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INTRODUCTION

The World Religions Paradigm in contemporary Religious Studies

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> Let us take the old saying, divide et impera, and translate it somewhat freely as 'classify and conquer.'
>
> *(Müller 1873, 122–123)*

> The history of the study of religion is the dramatic story of the complex relationship between European Enlightenment concepts about the nature of religion and the violent reality experienced by people and cultures all over the world who were conquered and colonized by Europeans.
>
> *(Chidester 1996, xiii)*

Classify and conquer: taxonomies and power

In the Preface to his *The Order of Things* (1973), Michel Foucault – French philosopher, social theorist, literary critic and turtleneck-wearer – cites Jorge Luis Borges' essay 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins' (1942) in order to problematize scholars' uncritical use of taxonomies. Borges' essay (whose title refers to a seventeenth-century philosopher who proposed a universal language with a grammar based on taxonomic classification) presents an alternative taxonomy, ostensibly drawn from an ancient Chinese encyclopedia, *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, which organizes animals into fourteen categories:

1. Those that belong to the emperor
2. Embalmed ones
3. Those that are trained
4. Suckling pigs
5. Mermaids
6. Fabulous ones

7. Stray dogs
8. Those that are included in this classification
9. Those that tremble as if they were mad
10. Innumerable ones
11. Those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush
12. *Et cetera*
13. Those that have just broken the flower vase
14. Those that, at a distance, resemble flies

(in Foucault 1973, xv; cf. McCutcheon 2014, 142).

To most, this seems like an arbitrary or even ridiculous system of classification. The point that Foucault is making, however, is that objectively it is no more arbitrary than any other system, simply less familiar because we have not internalized its rules.

If we were to ask the reader for today's date, they would almost certainly reply (at time of writing) 'Friday, the thirteenth of February 2015'.[1] They would be far less likely to reply '23 Rabi II 1436', 'Cycle 78, year 31, month 12, day 25' or '13.0.2.3.4'. Yet none of these 'is' the 'real' date any more than any of the others, but rather they reflect different cultural contexts. Moreover, they encode particular epistemological and cosmological assumptions, and when examined critically, issues of power. According to Critical Theory, the criteria by which such distinctions are made do not describe reality, but rather the assumptions of those making them. These taxonomies therefore represent the intersection of knowledge and power – what Foucault would call a particular 'episteme' (1973, xxii). Such arrangements are neither universal, natural nor eternal, but claim to be – and when fully internalized, will appear to be.

This volume is concerned with perhaps the most obvious example of such a taxonomy in the discourse on religion, the World Religions Paradigm (WRP). The WRP typically includes 'the Big Five' (where does that term come from?) of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism – and moreover, almost always presented in that Abrahamocentric order – increasingly with additional 'catch-all' categories such as 'indigenous religions' or 'new religions' included.

The publication of *The Norton Anthology of World Religions* in 2014 demonstrates how entrenched this taxonomy is for both the public and, more problematically, academia. Indeed, with university Religious Studies (RS) departments becoming more and more structured around a series of area studies scholars rather than method and theory specialists or generalists, the question of which 'traditions' are to be represented is arguably more important than ever. In this introduction we lay out, first, the development of the WRP as a classificatory schema, and second, the robust critique that it has sustained in recent decades. This will be necessarily brief, but aims to offer a useful 'potted history' for students and their teachers, while pointing towards the sources through which the critique can be pursued fully. Discussion then turns to contemporary problems with putting this critique into practice within introductions to the academic study of religion, before providing a brief overview of the chapters that follow.

Given that the history of the WRP is intimately tied up with the history of RS itself, it is fitting that we begin our discussion with the development of the category 'religion'.

You can't say 'World Religions Paradigm' without saying 'religion' ...

The WRP is intimately bound up with the development of the category of 'religion'[2] and its 'semantically parasitic' other (Fitzgerald 2007, 54), the 'secular'. A discussion of these categories will help contextualize the way in which the WRP was formed, and explain the origin of the very notion that a plurality of 'religions' existed that could be placed within a paradigm. As Brent Nongbri notes,

> the *particular* concept of religion is absent in the ancient world. The very idea of 'being religious' requires a companion notion of what it would mean to be 'not religious,' and this dichotomy was not part of the ancient world.
>
> *(2013, 4)*

Sweeping through history, the term 'religio' can be encountered in a Roman context, primarily in relation to the rites and traditions connected with the ancestors (King 1999, 35–36). According to Brent Nongbri, it makes an appearance in early Latin comedies, where it appears to mean something more along the lines of 'scruples' or 'manners', and was not associated with gods until around the first century BCE (Nongbri 2013, 27). In the writings of Lucretius (99–c. 55 BCE) for example, 'religio' seems to refer to something almost the same as our modern 'superstition'; people could become overcome by 'religio' because of wrong ideas or 'excessive concern' regarding gods (2013, 28). Among the Latin Christians, Tertullian, etc., we encounter the 'religio' or 'religiones' (worship practice/practices) of Christians, and the religiones of others, where the term is deployed in a manner more akin to a racial or ethnic discourse of the modern day (2013, 29). Augustine's 'de vera religio' – 'on true religion' – is similarly suggestive of a meaning of 'worship'; 'our religio is not the religio of other gods, of idols', 'our religio is the religio of the one god', etc. (2013, 30–31).

In the medieval period, however, we see the emergence of the twin concepts 'religiosus' and 'saecularis' as indicative of different types of ecclesiastical vows (Nongbri 2013, 5). To be 'religious' meant to pursue a monastic life, while 'secular' designated those in the 'ordinary' clergy working within the world outside the monastery (Asad 1993, 39). According to Charles Taylor, this development of a religious/secular binary highlighted a perceived distinction between 'ordinary' or 'profane' time, as opposed to 'spiritual' or 'God's' time, and 'reflected something fundamental about Christendom', the view that 'a less than full embedding in the secular [was ...] essential to the vocation of the church' (1998, 32; in Knott 2005, 64). However, it is at the dawn of the Enlightenment period, and the beginning of the colonial encounter, that these terms begin to take on forms more familiar to us today.

Timothy Fitzgerald's *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (2007) features an extended discussion of the writings of an English vicar named Samuel Purchas, which he utilizes – along with other case studies – to build a convincing case that until the early Enlightenment/colonial period 'there was arguably no concept in the English language either of "a religion" or of "secular neutrality"', but that '[r]eligion almost always has meant Christian Truth and civility, and was invariably contrasted with barbaric superstitions' (2007, 283). According to Fitzgerald, in 1615 Purchas had

> not only referred to the 'religions' of India, China, Japan, the Americas, and many other parts of the world, but had attempted to analyse and describe them .... His usage, however, was ironic, since in his understanding 'religion' meant Christian (or more precisely Protestant Christian) Truth, and when applied to others the term 'religions' really meant its opposite, superstitions, and thus pagan and irrational misunderstandings. Yet arguably we can see a wobble in his text between irony and straightforward generic usage.
>
> *(2007, 9)*

Samuel Purchas, then, stands in a long line of male authors who were encountering and theorizing the 'other' for the first time, and from a perspective of normative Christianity. Indeed, in some of the earliest accounts of the 'New World' (see J. Z. Smith 1998, 269) we read of 'natives' who went 'without shame, religion or knowledge of God' (Eden 1553), or who 'observ[ed] no religion as we understand it' (Cieza de León 1553). As Jonathan Z. Smith simply but forcefully states, 'the question of the "religions" arose in response to an explosion of data' (1998, 275) and thus by the late 1700s it made linguistic sense for Thomas Jefferson to state that there are 'probably a thousand different systems of religion' of which 'ours is but one of that thousand' (1787, 267). The seeds had been sown from which the Victorian Science of Religion – and the WRP – would spring, and to which discussion shall shortly turn.

Owing in no small part to the intellectualization and individualization of the Protestant Reformation, at the same time as the notion of distinct 'religions' emerges, we begin to see the emergence of the idea of religion as a private, personal, and individual affair, as a matter between the individual 'believer' and 'God'. We see, for example, in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) an outspoken example of this 'independent ethic, in which religion in general, and "Christian religion" in particular, was located in the private sphere, the realm of conscience, apart from the public sphere of the state' (Knott 2005, 66). For Hobbes,

> The maintenance of civil society depend[s] on justice, and justice on the power of life and death, and other less rewards and punishments residing in them that have the power of the Commonwealth; it is impossible a Commonwealth should stand where any other than the sovereign hath a power of giving greater rewards than life, and inflicting greater punishment than death.
>
> *(1651, 275)*

Here we begin to see the development of the secular as the 'default' state from which 'religions' deviate, something that will be of particular significance when we discuss the legacy of the WRP below.

'Mixed motivations': the Science of Religion

The Victorian 'Science of Religion' was at its core an attempt to produce a typology of 'religions', as per Linnaeus's classification of the natural world or Darwin's proposition of the evolutionary links between the species. Indeed, '[o]nly an adequate taxonomy would convert a "natural history" of religion into a science' (J. Z. Smith 1998, 276). As F. Max Müller, one of the most influential scholars behind the development of the WRP, framed the question, 'How is the vast domain of religion to be parcelled out?' (1873, 123). Terence Thomas describes the emerging Science of Religion as a 'situation of mixed motivations' (2000, 74), with three significant factors – scientific (and particularly Darwinian), theological and colonialist – which shall each be discussed below.

In popular discourse, and distressingly often academic discourse also, 'science' is constructed as a disinterested, objective account of an underlying reality. This argument originates with Victorian positivists like Auguste Comte, and has been repeated by many RS scholars, who 'claim that the methodologies used in this discipline are objective and neutral in that they neither presuppose nor preclude any particular religious commitment' (King 1999, 47). Twentieth-century philosophy has made it clear, however, that such objectivity is difficult and perhaps impossible to achieve. Indeed, the institution of 'science' itself exists within particular social, cultural and political contexts. The 'Science of Religion' is a perfect case in point. How these scholars defined 'religion' and how these definitions were used to create typologies did not dispassionately describe 'reality', but rather simultaneously reflected and reinforced the presuppositions – and therefore the concerns – of those with the power to make such proscriptions. Their typologies did not disinterestedly describe religions, but implicitly ranked them.

For C. P. Tiele, the 'World Religions' – Buddhism, Islam and, of course, Christianity – were those which had 'found their way to different races and peoples and ... profess the intention to conquer the world' (1884, 368). Their supposed dynamism set them apart from the other 'ethical religions', such as Judaism and Taoism, which were characterized by being founded on 'holy' scriptures or laws, but are 'generally limited to a single race or nation' (1884, 366). These were in turn superior to the 'nature religions' which were divided into 'polydaemonistic magical religions', 'organized' or 'unorganized magical religions', and 'anthropomorphic polytheism' (ibid.). For Tiele, the 'ancient faiths and primitive modes of worship' must either 'reform themselves as the model of the superior religion' (i.e. the World Religions), or inevitably 'draw nearer and nearer to extinction' (1884, 369). Tiele's typology is therefore both Darwinian and unambiguously theologically normative.

Müller, however, inverted this evolutionary trajectory, seeing religions as degenerating from the purity of their inspired origins towards populist superstition

and mythology, which he described as 'the dialectic life of religion' (1873, 274). He singled Hinduism out for particular criticism, describing it as 'a half-fossilised megatherion walking about in the broad daylight of the nineteenth century' (1873, 279). The emphasis on texts reflected Müller's linguistic training, but perhaps less obviously, his Protestant German upbringing: his insistence on the purity of inspired texts was also an implicit critique of priestly, ritualistic Catholicism and its supposed idolatrous materiality.

Tiele and Müller's versions differ in significant respects from one another, both in the evolutionary trajectories and in which religions were singled out for praise or scorn (Christianity again the exception, with Müller describing Christianity as 'the fulfilment of the hopes and desires of the whole world' (1873, 148–9)). Yet they have in common that each utilized an ostensibly scientific model derived from Protestant Christianity, which prioritized 'belief' and 'doctrine' as preserved in texts as the *sine qua non* of 'religion' (Lopez Jr. 1998, 21). On the colonial frontiers, this meant that either it was thought that there simply was no religion there (Chidester 1996), or these contexts were constructed as exemplifying a 'primal' or 'primitive' form of religion (Cox 2007). In other cases where the traditions could not be so easily marginalized, they would be constructed according to Protestant norms, notably in the case of Hinduism, where the role of the Vedas was exaggerated and the supposed trinity of Brahma, Siva and Vishnu was promoted. For many scholars – as typified perhaps most famously by Mircea Eliade in the middle of the twentieth century – these different religions were seen as exemplars of a *sui generis* 'religion' (see McCutcheon 1997), whereby 'Religion in its essence is one and the same thing. Exceedingly varied as may be the forms which it assumes, it does not itself vary or undergo change' (Jordan 1986 [1905], 19).[3] Echoing Linnaeus, this model – a genus ('Religion') which contains a discrete group of species ('World Religions') distinguished (often implicitly) by textual traditions, a stress on orthodoxy rather than orthopraxy and some degree of universal ambition – was to form the basis of the emerging academic study of religion. Indeed, the knowledge gained in this new academic field could be utilized as 'counter-propaganda' (Thomas 2000, 74). This theologically informed model was used to support the proselytization of Christianity in the colonies, as it was presented as the paragon of religions over what was perceived as 'primitive', or completely absent.

Colonialism forms the third factor impacting the emergence of the WRP. As noted above, '[t]he question of the "religions" arose in response to an explosion of data' (J. Z. Smith 1998, 275) brought about by the colonial encounter. Müller and Tiele were both embedded within countries deeply invested in colonial expansion. The British Empire was the largest empire in history, including one quarter of the world's population at its apex in 1921. The East India Company, who had been granted a special sanction to trade in India, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia and often assisted with administration for the British Empire, acted as patron to Müller, funding his move to Oxford and commissioning his translated edition of the Rig Veda (4 vols, 1849–1874). Regarding Tiele's colonial connections, the Dutch Empire grew steadily from 1602 until 1940, and was similarly operated primarily

through privately owned trading companies. So Thomas's observation that 'political motivation [was] at the heart of much study of religions' (2000, 77) is appropriate, as there was in fact a practical, economic purpose for such study. As F. D. Maurice observed in 1847, knowledge of other religions was especially useful if you were 'engaged in trading with other countries, or in conquering them, or in keeping possession of them' (1877, 255; c.f. Huston Smith's *The Religions of Man* (1958) and the Müller quotation at the top of this chapter) – or as Thomas wittily suggests, 'not so much a case of "know thy enemy" as "know thy trading partner"' (2000, 77).[4]

The colonies – or more accurately, subjugated men and women – were rich sources of materials. These included raw materials such as minerals, wood, plants and animals, cultural products such as new flavours, fashions, literature, art, philosophies and religious texts, and until the late nineteenth century, people themselves in the form of slaves. So knowledge of 'native' religions became important, both for jurisdiction through law-making and censuses (the case of 'Hinduism' here being a significant example), and for predicting how the indigenous population would respond to various requests and demands. Ironically, in some cases (most obviously, Hinduism and African religions) the post-colonial response was for these people to normalize and homogenize their traditions of belief and practice into 'World Religions' recognizable to Protestant Christians. In aiming to be treated as an equal, they implicitly restated the perceptions of the oppressor.

Critiques of the WRP

The WRP has been subjected to a sustained and rigorous critique in the academic study of religion for many years[5] and, for our purposes, this critique can be divided into three strands: that the WRP constructs 'religion' according to an ostensibly Protestant Christian model; that it is 'deeply implicated ... in the discourses of modernity, especially ... in technologies of power' (Jantzen 1998, 8); and that it encourages an uncritical *sui generis* model of 'religion'.

The first of these strands can be articulated quite simply: despite its non-partisan and inclusive appearance, the WRP has 'remodelled [non-Christian religions] according to liberal Western Protestant Christian values' (Owen 2011, 258), whereby one's religion 'is imprinted on the heart' in the form of beliefs, and 'manifests itself in outward observances of various kinds, [... such as] rituals, ceremonies, and customs' (Fitzgerald 2007, 216). As Donald Lopez Jr. has noted,

> Belief appears as a universal category because of the universalist claims of the tradition in which it has become most central, Christianity. Other religions have made universalist claims, but Christianity was allied with political power, which made it possible to transport its belief to all corners of the globe ..., making belief the measure of what religion is understood to be. Belief, then, or perhaps the demand that there be belief, is implicated both in the activities

> of Christian missionaries and in the 'native' efforts (and those of their invited and uninvited surrogates) to counter them.
>
> *(1998, 33)*

We see this particularly evidenced in swathes of scholarship on 'African' religions, where one finds African deities described as 'eternal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient', etc., the ultimate argument being 'that African deities have identical attributes with those of the Christian God' (p'Bitek 1990, 80; cf. Cox 2014, 1). Of course, we must not assume that this 'Christianizing' of 'other religions' was the explicit intent of those engaged in their study. Indeed, as Masuzawa details in her discussion of Buddhism, those nineteenth-century scholars who were engaged in the construction or 'discovery' of Buddhism as a 'non-national ... qualitatively universal(istic) ... world religion' seemed to do so quietly and automatically 'without either an express endorsement or an audible objection on the part of the scholars specializing in Buddhism' (2005, 137–138). Many examples can be marshalled against this reification of a belief component to 'religion' – from well-documented self-identifying 'secular Jews' to the 'situational belief' of many 'ordinary' British churchgoers (Stringer 2008) – and one can only speculate as to how different the Science of Religion might have been had it developed in contexts where non-Protestant traditions had been historically dominant.

The entanglement of the WRP with technologies of power has been alluded to throughout our discussion of its development and relationship with Protestant Christianity. For starters, the division of humanity into adherents of the 'Big Five' religions plus miscellaneous 'others' reflects an underlying political and economic discourse on what matters to 'us'. Indeed, a 'world religion' appears to be

> a tradition that has achieved sufficient power and numbers to enter our history to form it, interact with it, or thwart it. We recognise both the unity within and the diversity among the world religions because they correspond to important geopolitical entities with which we must deal. All 'primitives,' by way of contrast, may be lumped together, as may the 'minor religions,' because they do not confront our history in any direct fashion. From the point of view of power, they are invisible.
>
> *(J. Z. Smith 1998, 280)*

These invisible Others most obviously take the form of non-Western religions, or minority and new religions in the West, but the power imbalance of the WRP is not confined to the imbalance of colonial centres and peripheries (Owen 2011, 255); it further prioritizes the accounts of elites within specific traditions and communities. For example, as Owen notes, 'Hinduism as a World Religion does not include Hinduism as a village religion' (2011, 255). We see this in textbooks which distinguish between codified theologies and 'unsophisticated' beliefs on the ground (Weightman 1996, 294). Indeed, the focus on texts itself prioritizes elite accounts over those of the illiterate. Moreover, '[n]either Sanskrit nor Pali are vernacular languages, thus they cannot reflect the religious opinions of the nonliterate masses in anything other than an indirect manner' (King 1999, 66).

However, the West and 'the rest' is not the only imbalance inherent in the WRP. This elitism is further reflected in gender imbalance. Colonialism, the rationalism enshrined by the Enlightenment and the WRP itself are the products of men, as demonstrated by the dominance of male scholars in the history of the field (and, indeed, even continuing into the pages of this book). Feminist critiques throughout the twentieth century contributed significantly to a destabilization of the certainties embedded within the dominant 'enlightened' discourse of the West. This critique was realized in many important works of cultural anthropology, including the work of Mary Douglas, Ruth Benedict and other female scholars whose focus on the colonial periphery helped to significantly undermine the gendered and theologically inherited categories of established scholarly research.

These and other power dynamics are inherent in the act of classifying certain social phenomena as '(world) religions'. Timothy Fitzgerald argues forcefully that '[r]eligion is a modern invention which authorises and naturalises a form of Euro-American secular rationality. In turn, this supposed position of secular rationality constructs and authorises its "other," religion and religions' (2007, 6). He goes on to demonstrate that when scholars project 'religion' on to different contexts and languages, there is ambiguity surrounding whether they are imagining religion to be indistinguishable from culture, radically separated from the 'profane' world, or simply a projection 'of the Western religion–secular dichotomy, whereby religious practices are assumed to be different in kind from political, economic, and technical/instrumental ones' (2007, 104–105). More often than not, the projection of religion onto others – whether within or without our 'own' culture – involves being part of a hegemonic structure whereby politics and economics are constructed as inherently natural and rational. We see this logic at work in the administration of 'religion' through censuses and other state apparatus, where the WRP-inflected presumption is that an individual will be an adherent of a single 'faith' in a simple either–or binary, and that the number of adherents of specific traditions relates in some way to their legitimacy (see Chryssides *et al.* 2012).

Finally, by reifying vast swathes of human thought and activity into discrete 'isms', we present 'religions' as having both essence and agency. In such a model, it is not human beings, but Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. which compete, evolve, engage in dialogue and teach things (Suthren Hirst and Zavos 2005, 5). For example, Jack Miles, General Editor of *The Norton Anthology of World Religions* (Miles 2014a), describes how the volume 'responds to a simple desire ... that the six major, living, international world religions speak to readers *in their own words*' (2014b, xli; emphasis added). The idea that such a 'religious essence' exists which can express itself, independent of any human agency, is the *sui generis* model which, in the words of Russell McCutcheon, 'deemphasizes difference, history, and sociopolitical context in favour of abstract essences and homogeneity' (1997, 3). It presumes that the category of religion names a specific and stable set of things in the world set apart from all others. We argue, with Steven Ramey, that religion 'does not have

agency to teach or do anything' but is constructed by individuals who interpret practices and texts that they associate with religion/s 'in ways that relate to their particular context and the range of interests that enliven that context' (2014, 109). The WRP is one such construction, but one which has gained the hegemonic status of ahistorical, universal 'common sense'. This makes our mission of deconstruction simultaneously all the more difficult and all the more important. The non-confessional social-scientific study of religion must be self-reflexive and self-critical, and cognizant of the political and social implications of its influence upon media discourse and state apparatus such as censuses (Owen 2011, 260).

To conclude this section, rather than promoting critical thinking, we argue that the continued uncritical use of the WRP fosters a breeding ground for relativistic navel-gazing which has no place in the contemporary research university. Yet in spite of the critiques outlined above becoming an established part of the Religious Studies corpus, the need for scholars to continually remind their colleagues of the efficacy of these critiques has yet to abate (Owen 2011; Taira 2013; Beyer *et al.* 2013). The following section asks just why it is that the model remains so resiliently entrenched.

'Chairs on the *Titanic*': problems of operationalization of critiques

> An introductory course, then, is a first step in [training in argument about interpretations]. Arguments and interpretations are what we introduce, our particular subject matter serves merely as the excuse, the occasion, the 'e.g.'
>
> *(J. Z. Smith 2013, 14)*

Arguably, the area in which the WRP has proven most resilient is in pedagogy, and particularly in introductory courses on 'religion' (Owen 2011, 253). These courses may be students' only encounter with university-level Religious Studies, and have a major impact upon public perception of the field itself, and upon teaching throughout primary and secondary education (Geaves 2005). Distressingly, this tendency shows little sign of abeyance. For example, Simon Weightman, writing in John R. Hinnells' *A New Handbook of Living Religions* (1996), a textbook that is still widely used in RS introductory courses in the UK,[6] claims that:

> Hinduism displays few of the characteristics that are generally expected of a religion. It has no founder, nor is it prophetic. It is not creedal, nor is any particular doctrine, dogma or practice held to be essential to it. It is not a system of theology, nor a single moral code, and the concept of god is not central to it. There is no specific scripture or work regarded as being uniquely authoritative. Finally, it is not sustained by an ecclesiastical organization. Thus it is difficult to categorize Hinduism as a 'religion' using normally accepted criteria.
>
> *(Weightman 1996, 261)*

These criteria apply strictly only to prevalent models of Christianity and Islam, and therefore convey a very limited idea of 'normal'. Sadly, however, this bias is by no means unusual. A North American volume, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Walvoord 2007), despite a welcome focus on the practical aspects of pedagogy, divides the field into two: 'World Religions' and 'Theology, Bible, Christian Formation'. This not only reinforces the assumption that RS is either 'Christian' or 'Other', subscribing to the WRP explicitly, but seems unaware that RS can interrogate, rather than simply reproduce, such categories. It also problematically assumes that students' 'spiritual development' falls within the purview of RS.

This apologetic or even theological trajectory is also seen in the aforementioned *Norton Anthology*, which aims to assist readers 'to see others with a measure of openness, empathy, and good will' because, apparently, the aim of RS is to encourage 'human sympathy and cultural wisdom', and not to dispassionately analyse and critique discourses on 'religion', as these authors would suggest (Miles 2014b, 1). *The Norton Anthology* reproduces Weightman's problematic typology in other ways too; for example, it is explicitly based upon 'foundational' texts (back cover), yet admits that 'no canons existed for the literatures of the world's major religions' (Miles 2014b, xliii), and that the editors would be 'creating for the field of religious studies a first draft of the very canon that it lacked', as though this were the point of such a volume (2014b, xiv). Steven Ramey has recently argued that although we can debate the significance of such problems within many areas of RS, 'the[ir] prevalence ... in the textbook market is particularly pronounced' (2014, 110). Textbooks frequently reinforce students' desire to find the 'right answer' concerning others' religious beliefs and practices (ibid.), and can be viewed as participating in a dominant political discourse that promotes sameness whilst marginalizing difference (McCutcheon 1997, 161). Even a more nuanced example, Mark Juergensmeyer's *Teaching the Introductory Course in Religious Studies* (1991), which includes contributions from many of Religious Studies' (then) leading authorities and useful opinion essays on how one should/might teach the introductory course, rather uncritically adopts the very paradigm against which the present volume is designed. Before turning to an overview of the chapters presented within, our case is strengthened by briefly considering three prevalent pedagogical strategies that further shore up the WRP.

As noted above, the WRP as articulated today almost always includes 'the Big Five', although increasingly we see an additional sixth category added, such as 'East Asian traditions' (Confucianism, Daoism, Shinto) (MacWilliams *et al.* 2005, 2), indigenous religions, or less commonly, new or alternative religious movements. This is by no means universal, with *The Norton Anthology* reintroducing Daoism as the sixth-place category and ignoring indigenous and alternative religions altogether. The reasons given for the selection of these traditions are that these six, and no others, are 'major', 'living' and 'international' (2014, xlviii). Obviously, many criticisms might be offered here, such as whether Daoism is living, or Hinduism an international 'equal alongside other world religions' (Weightman 1996, 301), especially given that other textbook authors have advanced the view that 'religions characterized

under the rubric of traditional African religion have now attained an international status that qualifies them as members of the world religions' (Gore 2002, 226). The simplest criticism is, of course, that 'major' is quite plainly a value judgement. Moreover, it is stated in passing that the main reason for the omission of African religions is that they lack canonical texts (Miles 2014b, xlviii). In essence, such approaches explicitly reject the category while continuing to use the same typology (see, for example, Juergensmeyer 1991; Woodhead *et al.* 2002; Walvoord 2007). Rearranging 'the deckchairs on the *Titanic*', as Sutcliffe puts it in his chapter in this volume.[7]

Although these moves might seem at first a positive step, what such tinkering does is to further entrench the typology. The expanded WRP adds additional categories which act as 'pressure valves', allowing for voices which otherwise do not fit. Such incorporation essentially forces those traditions to behave like World Religions – for example, encouraging various African systems (plural) to be seen (and to see themselves) as 'African Religion' (singular), homogenizing difference and historical development, prioritizing certain structural features such as texts, institutions and 'high gods', and forcing a distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' systems. In so doing, differences and contradictions which might potentially challenge the presuppositions of the WRP are co-opted in its service, sometimes against the best intentions of authors and teachers constrained by the prevalent logics of textbook construction and use (Larsson 2014, 312), and similar pressures surrounding the construction of introductory courses. Where new syllabi are constructed, 'the approach of the course does not [necessarily] change significantly', remaining 'implicitly, if not explicitly, concerned with examining and comparing' seemingly autonomous 'religions' (McCutcheon 1997, 104).

A second approach is to talk primarily of 'Lived Religion', i.e. 'religion as expressed and experienced in the lives of individuals' (McGuire 2008, 3),[8] rather than in the systematized theologies of male elites. Such approaches, through their focus on the particular and contextual, 'challenge ... the "World Religions" approach of religious studies with its focus on discrete, generic traditions, and normative beliefs and practices' by 'starting from the particular rather than the general and focusing on what happens to religion' within specific contexts (Knott 2005, 118–119). However attractive such radical particularism might seem, it creates further pedagogical problems within the context of an introductory course or textbook. For a start, due to the constraints of time and space, a persistent danger is that the particularities become reified to generalities in students' minds – the many 'Christianities' become 'Christianity'. A potentially more serious pitfall, to which the authors can attest, is that this strategy runs the risk of producing a similarly entrenched problem to the generalities of the WRP, whereby students emerge from the introductory course with the attitude that 'anything goes', that all academic theorizing is worthless abstraction, and that subjective interpretations of individuals or local communities are what *really* matters, as opposed to history, tradition, etc.

Closely related to these is the 'Material Religion' approach, primarily promoted by David Morgan (beginning with 1999's *Visual Piety*). The Material Religion approach, which advocates studying specific physical objects involved in religious behaviour, has quickly become one of the most fashionable methodologies in contemporary Religious Studies, with numerous edited volumes, conferences and a journal focusing on it. By prioritizing material products, the argument goes, scholars avoid over-reliance on textual sources and speculation on abstracted 'beliefs', refocusing analysis towards everyday human behaviour – an aim the authors would support. Unfortunately, the Material Religion approach seems to inevitably slide into 'phenomenology by stealth'; as McCutcheon notes, talk quickly turns to how religion 'manifests' itself, or how objects 'embody the sacred' (McCutcheon 2013). Thus a methodology meant to focus only on the immanent turns to the transcendent, and scholars once again repeat the essentialist suppositions of Eliade, Otto and their ilk. Seeking to avoid the WRP, these approaches in fact further entrench the problems inherent in it.

It is worth noting that the accumulation of critique detailed above should not be taken as implying that the WRP – and these flawed attempts to avoid it – have no pedagogical value whatsoever. In fact, as we turn to the chapters contained within this volume, particularly those in the first part, it should become evident to the reader that strategically or subversively employing the WRP in classroom situations can be a rewarding pedagogical technique. The WRP is, after all, a culturally constructed symbol, metaphor, or tool, that functions to simplify, for 'good' or 'ill', areas of human behaviour that have been deemed 'religious', in a manner which efficiently communicates 'key points' to constituents of varied levels of ability and spans of attention. And, as many of the chapters in this volume demonstrate, a 'problematic book or text', for example, can 'be utilized as a pedagogical resource' (Larsson 2014, 312). In a limited sense, then, the WRP performs a service. However, as should be clear from the preceding discussion, problems occur when the WRP and other constructed paradigms are taken as constitutive of reality, and when said 'key points' are reified as *sui generis* 'facts', rather than the agenda- and power-laden intellectual constraints that they are. Thus, in addition to presenting viable approaches to RS which in no way presuppose the WRP, this volume considers possible ways forward for scholars who are required to teach a World Religions course, and reflects on how we can avoid alternative models succumbing to the same uncritical essentialism as the WRP itself.

Outline of chapters

The chapters that follow offer a broad range of innovative theoretical and methodological approaches, and directly address the variety of pedagogical challenges presented in different departmental, institutional and geographical contexts. The first part, 'Subversive pedagogies: data and methods', addresses the fact that for many academics, simply starting from scratch is not an option. Whether this is through institutional pressure, tradition, student preference, political factors or other reasons (cf. McCutcheon 1997, 104), in many cases the only way to reform the system is to employ subversive pedagogies – working with an established World Religions

model and critiquing from within. Chapters in this part therefore start with the WRP, suggesting opportunities to interrogate or subvert it.

In the first chapter, 'The problem of "religions": teaching against the grain with "new age stuff"', Steven J. Sutcliffe (University of Edinburgh, UK) describes his experience of teaching sections on 'new age' formations in the context of a WRP-structured introductory course. For many academics, especially in the UK, this is a necessity; however, Sutcliffe argues that such content can 'punch above its weight' by offering a theoretical challenge to the students' received understanding of the self-evident existence of plural 'religions'. Rather, drawing on the work of R.D. Baird and J.Z. Smith, he argues that new age formations can be used as empirical evidence for 'the more theoretically adaptable and resistable concept of "religion"'.

'"Not a task for amateurs": graduate instructors and Critical Theory in the World Religions classroom' offers a different take on the same problem, by focusing on the role of postgraduate tutors and instructors who do not have any power to challenge the structure of introductory courses. Reflecting on their time at Florida State University, USA, Tara Baldrick-Morrone, Michael Graziano and Brad Stoddard argue that such roles nevertheless offer rich possibilities for introducing critical reflection, with the tutor/instructor essentially offering a meta-critique of the course structure itself. They suggest that using the course textbooks as data, contrasting how a particular issue is addressed or ignored by different texts, allows instructors to demonstrate that these books do not simply describe *sui generis* religious entities, but rather reflect the interests and biases of the scholars and academic culture which produced them. Further, they demonstrate how such texts can serve as examples that show how scholars of religion construct homogeneity from heterogenous empirical data.

An interesting further possibility is suggested in Steven W. Ramey's (University of Alabama, USA) chapter, 'The critical embrace: teaching the World Religions Paradigm as data'. While a 'World Religions' class may be an institutional requirement, Ramey suggests using the WRP itself as data. Using a traditional WRP-structured textbook critically allows teachers to introduce critique through a model with which they are already familiar, while exposing how the typology was constructed and reinforced by human beings with specific concerns and contexts. Ramey therefore advocates using the development of the WRP as a way into understanding the power plays behind the contemporary popular and academic discourse on religion.

Assuming that one is in a position to propose introductory courses which do not follow a World Religions model – what options are there? The second part, 'Alternative pedagogies: power and politics', offers theoretical models which can be used to explore and interrogate the category 'religion' without following the WRP. Of particular importance here is the issue of power: who benefits from 'world religions' – or 'religion', for that matter?

The first chapter in this part is Craig Martin's (St Thomas Aquinas College, USA) 'Religion as ideology: recycled culture vs. world religions'. Martin argues that introductory courses can be constructed around a scaffold of theoretical questions, with particular data or content being drawn from various 'world religions' in order to meet students' expectations halfway. Reflecting on his experiences teaching a pairing of seemingly orthodox WRP courses – 'Religions of the West' and 'Religions of the East' – and also the more provocatively titled 'The Evolution of Jesus', Martin demonstrates how one can deliver the basic content students desire, while taking a quasi-Marxist functional approach to show them how those basics are used, reused, and recycled in support of various social agendas in different times and places. He concludes, forcefully, that 'students are better served by courses that promote critical thinking as opposed to the accumulation of historical trivia'.

Teemu Taira's (University of Helsinki, Finland) 'Doing things with "religion": a discursive approach in rethinking the World Religions Paradigm' begins by outlining what taking a discursive approach to 'religion' might mean, arguing that while discourses on 'religion' might operate at all levels of society, their function varies enormously from situation to situation and requires detailed empirical study. Taira's chapter provides a practical guide for instantiating such an approach in the classroom, and argues for greater problematization, denaturalization and historicization of World Religions discourse, the introduction of ethnographic material to disrupt stable, pristine and homogeneous WRP-inflected presentations, and for explicit exploration of the category of 'religion' in the classroom. Finally, Taira presents a substantial overview of readings – some of which are explicitly 'discursive', and others that can be reinterpreted from a discursive point of view – that can be assigned to students or integrated into lectures by those wishing to pursue this approach.

Paul-François Tremlett (The Open University, UK) turns the discussion back to Marx, whose thinking underlies much of this part, and the critical study of religion. 'Looking back on the end of religion: opening re Marx' suggests engaging students in a critical reading of Marx in order to destabilize their assumption of reason as objective and disinterested, and move them towards 'a conception of reason as a social practice beyond the binary of subject-centred reason and experience' as suggested by Marcuse, Adorno, Habermas and others. This is done to demonstrate that the students are themselves implicated in the history of the WRP, and the idea of 'religion' itself.

The final chapter in this part focuses upon the contested category of 'the sacred' as a potentially useful tool for broadening and dissecting WRP-dominated approaches. In 'The sacred alternative', Suzanne Owen (Leeds Trinity University and University of Chester, UK) weaves theoretical discussion with an empirical example from a local Pagan festival in the UK to demonstrate the limitations of both the Durkheimian and Eliadean 'sacred' as an analytical framework in cases where 'religion' is ambiguous. Despite this, Owen argues that a focus on 'making sacred' as a human activity that highlights a group's interests is a useful pedagogical alternative to the WRP.

By this point, the volume has critiqued the WRP, subverted it, and provided alternatives to it – now we need to put these measures into practice. The final part of the volume, 'Innovative pedagogies: methods and media', presents innovative pedagogical techniques that facilitate the twenty-first century introduction to 'religion' and, by their very nature, avoid and problematize the WRP, whilst

potentially increasing the transmission and internalization of this critique in the next generation of scholars. Can emergent pedagogical techniques be used alongside the methodological approaches already explored to create new ways to introduce Religious Studies? The following four chapters therefore offer alternative entry-points into conceptualizing 'religion'.

Food is the entry-point in Michel Desjardins' chapter, 'The Desjardins diet for World Religions Paradigm loss', which presents his course as run at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada. Desjardins suggests that teachers can help students to think differently about 'religion' – and therefore the WRP – not by focusing on theory, but by 'creating learning spaces within a thematic course in which students can arrive at more complex understandings of human culture'. It is therefore an example of how using alternative data can help to destabilize preconceptions in the academic study of religion, allowing students to arrive at theoretical conclusions for themselves.

In 'Narrating the USA's religious pluralism: escaping world religions through media', David W. McConeghy (Chapman University, USA) describes his experiences using the PBS television documentary series 'God in America' as a primary and secondary source, and suggests that introductory students can avoid conventional paradigms that trap material into pre-existing models by deconstructing and closely examining the composition of religious narratives. Examining the trope of the United States as the world's most religiously diverse nation provides a powerful means to subvert the dominance of the WRP in the classroom. This creates many opportunities for students and teachers to reveal more complex lives and worldviews without homogenizing differences.

In 'Archaeology and the World Religions Paradigm: the European Neolithic, religion and cultural imperialism', Carole M. Cusack (University of Sydney, Australia) interrogates the idea that self-contained, boundaried 'World Religions' spread across geographical and temporal locations (via mission, imperialism, and colonialism), and then subjugated the indigenous religions of the dominated societies. Here the alternative entry point is archaeological data from Northern European Neolithic peoples, including the Stones of Stenness and the Ness of Brodgar in the Orkneys, and Stonehenge and Durrington Walls on Salisbury Plain. She argues that by using archaeological data rather than *a priori* religious categories, RS can be redirected towards 'a model that is non-elitist, fluid, and non-normative'.

Dominic Corrywright's (Oxford Brookes University, UK) 'Complex learning and the World Religions Paradigm: teaching religion in a shifting subject landscape' takes the issue of pedagogy head on. Rounding off this part of the book, the chapter aligns post-WRP approaches with emergent pedagogical techniques wherein students and teachers become co-pilots navigating a super-abundant sea of data. Corrywright demonstrates that analysis of categories and their deconstruction can be a core mode of teaching.

The volume is bookended by a Foreword from James L. Cox, whose accessible but nonetheless challenging work on the WRP inspired the editors' interest in the subject, and whose interview for the Religious Studies Project (Cox 2013) started the process which would culminate in this book; and an Afterword by Russell T. McCutcheon, who suggested the book and whose work has influenced many of the chapters herein. Both the Foreword and Afterword offer substantial commentary on the themes of this book, with Cox and McCutcheon bringing their own inimitable styles to bear on the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the (de)classification of the 'planet' Pluto, and more. Our sincere thanks to them and all of the contributors.

Notes

1 That this particular date has symbolic significance reinforces the point. It is also worth noting contextual differences in numerical date formats: in the UK, for example, this date would be referred to as 13/02/2015, whereas in the US the dominant format is 02/13/15.

2 We encourage those interested in this development to seek out Timothy Fitzgerald's *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity* (2007), Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), Brent Nongbri's *Before Religion* (2013), or a number of other seminal works cited throughout this volume.

3 Andrew McKinnon traces this line of thought to the mid-nineteenth century, suggesting that Ludwig Feuerbach 'was the first to argue that "religion" in the generic sense was a single thing with a single essence' (2005, 29).

4 Similarly, in *Trying Leviathan: The Nineteenth-century New York Court Case That Put the Whale on Trial and Challenged the Order of Nature* (2007), D. Graham Burnett describes how the decision about whether a whale was a fish or a mammal came down ultimately to economic factors.

5 See, for example, Fitzgerald (2000; 2007), Lincoln (1992), Masuzawa (2005), McCutcheon (1997), Nongbri (2013) and J. Z. Smith (1978; 1998).

6 The authors are most familiar with textbooks that are utilized in the UK. See McCutcheon (2014) for a critique of some prominent textbooks in the USA – particularly Esposito *et al.* (2002) and Fisher (2003) – and Emanuelsson (2014) for an analysis of representations of Islam in textbooks prominent in Sweden.

7 See also McCutcheon (2014). Or, to continue with the zoological language from earlier in the chapter, as 'formulating the most appropriate accommodation arrangements for the animals on board the Tsimtsum', the Japanese freighter in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, a story that provides a useful pedagogical tool to both problematize assumptions about singular 'religious' identifications and the relationship between 'belief' and 'truth'.

8 See also many similar formulations, such as 'Everyday Religion' (Ammerman 2007), 'Folk Religion' (Yoder 1974), 'Vernacular Religion' (Primiano 1995; Bowman and Valk 2012) or 'Popular Religion' (Jolly 1996).

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PART I

Subversive pedagogies: data and methods