in the religious life of the students, sparked by football-game prayers, the religious content in the Pledge of Allegiance, and the place of “intelligent design” in the curriculum. In all of these cases, people’s emotions and assumptions (often inflamed and manipulated by national legal-activist groups) quickly obscured the facts of the matter and made any public conversation over what had actually happened and whether it was educationally acceptable impossible.

Tailoring a World Religions course to the particular school or locale will not ensure that the course will not inadvertently strike a nerve. Even within a single community, a teacher will encounter widely varying ideas about what is reasonable. One family forbids participation in Halloween or reading Harry Potter, while another believes attending the services of another faith will enlighten and not threaten or corrupt them. Some with far-right religious views seek out as much education as possible as a means to proselytize throughout the culture, while one family in El Paso is headed to the Texas Supreme Court because they were not teaching their homeschooled children anything due to the imminence of the Rapture (Dallas Morning News, 2015). Despite the frequency of

cultural battles over such things as transgender rights, it is still easy to misunderstand how vastly differing American beliefs are concerning what is normal, reasonable, moral, safe, etc. However, this lack of consensus and the magnitude of these kinds of disagreements are not reasons to avoid bringing information on the religion of the world into high schools, but in fact reasons to do so. Nothing can guarantee that a teacher who brings a Wiccan speaker into the classroom will not receive difficult emails or be targeted by a social media campaign. Education should not be held hostage by the fearful and the uninformed, though, and a teacher has to make decisions based on all the curricular goals in question, be confident that the lessons meet First Amendment standards, take steps ahead of time to be sure administrators, parents, and students are on board with the goals for the course (ambushing people with things certain to upset them while claiming that one is in the right is counterproductive), and proceed with the most effective course possible.

### **III. Teacher Training**

Focusing on the teacher as the crux of the successful implementation of a World Religions course brings us to the final aspect of this consideration of the feasibility of the curriculum I have proposed: teachers and teacher training. In Chapter One, I made the point that one reason the standard paradigm has persisted is the reliance of instructors on textbooks. Unlike most other introductory courses, World Religions is so wide-ranging that no one in the discipline to which it belongs has expertise in everything that potentially could be included. Whether considering high school or college, there is no doubt that teacher training is a crucial element. We have seen this point emerging

throughout the previous chapters; for instance, the Lester and Roberts study of Modesto's course expressed reservations over the decline in teacher preparation from the intensive efforts surrounding the course's launch to some reading and videos five years later. We also saw Michael Evans's findings in his study of Harvard Divinity School's Program for Religion and Secondary Education that training teachers about the legal aspects of teaching about religion was the most important aspect of preparation, because teachers who felt empowered to make and defend good decisions could proceed with confidence. Melissa Rogers (2011) asserts that any program educating future religion teachers must prioritize an understanding of the First Amendment in order to forestall potential problems in a public school context and that such an understanding "can serve as a moral compass as unexpected situations arise" (Rogers, 2011, p. 42). (She also insists that students must be taught the tenets of religious liberty, not for quite the same reason that Lester and Roberts see this as key, which is positioning students to be accepting of the rest of the course; she simply believes they must be directly taught about the First Amendment as an American value, because we see today, for instance, legislators propounding restricting Islam on the basis that it isn't a religion and so is not protected [p. 42].)

These scholars are suggesting that some kinds of knowledge about *how* to teach about religion are at least as important as actual knowledge about religions. I would concur, out of my own experience, that a commitment and a willingness to learn and adapt constantly as one designs and implements a World Religions course is more important than beginning from a position of wide-ranging knowledge, especially given

my emphasis on responding to current events and using local resources. If no one teacher can ever master all the potential subject matter, then the training of religion teachers indeed needs to focus on the things that can help teachers be prepared to handle the particular qualities of this kind of survey course. In Chapter Two, we took a look at Joanne Punzo Waghorne's course for teachers about teaching World Religions, and we saw that she equips them not by studying religions but by setting them on the path of continual identification of problems in the teaching of religion and continual work towards solutions. Waghorne's approach is very much consonant with developing the kind of attitude and skills that would enable a teacher to bring to life the curriculum I have set forth.

Other than her course at Syracuse, there do not seem to be many opportunities for teachers to learn specifically how to teach about World Religions. The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion at Wabash College in Indiana has offered among their many workshops a Colloquy on Teaching about World Religions, in the Augusts of 1997, 1998, and 1999 (Wabash Center, n.d.). While their stated goals included reflecting on what is distinctive about teaching World Religions and evaluating the different models and methods, this was couched specifically in the context of doing so in schools of theology, not in secular schools. Diane Moore, of Harvard's Program in Religion and Secondary Education and whom we saw in Chapter Three as an advocate of Amy Gutmann's views on education and democracy, devotes a chapter of her book *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy* (2007) to teacher education. In "this historical moment when sectarian religious ideologies have gained political prominence in a cultural climate

defined by widespread religious illiteracy,” she says there “is an urgent need for informed, skilled and dedicated educators who can help students negotiate this complex terrain” (p. 104). Moore directs a certification program for teachers of religion, which includes among its requirements a course on Methods in Religious Studies and Education, and a course on Religion, Democracy, and Education (Harvard Divinity School, n.d.). This program does not specifically address World Religions, but is aimed at equipping teachers to teach about religion in the public schools, especially as part of other subjects such as history, and it is offered by the Divinity School, not the Religion department of the college. Moore is also affiliated with Harvard Divinity School’s Center for the Study of World Religions, which sponsors events and publications, but is concerned with giving Christian Divinity students experience of the study of the religions of the world in general, not with how we think about World Religions as a course of study.

So, there is much scope for development in training teachers to teach World Religions. We saw academic interest in Chapter Two in making some changes about how an instructor approaches the World Religions survey, and we saw popular interest in adding such a survey to high schools, in the work of Prothero, Wertheimer, and others. There *is* professional support for educating teachers to teach about religion; for instance, the American Academy of Religion published, under the leadership of Diane Moore, a 36-page *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion* (2003). What there is not, though, is sufficient momentum to bridge the gulf between various separate interests and a concerted, multi-disciplinary initiative. Rogers concludes her article with a call for more

high-profile leadership in championing the cause of teaching about religion in the public schools (Rogers, 2011, p. 44), and clearly some such catalyst is needed for Education and Religious Studies departments to collaborate on interdisciplinary institutes for educating a wide variety of people whose teaching careers and whose religious scholarship careers could include teaching about religion.

Were I designing such an institute, it would certainly include many of the features of Waghorne's course and Moore's certification program. Waghorne uses the Tomoko Masuzawa book that we saw so much of in Chapter One, Stephen Prothero's *God is Not One*, and Russell McCutcheon's *The Discipline of Religion*, among other resources, to lead her teacher-students in a critique of Religious Studies and of World Religions, with a final assignment to develop their own syllabi. Moore's program is very concerned with teachers' working for the development of their students' agency as human beings and as democratic citizens. In order for teachers to be able to enact their version of the curriculum I have proposed, they would indeed need a sharp sense of the pitfalls of how we have talked about religion and a well-developed commitment to situating a study of the world's religions in students' lives and in America's landscape of religious freedom. I would also, though, want teachers to have a substantial experience of critical pedagogy—to be alert to the dangers of thinking of any part of the humanities as abstract and free of historical grounds, to frame all of their curriculum decisions and classroom experiences in an awareness of the social and political forces that create both the religions under examination and the individual classroom environment itself. A heightened sense of those social and political forces, forces that are both deliberately disguised and that we simply

find it easy to exclude from our personal constructs of how the world works, is necessary for a World Religions teacher who wants to craft a just, honest, and liberatory classroom. To fairly and effectively put together experiences with information for the students to encounter and grapple with, and to respond with integrity and love in the thousand improvised moments of a course, a teacher needs to undergo *conscientização*.

As well as a foundation in critical pedagogy, I think a teacher needs familiarity with the concepts of postmodern pedagogy that I discussed at the end of Chapter Three. Hierarchical models of education are so entrenched in our experiences of schooling and in other aspects of daily life, and thinking differently about how students could be positioned relative to the instructor and to the objects of study and to themselves requires constant monitoring of our default speech and actions. Furthermore, the comfort with the open-endedness and chaos that characterizes a postmodern view of life does not sit easily within our human nature, which often longs for security and closure, nor within the context of classroom education, which focuses on right-and-wrong binaries and discrete fifteen-week sections of truth. The theoretical foundations for my curriculum are not meant to just underlie it; an instructor needs to be aware of and determined to bring to life its disruptive and liberatory goals.

This is why what I have presented is a curriculum and not a textbook, and why each aspect has had to be argued for and explained. The remedy for an essentializing and dissociating parade of Others is not a different textbook that uses more inclusive language or comes with a DVD. What I have presented is a shift in attitude and goals as well as in structure, and teachers cannot be manipulated into approaching their subject

and their students in the ways I have been arguing for by implicit means such as the wording in a textbook. They must be in personal command of why and how they want to teach differently and eager to lead a thematic and integrated study of the religions of the world, one that is constantly responsive to current events, the community, and the students. Far from being teacher-proof, my curriculum depends on the teacher's willingness to constantly learn and adapt, to embrace Gert Biesta's pedagogy of the event. When education is about the event, about a live encounter when people come into presence, teachers need to know more than *how* to do things. Biesta insists they need *phronesis*, practical wisdom, "in order to judge what needs to be done" (2013, p. 8). This unscriptable approach to teaching involves that security of knowing the theoretical grounds for choosing to do this and the acceptance of postmodern chaos, in order to leave behind the safety of orderly, testable facts about Others and launch a risky encounter with the no-longer-imaginary stranger and with each other. Biesta makes it plain that this is necessary for the sake of ourselves, of education, and of democracy:

To engage with the openness and unpredictability of education, to be oriented toward an event that may or may not happen, to take communication seriously, to acknowledge that the power of the teacher is structurally limited, to see that emancipation and democracy cannot be produced in a machine-like manner, and to acknowledge that education cannot be reduced to the logic of *poiesis* but always also needs the logic of *phronesis*, means to take this risk seriously, and to do so not because the risk is deemed to be inevitable . . . but because without the risk, education itself disappears and social reproduction, insertion into existing order of being, doing, and thinking, takes over. (2013, p. 140)

#### **IV. Representing Religion**

I will conclude with some thoughts about one more area in which questions arise concerning what I have discussed and asserted throughout this work. Related to the issues of implementation discussed above but arcing over my entire exploration of World Religions and its pedagogy, questions about religion itself—how we represent it to students and why—demand examination. How critical should instructors be? What kind of treatment does religion deserve? What kind of historical force are we going to depict it as being? What are the dangers of being too protective of or congratulatory towards religion? Conversely, can we be too harsh and condemnatory? Is Russell McCutcheon correct in his concerns that we saw in Chapter One that instructors who are interested enough in religion to teach about it are too apt to treat religion with devoted respect, as a special force transcending history or critique and uniquely capable of evoking the best in people?

As we have seen repeatedly throughout, religion impinges on every aspect of human culture and history, and therefore is as complex as humanity itself. It is not always a force for good, and an instructor who believes that it is and who undertakes a World Religions course from an apologist position is not helping students or religions in any way. A sunny panorama of religions all imbuing their various followers with morality and kindness no more prepares students for national and world citizenship than does the static and foreignizing pageant of the standard paradigm. Instructors must be honest about religion in all its dimensions in every unit of the course, and critique institutions and their constituents fairly. Furthermore, the presence of the Religious Extremism unit

does not imply that all negative aspects of religions are to be confined to that context and therefore the other units should be unrelentingly positive. There is a vast middle ground between religions in their most peaceful manifestations and toxic, deadly extremism, an ordinary middle in which ordinary people are hurt, human rights are denied, voices are silenced, and societies are distorted. I think I have been plain in Chapter Four that I believe that a calm, critical approach that lays out a wide variety of evidence for honest and fair examination and discussion is the best way to launch young people on their journey of developing a realistic and respectful understanding of their fellow humans and the religious commitments that influence individuals and cultures.

On the other hand, the instructor does have to choose that wide variety of evidence, and as we explored earlier in this chapter, the teacher's attitude shapes the course moment by moment. As choices are made for the limited time available, choices that create the metamessage of the course, I think that there is a greater danger of undermining the purposes of this course by emphasizing religion as a negative force in history and current events than by spending the most course time on neutral and positive aspects. Without devolving to sentimentality and certainly without being dishonest, an instructor of a course intended to situate young Americans as co-owners of religious freedom with other Americans of whom they know little or nothing needs to keep in the foreground the daily lives of followers of various religions, as outlined in Chapter Four. This is an introductory course, and an instructor must always work to keep that beginner's perspective and consider what levels of complexity are better left for more advanced seminars. In particular, this is an introductory course aimed at students in an

America of such deep ignorance about religion, an ignorance that can lead to terrible injustices. In a nation and at a time when a Berkeley student on his way home from a dinner with the Secretary-General of the United Nations could be removed from a plane, detained, searched, and interrogated because another passenger overheard him speaking Arabic (Wang, 2016) and when a student can tell a teacher that the Bible is superior to the Qur'an because the Qur'an wasn't written in English, my course goals are indeed to engender in students positive feelings about the panoply of religions their neighbors practice, to send them out into the world having had a rich experience of a number of religions, in possession of actual information, and emotionally inclined to be accepting rather than suspicious that someone else's religion makes that person dangerous or not American.

Nel Noddings is concerned about the ability of cosmopolitanism's thin rhetoric to combat the "emotional wallop" of the prevailing, unexamined jingoism, and she thinks this kind of excessive nationalism that has driven the marginalization of non-Christians can be combatted with thick knowledge and experience (2013, p. 134). This is the claim that I too am making, that students who have encountered ideas, information, and others in as dense and real an experience as can be devised for the classroom have some means of seeing and evaluating the triumphal Christian American exceptionalism that permeates the zeitgeist. Noddings says

In my opinion, pluralistic dialogue about religions and spiritualities in the classroom, as in the world at large, requires direct give-and-take participation with all types of religious otherness. It insists that we allow the 'other' to get under our skins, to engage with us, to disturb us, and even, if the circumstances

warrant, to *change* us. Simple tolerance, respect, and celebration of difference must always give way to the active seeking of understanding and a willingness to consider transforming or modifying our previous religious views. (2005, pp. 101–102)

In *The Dignity of Difference* (2011), Jonathan Sacks, formerly Chief Rabbi of the Orthodox synagogues of the United Kingdom, sees humanity today as driven by two paradoxical responses to the insecurity broadcast and instilled by modernity, market forces, politics, etc. On the one hand, there is a resurgent tribalism, fracturing people into peoples, all ready to fight for supremacy in one way or another. He equally criticizes, though, a rising universalism that, in a vision of humanity he traces back to Plato, asserts that only universal traits are real and differences are illusions to be overcome and eliminated. Universalism, he says, is at least as dangerous as tribalism, as it leads to the belief “that there is only one truth about the essentials of the human condition, and it holds true for all people at all times. . . . If what I believe is the truth then your belief, which differs from mine, must be an error from which you must be converted, cured, or saved” (p. 50). Sacks asserts that in the global era, cultural diversity is as necessary as biodiversity, “because no one civilization encompasses all the spiritual, ethical, and artistic expressions of mankind” (p. 62).

The way that Sacks sees possibility for living in a world of difference should come as no surprise at this point: it is by means of substantive conversations, live encounters in which the goal is not to win but to understand and to make space for each other. These conversations are also how my World Religions course tries to bring people into presence with each other and with ideas, to engender empathy and break down

foreignness. The way that Sacks sees the religions of the world as part of this conversation among differences should also seem familiar: “The power of the great world religions is that they are not mere philosophical systems, abstract truths strung together in strictly logical configurations. They are embodied truths, made vividly real in lives, homes, congregations, rituals, narratives, songs and prayers . . .” (p. 158). Although the position of faith that Sacks is speaking from is not part of the argument of a World Religions course, his point is that what is important about religions as forces in the world is their embodied reality, not their logical systems. Sacks insists on people’s being present in this lived particularity, not the blurring view of “tolerance” or the stance of “common ground,” as the only way that we can all understand and live with one another. “This is not the cosmopolitanism of those who belong nowhere,” he says, “but the deep human understanding that passes between people who, knowing how important their attachments are to them, understand how deeply someone else’s different attachments matter to them also” (p. 201–202).

So, in studying the religions of the world in the context of becoming a more informed, empathetic, and compassionate fellow member of global humanity, we are trying to come into presence with others in our diverse, lived, particular differences. Whatever one’s own religious convictions, this knowledge and this conversation has the potential to open up places for human connection, empathy, and peace, not because of unique qualities of religion to bring out the ethical best in people, nor because people need their divisive and opposing religious beliefs debunked in order to come together. We are not sitting with one another, and with as much of the world as we can bring into a

World Religions class, in order to valorize or to critique religion. Religion simply exists—it is a significant piece of the diversity of humanity, and our goal is to make that diversity as real as possible to young people steeped in us/them rhetoric, and to experience it in an abundance of particularities, an abundance of human faces and voices.

### **V. Dwelling in Possibility**

A classroom is a place of hermeneutics—materials of every kind are interpreted. Is Hamlet bedeviled by grief, scruples, desperation, or naïveté? Was Woodrow Wilson a great humanitarian struggling against his era? What is implied by the Tanakh's teaching that everything is mist? Was the Cultural Revolution inevitable? How does Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* undermine our ability to use language? Does seeing particles as only momentary manifestations of fields make quantum theory more or less cohesive? Students examine texts, lives, images, events, artworks, nature, and scientific hypotheses, constructing their own interpretations, perhaps refining those interpretations in conversation with classmates, sometimes subordinating their interpretations in favor of the authorized interpretation that must be written on an exam, sometimes enlightened by the wisdom of others, sometimes crushed under the weight of the hermeneutics of the past, and sometimes rebelling against that burden.

This liminal space of hermeneutics is where people individually and humanity itself become something more. The space of hermeneutics is an open zone, neither here nor there, and it is open zones that make action and transformation possible. Liberated from their quotidian activities, people enter this zone and encounter texts in the broadest sense, texts that are also liberated from their concrete, objective realities. In this

hermeneutical space, people engage in creative play with ideas and phenomena, and from this space, the texts return augmented and reshaped, and the people return changed and enriched. Regardless of whether the term *hermeneutics* comes from the Trickster Hermes, messenger of the gods, this open and in-between space where messages are carried back and forth is certainly the domain of the Trickster. In opening up—and keeping open, in a stalwart commitment to postmodern uncertainty and its chaotic multitude of possibilities—a place for hermeneutics, a teacher creates for a community of students a place that teaches and affirms the shapeshifting, bordercrossing messiness that confounds positivistic, hierarchal, linear constructs that control and imprison both people and texts. The Trickster carries the news through the space of uncertainty, and rejects self-important authority, rejoicing in what is, disinclined to decree what is right and wrong, and affirming the joy of embodied life. A World Religions teacher who works to keep this hermeneutical space open and thriving in the classroom is making space for the religions of the world and the people who practice them to come into presence and for the students to open themselves to live encounters with them and with themselves—and to develop the ability to embrace the kaleidoscopic unboundedness of humanity.

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APPENDIX A  
CLOSE-UP OF THE JUDAISM UNIT

**Week 1**

If at all possible, this unit should start at the same time as the High Holy Days. Rosh Hashanah is usually in early September, so beginning at that time allows a multi-sensory, experiential statement about a living religion to set the tone and to impart a sense of what is important to Judaism. The unit begins with a combination of learning about the High Holy Days, including readings, Rosh Hashanah videos, and eating honey and apples, with reading some key stories from the Torah that define who the Hebrews felt themselves to be as a people. Reading from the Torah is also a key part of observing the High Holy Days, so this combination makes a powerful statement about praxis and about connections across history through narratives.

**Activities:**

- Defining Judaism in opening class meeting using the Shema, in video and in scripture
- Food and songs on the actual day of Rosh Hashanah
- Rosh Hashanah in 60 Seconds:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRp0vw8RBAw&list=TLGNafw8zM37E>
- A cappella song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7BtgeiIdl7U>

- Debate on the potential meanings of the story of the Binding of Isaac (traditionally read on first day of Rosh Hashanah). From prepared slips, each student draws one of eight ways to interpret this story and then the class debates, all defending that point of view as if it were their own. This also illustrates the Jewish tradition of and valuing of mankind's grappling with religious uncertainty through argument and multiple interpretations.
- Excerpts from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. In particular, the song "Close Every Door," to examine the hope-for-deliverance theme, and to set the stage for the story of Hebrew slavery in Egypt

**Assignments:**

- Abraham: Genesis 15–17, and 21 and 22 (including LMS quiz)
- Jacob: Genesis 27–28, & 32–33 (including discussion board on whether Jacob's deeds were wrong and the reconciliation of the brothers [also sets stage for later topic of Forgiveness])
- Podcast from radio show On Being (<http://www.onbeing.org/program/days-awe/82>) and handout of questions. Students hear a contemporary female rabbi talking about the meanings she makes out of the High Holy Days. This allows us to arrive at Yom Kippur with a discussion about what atonement is, which will also connect to Forgiveness topic.

## **Week 2**

The next focus, continuing with the idea of narrative from the Torah as a source of community, identity, law, and knowledge of how to live, is Moses. Studying Moses combines reading from the Torah, connections to modern American ideas about law and freedom, a vivid illustration of the unit themes of law and deliverance, learning about the central holiday of Passover, and a connection to the modern civil rights movements.

### **Activities:**

- Opening scene of *The Prince of Egypt* and Louis Armstrong’s “Go Down, Moses,” to examine idea of deliverance
- Discussion on aspects of the Moses story, looking for thematic difficulties such as Moses’s age, reluctance, and stammering, and ethical problems concerning Yahweh’s treatment of the Egyptians. Focus also on the Ten Commandments, which is also an opportunity to compare translations and raise the concept of being able to know for sure what ancient texts say and mean.
- Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly video on Abraham Heschel to connect Moses story to civil rights movement: <http://www.onbeing.org/program/spiritual-audacity-abraham-joshua-heschel/227>. Discussion on freedom versus law, and Moses as archetype of liberator and lawgiver, using all the Moses material, this, and the Feiler article

### **Assignments:**

- Moses: Exodus 1–14
- Bruce Feiler article in Washington Post about Moses as American icon (including discussion board questions), “Moses: Biblical Prophet, American Icon”:  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/10/15/AR2009101503474.html?sid=ST2010031901389>
- Part of the Judaism article in the World Religions Reference Library, an online reference work in our school database subscriptions, including an assessment in LMS
- The Tenets of Reform Judaism webpage and assessment in LMS:  
[http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/reform\\_practices.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/reform_practices.html)

### **Week 3**

The section on Moses segues into Judaism in America, with some use of the PBS documentary *The Jewish Americans*, which contains many good visuals, both historical and contemporary. Here is where we learn about holidays and family-based practices, and keeping kosher, which is the beginning of a course-long thought about how praxis sometimes defines a community just as much as it meets a religious obligation. The fall holiday Sukkot makes a transition to the special topic of Wisdom Literature, because the book of Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) is traditionally read during this personal and contemplative observance.

**Activities:**

- Videos on contemporary observances, beginning with Passover and its connection to the Moses story, and then going on to the Sabbath, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, and Hanukkah
- In looking over the Tenets of Judaism site we connect to the idea of Tikkun Olam and show video of providing aid to New Orleans:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/?p=4089>.
- *The Jewish Americans*, on Reform Judaism and its roots, and on the Lower East Side, which ends on kosher food, and handout, video, and discussion on keeping kosher
- Bring in bagels and cream cheese.
- Visit to Temple Emanuel, with emphasis on Reform Judaism and living in a Southern town. Make connection back to theme of exile and return embodied in their adopted Czech Torah: <http://www.czechmemorialscrollstrust.org/>.
- Introductory group activity on Wisdom Literature, doing a side-by-side comparison with ancient Egyptian advice and Proverbs from the homework

**Assignments:**

- “An Online Path to the Bar Mitzvah” in the NY Times:  
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C07E5DC133CF932A15752C1A9669D8B63>
- Hanukkah: Two articles on contemporary experiences with it: Krieger article  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/08/opinion/hanukkah-unabridged.html> and

Gaiman article <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/neil-gaiman-hanukkah-with-bells-on-1203307.html>

- Wisdom Literature: Proverbs: 1, 2 3, 8, 26, 27
- Handout on the Instruction of Amenemope
- The Book of Qohelet (provided in handout so they have the same translation)

#### **Week 4**

This week takes the very pragmatic considerations of Wisdom Literature about how we are to live in the world and asks why they are situated in a religious context. This lets us take a short step into asking why life is so unjust. Students have usually had exposure to Elie Wiesel in studying the Holocaust, but not to Viktor Frankl, and they are provided here with a variety of material on living in a world where very bad things happen and people do not get what they deserve. The culminating activity on this topic involves having the students generate a number of hypotheses that can then be shown to correlate with different theological positions. The final day is for recapitulating themes and learning a little about Purim, a lighthearted holiday that also lets us see again the ideas of narratives from the scriptures, faithfulness, and deliverance.

#### **Activities:**

- Small group discussions with guiding questions about what the message of Qohelet is and what worldview that expresses
- Two class periods watching the British television movie *God on Trial*

- One class period watching extracts from the Frontline 9/11 documentary *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*
- Discussion on the Problem of Evil, using all of the material and using their essays to facilitate the discussion
- Telling the story of Purim from a children's book, getting a sense of the holiday from a video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgJInVvJSZg>), pulling out the themes, and enjoying Zabar's apricot hamantaschen

**Assignments:**

- *On Being* podcast with Elie Wiesel, including guiding questions
- Extract from Viktor Frankl's book *Man's Search for Meaning*:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/frankl.html>
- Job: 1 & 2, 5 & 6, 38 & 39, 42
- Essay Assignment: Write one to two typed pages on these questions:
  1. The first part of your essay compares Elie Wiesel and Viktor Frankl's understandings of where God is and where meaning is in the Holocaust. You must support what you are saying with specific references to the texts.
  2. The second states and explores your own answer to the problem of why bad things happen: Where is God in suffering and disaster? How do you know? What meanings can you find in suffering and tragedy, or how do you understand them as fitting in with the rest of life?

## **Assessments**

Students earn a variety of grades in this unit from sources that reward different kinds of thinking and working. Several of the reading assignments have assessments based within the LMS. Some of these are little quizzes that are written simply to reward students for doing the reading and to make sure, in asking the questions, that they have their attention drawn to key ideas in the reading. Some of them are discussion-board questions that are graded on participation and on the thoughtfulness (versus perfunctoriness) of their responses. Some of the reading assignments have a handout of questions that ask for a few sentences that both confirm that the students understood what was important about the reading and have an opportunity to interpret, compare, critique, and bring in personal opinion and experience. These assignments allow for rewarding students for keeping up with their work, help them interpret their work, let students who are reluctant to speak in class have a private venue to respond, and give the instructor material for facilitating discussions. The essay in the Problem of Evil section is a place to explore and integrate ideas more fully and to practice being specific to texts and expressing personal opinions in the same train of thought, and knowing the difference. Finally, there is an in-class, short-answer test at the end emphasizing about fifteen basic pieces of information about Judaism, such as what the Shema and Passover are, and including about five opportunities for more personal and integrative thinking. Throughout the course, the unit tests are more factually oriented, and then the two take-home exams are entirely essay and interpretation.