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3

'NOT A TASK FOR AMATEURS'

Graduate instructors and Critical Theory in the World Religions classroom

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Introduction

Jonathan Z. Smith has written that the task of 'introducing' is 'not a task for amateurs, nor, as is too often the case, should it be assigned casually (or punitively) to neophytes' (1988, 727). As a few of the many graduate students responsible for teaching introductory courses every semester, however, it is clear to us that the task is very often, and very often casually, left to amateurs. This task can be an overwhelming one for young scholars, especially those schooled in Critical Theory. The concept of 'World Religions' remains part of the operating logic for numerous scholars and institutions in the field, even though this is problematic in many respects. Nonetheless, this chapter suggests that critically engaging with World Religions discourse can be professionally productive and methodologically useful for graduate student instructors. In this spirit, we suggest strategies that critically engaged graduate instructors can employ in the archetypal Introduction to World Religions classroom. We argue that choosing to reproduce the conventional World Religions Paradigm (WRP) is a missed opportunity not only for our students but for graduate instructors' scholarship and professional development. Although our role as graduate student instructors lies at the heart of our pedagogical strategies, these approaches can and should be used by any instructors who must teach using a syllabus that works within the WRP.

We are first concerned with the ordeal of teaching a course which is often seen as theoretically unsophisticated. Our goal is to explore the peculiar pressures on graduate instructors – pressures both *practical* and *political*. We will discuss practical approaches we have taken in the classroom which have worked to challenge the dominant WRP, specifically World Religions textbooks and the idea of 'traditions'. This chapter also engages the political challenges of teaching such a class from the peculiar institutional position of a graduate student. This position is

inextricably linked with how we approach the methodological concerns that motivate our pedagogy.

Of course, some challenges to this approach lay outside the classroom. Graduate students interested in exposing their students to the critique of the WRP must begin by gauging the overall mood in their respective departments to identify if there are any boundaries within which they must operate. Given the many demands of graduate life as well as the political realities of the academy, we recognize that challenging the status quo is not necessarily a strategic choice for all students. Our experiences have taught us that graduate students should have honest conversations with tenured faculty who might object to the student's methodological proclivities. Assuming there is room in the department for graduate student instructors to incorporate a critique of the WRP, they can then begin the arduous task of building a syllabus, lecture schedule, and reading list.

World Religions is a valuable course for graduate students to teach precisely because its conceptual underpinnings are so problematic. Reckoning with the discourse on world religions serves as a call for graduate students to remain 'relentlessly self-conscious', strategically sharpening their explanatory powers in the classroom and in their own work (J. Z. Smith 1982, xi). In this way, graduate instructors have the opportunity to challenge students' notions that there are these *things* out there in the world called religious traditions, and to explain how 'traditions', 'religions' or even 'world religions' are ideas with particular histories associated with specific institutions, groups and nation-states.

We suggest that even when introductory courses are 'left to neophytes', graduate students can make the best of a difficult situation by taking the opportunity to confront their own classificatory schemes. It is this focus on classification that is at the root of our thinking about the WRP. Instructors who seriously consider this approach must centre their pedagogy around the concept of 'classification' as an organizing principle. Our practical suggestions are rooted in this self-reflexive attention to classification.

By focusing attention on the issue of classification and, more specifically, how the people and groups under study *classify* and *are classified*, graduate instructors can make larger theoretical points about the study of religion more accessible to their students. Such a focus assists instructors in the debate about the worthiness of World Religions classes (or even courses in the humanities in general) by showing that there are, in fact, a variety of useful critical skills that can be taught and developed in our classrooms. Our focus helps students to identify authority structures, trace power dynamics, and become more aware of how ideology and rhetoric operate. As demonstrated later in this chapter, it also provides an easy way to make the content delivery more sophisticated, as it gives our students the tools to follow the textbook while interrogating it at the same time. Similar to other constructed social arrangements, the WRP is neither neutral nor natural, but its social authority derives from appearing as both.

Graduate instructors should also be familiar with the classificatory history of the category of 'religion' in order to teach, and teach against, the WRP. Paying

attention to the category's relationship with European Christianity, colonialism, and nation-states can form the backbone of a powerful critique of the WRP on display in most textbooks. Fortunately, graduate instructors now training for degrees have a particularly rich assortment of scholarly work on this topic to guide them in informing their lesson plans.

A class like World Religions all too easily becomes 'death-by-e.g.,' a forced march through a variety of pre-selected 'isms'. By focusing on the issue of classification, we can inject some clarity into the course that simply is not found in most World Religions textbooks when it comes to addressing the all-important question of '*why these traditions and not others?*' A brief survey of any number of the most popular textbooks demonstrates that many authors choose to answer this question by appealing to the difficulty of a comprehensive answer. For example, Willard G. Oxtoby and Alan F. Segal's widely-assigned *A Concise Introduction to World Religions* (2012) suggests that with regard to a definition of religion, 'no single line of definition seems able to trap it, but we can weave a net' (2012, 19). The selection of traditions, all too often, must rest on their presumed self-evidence rather than any conscious attention to classification.

Our goal is to reach a point, early in the semester, where students can begin to understand the fundamentally Durkheimian point that *classification is a social act*.[1] Once the class has this framework in place, we can begin to critically examine things beyond the syllabus – for example, what exactly do nineteenth-century British colonial officials in Nepal have to do with the chapter on Buddhism in the textbook?[2] This also opens up constructive avenues to critique the course itself. Instructors should practise introducing their students to the same choices that they face as instructors: to consider what *is* classified as worthy of inclusion in our syllabus, and what *is not*. For example, students have to wrestle with why their textbook omits any discussion of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, Scientology or Free Market Economics. Students can then begin to hypothesize why we might talk about *some* things rather than others.

As we hope has become clear, focusing on 'classification' in a World Religions class has several benefits for the graduate instructor. By getting our students to think about how the groups of people under study have categorized the world around them – and then how these same groups are classified as 'religious' (or not), we can help to instil practices of critical thinking so needed in the introductory classroom. It allows us to show our students the problems inherent in a conceptual framework that classifies things as a 'world religion'. It gives us the opportunity to address what Smith calls the 'duplicity in the disciplines', specifically the disciplinary lies that make up any introductory course. More importantly, it allows us the chance to turn these potential stumbling blocks into learning opportunities by making object lessons out of the very things that can so easily distract an introductory class. When the semester ends, students leave the classroom not just knowing the content of a so-called 'world religion' but also knowing how to better interrogate the world around them. What follows are two specific examples of how this might be accomplished from the perspective of graduate students teaching World Religions in a critical fashion.

Our approach to the Introduction to World Religions course naturally lends itself to a variety of assignments that allow the students to synthesize the various materials, theories, histories, and methodologies that they learn in class and from assigned readings. By integrating the lectures and supplementary readings, the students also learn that the textbook does not refer to objects or groups that exist in Platonic forms; rather, the students learn that the textbook participates in the construction of the objects it references. To help students understand this, we often ask the students to reflect on World Religions textbooks as primary sources, not as authoritative secondary sources that conveniently correspond to natives' 'religious' identities. We have found several assignments to be particularly useful in this respect.

In practice: the textbook is always right?

In one assignment, the students analyse a particular idea that an individual textbook treats as fact. For example, students might identify an instance when the textbook privileges canon and text in a manner that contradicts the ways that 'natives' or 'practitioners' traditionally approach texts. The study of Buddhism provides an opportunity to explore this. In *The British Discovery of Buddhism*, Philip Almond describes how the middle and upper classes of Victorian era Britain influenced the West's understanding of Buddhism (1988). He argues that in the 1830s, the British acquired new knowledge of the Buddha and the Buddha's teachings. As they gained knowledge about the Buddha via 'Buddhist texts', they came to identify Buddhism as a unique religion, i.e. independent of Hinduism. The British justified their conclusions, Almond argues, by comparing the Buddha with either Martin Luther or Jesus himself. For example, many people in Britain believed that the Buddha was a reformer who protested Hinduism much like Martin Luther protested Catholicism, while others portrayed the Buddha as an Asian Jesus: a reforming prophet who was an object of his followers' devotion.

As Almond describes, the British who were interested in Buddhism located 'authentic Buddhism' in 'Buddhist texts'. This interest stemmed from a desire to demonstrate their new-found literacy, but it also developed out of their Christian belief that texts are sacred, divinely inspired, and authoritative sources of religion. They believed that true or authentic Buddhism would be found in the texts; however, in so doing, they may have over-represented the degree to which the majority of so-called Buddhists privileged texts.

Almond's history of 'Buddhism' and 'Buddhist texts' tends to conflict with the histories of 'Buddhism' presented in most introductory textbooks. When we ask the students to read Almond's book in conjunction with their textbook, they quickly realize that there is a significant discrepancy between the two. The goal of this assignment is not to convince students that the textbook is 'wrong', but rather to expose the students to the idea that the textbook naïvely overlooks or ignores important history that is relevant to the social identity commonly labelled Buddhism. Our goal is to encourage the students to recognize diversity and even contradictions that result from pairing the textbook with critically engaged secondary sources.

In practice: textbooks as data?

While the aforementioned assignment asked students to explore the textbook as a primary source by comparing it with other scholarly writings, another useful assignment asks students to isolate one issue in a textbook and then to compare and contrast the ways that multiple textbooks either address or perhaps even omit that same issue. The topics of Hindu menstruation rituals and prohibitions provide an ideal example. For this assignment, it is important to include a variety of textbooks written throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[3] John Clark Archer's *Faiths Men Live By* is one such text (1934).

According to Tomoko Masuzawa, *Faiths Men Live By* was the first comparative textbook written for a non-seminarian audience to contain a list of the twelve or so religions that most Introduction to World Religions classes typically study today (2005, 44–45). In Archer's analysis of the individual religions, he meticulously describes what he deems as important beliefs, deities, and sacred texts. He also addresses founding figures and religious institutions, which cultivate and guard the sacred teachings. Archer largely ignores issues of gender, so prohibitions against menstruating Hindus would seem out of place in his narrative.

Another textbook that is often assigned in Introduction to World Religions is Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man*, which similarly ignores this topic (1965 [1958]). This book 'only' addresses seven religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) but, contra Archer, Smith discusses the different religions not to compare them, but to *understand* their deeper meanings. 'Religion,' he wrote, 'is not primarily a matter of facts in the historical sense; it is a matter of meanings' (1965, 11). Smith then attempts to provide an insider's view of what makes each religion meaningful to the religion's adherents.

Smith begins most chapters with an analysis of the historical setting of each religion and its founders. He repeatedly stresses that these founders were all fundamentally good people who took seriously their desire to help humanity. Smith is not particularly concerned with religious history, although he does occasionally address it. Instead, he discusses important theologies and sacred rituals, emphasizing those that appeal to a modern, liberal audience. Smith either downplays or ignores theology and rituals that might offend modern audiences; thus he ignores religious prohibitions in general, including prohibitions against menstruating Hindus.

Following the lead of Archer and Smith, the vast majority of textbooks have ignored the prohibitions associated with menstruating Hindus, although this has begun to change in the last decade or so. The move to address Hindu menstruation is part of a larger trend to include the 'lived experiences' of religious people, including women. Beginning in the 1980s, scholars placed a new emphasis on religion outside institutional settings,[4] which coincided with a rise in gender studies more broadly. Collectively, these two impulses motivated scholars to address both 'lived' religion and gender. John Esposito's *World Religions Today* is a textbook that reflects these new emphases (Esposito *et al.* 2006).

World Religions Today addresses the issue of Hindu menstruation rituals and prohibitions within the broader context of Hindu rites of passage. The authors claims that a Hindu woman's first menstrual cycle is an important event, as it ushers her into full womanhood and marks her as eligible for marriage (2006, 354). The young woman is isolated for a week and prohibited from seeing the sun and sometimes men. During this time, older women tell her stories about Hindu deities and provide instruction for adult religious practices. In this textbook, a woman's first menstrual cycle is therefore both restrictive and empowering. It is restrictive in the sense that it confines women; however, it is empowering in the sense that older women comfort the young woman during this transition period.

Another textbook, *A Concise Introduction to World Religions*, also addresses the topic (Oxtoby and Segal 2012). In a section titled 'Women and Pollution', Vasudha Narayanan writes, '[i]n the Hindu tradition menstruation was generally regarded as physically polluting', and therefore menstruating women were not allowed to leave the house (2012, 322). According to Narayanan, modern Hindus have largely abandoned this practice of strict isolation, although women continue to be prohibited from performing rituals and from entering temples. Some women are even unable to cook. Narayanan highlights these practices in such a way as to downplay their importance and prevalence in contemporary Hindu society.

More than any textbook discussed thus far, *Invitation to World Religions* provides the most comprehensive account of Hindu menstruation and relevant prohibitions (Brodd *et al.* 2012). This book acknowledges that regional variations dictate local customs, but it concludes that most Hindu women spend the first three days of their first menstrual cycle in a dimly lit room (2012, 111–112). According to this textbook, the first menstrual cycle is both a private and public event in the sense that the girl is confined to a room during her first period. The community later publicly recognizes her transition into womanhood at a feast that is held in her honour, where the girl often receives a special blessing from an older married woman at a local temple. The girl is now eligible for marriage, and her unsupervised interaction with boys is more restricted.

Collectively, these textbooks do not form a coherent narrative. Instead, they reveal the interests and biases of the scholars who wrote them just as they bear the imprint of the academic climate that produced them. When students learn to treat the textbook as data, they learn much more than 'facts' and history relevant to the so-called religions. They also explore the arbitrary and contested nature of representation itself. They learn that any given source – including textbooks and other academic sources – is not a simple representation of a thing that exists *a priori*; rather, they learn to question the contingent nature of all authenticity claims. This is a far cry from traditional approaches to teaching the Introduction to World Religions course, but it accomplishes much more than simply asking students to memorize names, dates, and places. It teaches them analytical skills that they can apply to their studies more broadly.

In practice: heterogeneity as homogeneity

Another task that instructors must also consider is how best to present the data of the course – the 'world religions' themselves. As graduate student instructors, we have neither the social capital nor the time to overhaul an entire course in order to fully disrupt the WRP; instead, we must find a productive way to work within it. One way to accomplish this is to teach the course using the structure of the conventional model, spending a certain amount of time on each tradition before moving on to the next. In the conventional model, each tradition is presented from the perspective of the dominant group in terms of its historical development and what official voices from within the tradition find to be significant. Because approaching traditions in this way tends 'to portray the many as one and heterogeneity as homogeneity', the focus on each tradition must implement a strategy that deviates from the conventional model at this point (McCutcheon 2001, 27).

We start this process by asking the students to consider how the textbooks present traditions, encouraging them to think about how the particular textbook's narrative recounts the tradition's history, what issues or ideas are portrayed as central to the tradition, and what groups are seen as authoritative. More importantly, though, the students are instructed to pay close attention to the rhetoric that the textbook uses, especially when addressing difference. Once this analysis is complete, we can start to destabilize the homogenizing language of tradition. One way forward is to choose passages from critical scholarship to pair with the textbook reading assignments. Bringing in additional reading introduces other voices into the section, which provide a counter-narrative. It is important to note that the scholarly reading does not need to map onto the textbook exactly. In fact, the exercise proves more fruitful if it does not, for the secondary reading ought to demonstrate that what the textbook presents is merely one rendering of an otherwise contested past. In this sense, then, the ideal choice of scholarly reading addresses an aspect of a tradition that the textbook fails to mention, or that the textbook mentions but in a manner that obscures the 'constructing, legitimizing, and contesting' that goes into the production of that particular social group (McCutcheon 2001, 24). The examples given represent aspects of these specific problems, each paired with a selection from a scholarly reading that demonstrates the strategies discussed.

Changing the emphasis from the presented-as-united traditions to the many social groups that exist within a single 'tradition' brings into view the ways that groups use discourse and force in creating and re-fashioning their identities (Lincoln 1992, 3–5). For example, when considering how early Christian groups distinguished themselves from one another and from other groups (i.e. Romans, Greeks, Jews, etc.), the language of nation or race was often used. This is evident in Origen's *On First Principles*, where he states that 'the present Israelites' could lose their race (*genos*) because they have not lived up to their status as God's chosen people. While this identity can be lost, it can also be gained, as those who exercise their will can 'enter into the church of the Lord' to become Israelites.[5] Although Origen uses the term Israelite here, he does not refer to Jews; instead, he refers to rival groups of

Christians who 'deny the role of free will in favor of a kind of determinism' (Buell 2005, 123). As Denise Kimber Buell shows in *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*, Origen understands the term *genos* 'as something that one can change through a better or worse exercise of one's free will' (2005, 125–126).

Rather than continue to tease out the complicated arguments from antiquity on the nature of the soul and will, this example can serve the purpose of illustrating to our students how social groups use discourse to construct and contest their identity internally. As Buell notes, Origen's use of Israelites is 'for the purposes of intra-Christian polemic' (2005, 126). In this way, he links the identity of 'true Christians' to 'true Israelites', deciding who is included and who is excluded from this social group. The discursive strategies that Origen uses here signal the way that language can be manipulated and redefined in order to construct and legitimize one's own position – in this case, Origen's group is defined as the 'true *genos*' of God. The aforementioned assignment that asks the students to look at the ways that different textbooks portray the same topic also communicates this point – the students see not only how groups construct their own traditions through discourse, but how books *about* those traditions do so as well.

In reading Oxtoby and Segal's *A Concise Introduction to World Religions*, before the students even begin the chapter on Hinduism they are presented with the first major heading, ORIGINS. The first sentence states that the 'origins of Hinduism have been much debated'; however, the textbook then proceeds to provide the dominant view of Hinduism's development, which stems from the Harappa Culture (Basham 1991, 4). As the textbook explains, '[t]here is no agreement about what might have brought the [Harappan] civilization to an end. Some scholars think it was destroyed by migrating Indo–European people .... Other theories centre on flooding or epidemics' (Narayanan 2012, 277). From here, the chapter continues to discuss the identity of Indo–Europeans and their 'earliest surviving compositions', which are identified as the Vedas (2012, 278–284). Although these texts are 'considered to be extremely important by all orthodox philosophers and theological treatises, the Vedas are not books that people keep in their homes' (2012, 280). As Narayanan explains:

> For many centuries, acceptance as an orthodox member of society we call Hindu depended on acceptance of the Vedas as authoritative. As custodians of the Vedas, the brahmins reserved for themselves the authority to study and teach these holy words. Though members of two other classes were technically 'allowed' to study the Vedas, in time this privilege was lost or, in some cases, abandoned.
>
> *(2012, 280)*

According to Narayanan, the Vedas provide the first indication of the caste system. In the 'Hymn to the Supreme Person' (*Purusha Sukta*), which details the 'cosmic sacrifice of the primeval man', it states, '[f]rom his mouth came the priestly class / from his arms, the rulers. The producers came from his legs; from his feet came the servant class' (2012, 281–282). These texts are later used as a foundation for the

Upanishads, which address similar topics but emphasize ideas that are said to be fundamental concepts in the tradition's development (2012, 282–284). This leads to the next major heading of the chapter: CRYSTALLIZATION. The production of writings such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the 'rediscovering' of deities led to the tradition 'as we know it today [becoming] crystallized' (2012, 287). It is in this so-called crystallization of Hinduism that the idea of caste as that which 'set[s] out the roles and duties ... that make up Hindu society' emerges, spawning from the writings of the *dharmashastras* (2012, 291).

It is at this point that the scholarly reading can be assigned. For this section, one book to use in order to undermine the textbook's homogenous narrative is Nicholas B. Dirks' *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (2001). The students read parts of Chapters 1 and 8, which explain the modern idea of caste and the custom of hookswinging.[6] Dirks' main point is that though caste is not quite a modern British invention, it did become 'a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all "systematizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization' during the colonial period (2001, 5). By using caste in this manner, colonists and Brahmanic groups were able to create a unifying, collective identity for local, heterogeneous groups, which undoubtedly helped to facilitate the British domination of India. While the modern understanding of caste is the central argument in Dirks' book, the chapter on hookswinging proves to be more useful for providing a crucial example of two related issues: (1) how social groups contest for authority over what constitutes 'proper' tradition and practice; and (2) how the many are not one.

As Dirks shows, hookswinging became a point of contention for the British in the 1890s, mainly due to the post-1857 proclamation of noninterference, which stated that colonial officers were no longer allowed to intervene in 'the religious belief or worship of any of [their] subjects' (2001, 149). The proclamation came as a response to the Great Rebellion of 1857, which the British misunderstood as occurring because of 'religious' concerns regarding pollution, not because of British colonization and occupation. However, they eventually redefined the terms of the proclamation so that it excluded customs deemed as either dangerous to British interests in law and order or offensive to various agencies, such as missionaries (2001, 151). The extension of the proclamation included such umbrages as hookswinging due to the 'barbaric' nature of the custom. 'High-caste Hindus', who encouraged the British colonists to ban the practice, condemned hookswinging, arguing that the 'popular practice' had 'no religious sanction' (2001, 161). Dirks illustrates that by denouncing popular practices such as hookswinging, Brahmanic groups were then able to define Hinduism in their own terms, which became the 'measures for authenticity' (2001, 171). The idea of the part (Brahmans) standing in for the whole (the tradition of Hinduism) becomes a teaching moment, particularly in relation to the textbook, as the students are asked to consider its discursive practices. In other words, how does the textbook define the tradition, and in whose terms does it speak? In the words of Bruce Lincoln, 'who wins what, and how much? Who, conversely, loses?' (1996, 226).

Using this approach in our classrooms encourages our students to develop 'critical thinking, debating, and writing skills upon which they will draw long after they have left our classes' (McCutcheon 2001, 217). Moreover, it provides the same opportunities for instructors, who can refine their own analytical skills by finding new and better ways to disrupt the WRP. Teaching traditions critically in the form of the conventional model provides an exit from mere description, especially for those who, like graduate student instructors, are unable to escape the WRP. As we demonstrate, instructors can take the uncritical course given to them and produce a model that takes seriously the discursive practices through which traditions are constructed – by groups themselves and by others (including textbooks).

Conclusion

As graduate students tasked with teaching Introduction to World Religions, we often find ourselves reflecting on a series of questions that form the basis of our pedagogy. Specifically, how do we teach a course that is premised on discredited theory and history? How do we teach a course that assumes that religious systems are discrete entities with identifiable histories and boundaries when recent research has repeatedly demonstrated the opposite? How do we teach Introduction to World Religions without naturalizing 'religious' identities and the category of 'world religions' itself? The short answer is that we do not teach that class. Instead of teaching a traditional World Religions class, we teach the course without naturalizing religious identity. We teach Introduction to World Religions without only teaching world religions.

With this approach, the Introduction to World Religions course is not only salvable, but valuable. It is valuable to the study of religion because students who are exposed to the academic study of religion in this type of classroom and who proceed to major or minor in the department not only possess sophisticated theoretical and methodological tools, but they expect future courses to build on these tools. The department retains the students who are attracted to these types of questions and to this line of academic analysis. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the course is valuable for the students. For the majority of the students, this will be their only exposure to the academic study of religion. Students can leave Introduction to World Religions with a more thorough understanding of the complex processes that are involved in the construction and representation of group identity.

Notes

1 For more on this point, see Durkheim 1912.
2 On Buddhism, see Lopez 1995.
3 We can put a variety of textbooks on hold in the library, so the students do not have to purchase multiple textbooks to complete one assignment. Such an exercise can also be done using online sources that address similar topics.
4 Robert Orsi is often credited as popularizing this trend. See Orsi 1985.
5 A translation of *On First Principles* appears in Buell 2005.

6 As described by an 1891 news story appearing in the *Madras Mail*, hookswinging 'consists in passing iron hooks through the deep muscles of the back, attaching a rope to the hooks, and (after the method of a well sweep) swinging the victim to a height several feet above the heads of the people. The car on which the pole is placed is then drawn along by large ropes' (Dirks 2001, 151).

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