

Teaching the Introduction to Religions: Religious Pluralism in a Post-Colonial World

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Abstract. *Taking seriously the implications of post-colonial theory, the authors revisit the introductory course (normally “World Religions”) as a course on the plurality of religions in contemporary U.S. culture. They explain the structure of the course, and discuss practical and ethical issues around student field visits to learn about other religions.*

Introduction

The introductory course to “World Religions,” which is currently enjoying growing popularity in the movement toward multiculturalism in many educational institutions, is the subject of much debate. Comparative method, although having roots in the nineteenth century, has been the basis of many world religions courses since the late 1950s; it is most frequently deployed as an organizing principle in the “matrix model” described below. At its foundation this method reflects a modernist, Western hope in the possibility of comprehending a universal pattern of religious thought and action. However, post-colonial critics have identified in universalism and perennialism a tendency to manufacture a false image of an “other” which is in reality little more than an uncorroborated projection of the assumptions and assertions of the self, a way of legitimizing one’s own religious perspective. Rather than seeking to define and describe what it means to be a religious human being on a universal level, many scholars – including post-colonial critics – argue that particularism, or the specific contexts of religiosity must be examined. This project is based on the assumption that differences, rather than a specious universality, should be the subject for our study.

Why Post-Colonial Discourse and Comparative Religious Studies?

In most cases, the comparative study of religions, including its methods and texts, is pursued by a scholar who is an “outsider,” i.e., not a “believer” of at least one of the traditions involved. In this terrain of cross-cultural study, the ways in which a religious tradition and its adherents are represented have come under scrutiny by “insiders” who have pointed out the serious and frequently self-serving misconceptions and inaccuracies often found in outsider accounts. Post-colonial discourse seeks to address the myriad and complex layers of interactions between cultural outsiders and insiders (and the many positions in-between) through highlighting the problematics and politics of representation. Post-colonial discourse also prompts us to examine the representation of religion from multiple subjectivities, by attending to multiple voices which describe a multiform reality too complex to be appreciated – or homogenized – by a single authority. At the same time, this examination recognizes that multiple subjectivities often involve conflicting claims of authority and these tensions are to be recognized rather than resolved.

A Brief Introduction to Post-Colonial Discourse: Definitions and Development

Post-colonial discourse is expressed in many historical, linguistic, geographical, and disciplinary contexts; as a result of this diversity there is no consensus as to its definition. It can refer to the writing (and oral traditions) of either the colonizers or the colonized.¹ Further, post-colonial writing is generally understood to begin at either of two points: 1) with the invasion by a foreign power and/or the establishment of the colonial regime in a particular context (assuming that post-colonialism, in the form of resistance, began

almost immediately after the onset of colonialism); or, 2) at the end of the formal colonialism, with the dissolution of a foreign-dominated colonial government. In the vast majority of cases, colonialism has been replaced by neo-colonialism, which may also be included as a post-colonial phenomenon. For the purposes of this article, the term “post-colonial” will refer to writings and oral traditions (including ritual performances) of peoples who have experienced both institutionalized and informal social, economic, political, religious, or cultural domination, including slavery, racism, introduction of new diseases, and many forms of material and spiritual deprivation.

Post-colonial writing has developed through several phases. In most locales, first were accounts by colonizers of the newly acquired territory and the experience of exile from a distant homeland. Soon afterward, the colonized began expressing themselves, focusing on themes of socio-economic oppression, disruption of culture, alienation, and exile from either traditional² (i.e., pre-colonial) and/or dominant cultures. Perhaps better known are what might be called the “revolutionary” writers, who critiqued the colonial system (usually influenced to some degree by a school of Marxism) and advocated the replacement by violent or democratic means of foreign-dominated governments and the purging of the pernicious aspects of colonial influence. Additionally, the Négritude movement attempted to combat internalized racism by proclaiming the unity of the African diaspora around an assumed shared cultural reservoir. Writers such as the Africans Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Chinua Achebe, and more recently, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, are exemplary of this stage of development.³ The Italian Antonio Gramsci has also had considerable influence on (among others) liberation theologians and the post-colonial Indian historiographic project, the Subaltern Studies Group.

Edward Said is often cited as having initiated post-colonial discourse as an academic discipline when his *Orientalism* was published (1979). *Orientalism* in part seeks to identify, critique, and trace through the documentary record the representation of the Orient (particularly, the “Near East”) by Europeans and Euro-Americans. This representation has specific characteristics which developed over time into a large, interrelated body of culturally accepted (i.e., by the West) stereotypes, which became the West’s “truth” about the Orient and Islam; it was a cultural product which served the interests of a Western world seeking dominance and self-legitimization, not an attempt at an objective encounter with the realities of Middle Eastern religious traditions, societies, and cultures. Methodologically, Said combines many of the anti-colonial concerns of the revolutionary writers with the views of contemporary Europeans Michel Foucault and Gramsci.⁴

In addition to the themes indicated above which addressed various experiences of alienation or exile, post-colonial writers have been concerned with the interaction between dominating and dominated cultures. Because of their intimate relationships and interactions, issues and terms such as cultural appropriation, hybridity, syncretism, Creole/mestizo/mixed blood, borders/borderlands/boundaries are often featured as ways of representing the post-colonial experience. Also, given the context of foreign domination, the question of agency (i.e., the ability of peoples to act and speak effectively as change agents on their own behalf) is quite prominent in the literature.

Some of the goals of post-colonial writing, whether expository or narrative, include a concern for subversion, that is, to render ineffective the dominant colonial cultural point of view, either through critique (including satire) or replacement. Further, there is a desire to expose colonial assumptions by “interrogating” the text for signs of bias, negative attitudes toward the colonized, voices which are given priority, and voices which are silenced or “put under erasure.” “Reading against the grain” is the technique by which the post-colonial critic attempts to determine how the social, political, economic, racial, gender, and cultural “location” of the writer affects the text, and whether the writer has “privileged” a particular point of view by failing to uncover or unfairly disparaging any competing narratives. Also, in addition to focusing on critique of European and Euro-American sources, there is also an attempt to create texts which express a vision of reality or a point of view completely (or largely) unpolluted by colonialism, or which depicts its socio-cultural reversal or eradication.

Also, a wide variety of academic disciplines, genres, and literary techniques are used in the service of post-colonialism. Probably in reflection of Edward Said’s influence, belles-lettres and literature are the genres most associated with post-colonial discourse. However, the effects have been felt such that philosophy, anthropology, geography, history/historiography, and religious studies are among those disciplines currently embroiled in controversies related to post-colonial theory. Specifically, with regard to religious studies, an obvious site for post-colonial critique is the “matrix” model.

Problematizing the Matrix Model of Religious Pluralism

Post-colonial thought provides an important opportunity to challenge the all too common, but seriously flawed “matrix model” of religions.⁵ Rarely explicit, the matrix model can be discerned as informing much of both the study of religions and the teaching about religions. The term “matrix model” is used to

identify an approach to religious pluralism in which a matrix is created by crossing two axes of analysis. One axis of the matrix is a list of “world’s religions” or “religions in the U.S.,” e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Chinese Religions. The other axis is a list of analytic categories which provide the terms of the comparison, e.g., god, founder, text. The designation of these two – religions to be compared and analytic categories – creates the matrix. The balance of the task involves filling in the cells of the matrix.

The problematic character of the model itself is revealed by examining the items arranged along the two axes. For example, it may seem very straightforward to include among the analytic categories that of founder. This works well enough for Christianity and Islam, and one can select Moses as the founder of Judaism, though that itself is questionable, given the importance of Abraham. The identification of a “founder” for Taoism, however, has led to an even more difficult situation. Contemporary research indicates that the figures of Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, and Lieh-tzu, long considered the founders of the Taoist tradition, were in fact marginal to a pre-existing tradition. This error is only compounded by the legendary status of Lao-tzu. The centrality of place given to these “founders” by older scholarship – which remains the basis for many textbooks – has led to a pseudo-history of Taoism. This pseudo-history includes the commonly held view of later Taoism as a corrupt form of Taoism, one which had fallen away from the pure, ethical, and philosophic teachings of the “founders.” Thus, the demands of the matrix have not only created founders out of figures who were marginal to the historical tradition, but have also created a history of decadence, which interestingly matches the Enlightenment’s vision of later Christianity as a decay from the purely ethical teachings of Jesus. Indeed, when the scholar seeks to reflect as accurately as possible the specifics of each tradition, it is moot as to whether or not there are *any* meaningful analytic categories of “religious universals.”

On a broader level, the choice of analytic categories implicitly defines the characteristics which are “significant.” The categories selected almost invariably derive from Western religions, philosophy, or the Euro-American study of religions. Thus, the matrix model reproduces the colonial construction of Orientalism, by naming and re-making non-Western traditions according to Western structures of thought. In this process, non-Western religions are misrepresented or distorted, their own significant categories ignored and reduced to only those facts which the West exploits to undergird its own construction of religious reality.

The other axis of the matrix is also problematic: the standard list of “world religions” or “world religions in the U.S.” While the first axis implies that there are

categories which can be applied with equal propriety to all religious traditions, this other axis implies that there is a discrete set of monolithic religious entities identifiably separate from one another. The list which is chosen for this axis indicates to the student the relative worth of the religions selected. For example, if Christianity is divided into Catholic and Protestant, and Buddhism is not divided into Theravada and Mahayana,⁶ then the student implicitly understands that the entirety of Buddhism is of equal importance to a part of the Christian tradition. Similarly, the erasure of Orthodox and Coptic Christianities implies that they are of lesser value than other forms of Christianity.

In addition to the issue of relative value, there are constructed traditions, e.g., Hinduism, a category produced by a colonial power to serve its own interests. Originally introduced by the Muslim conquerors of north India, and employed in turn by the British, “Hinduism” initially corresponded to no indigenous/insider category.⁷ (The issue has been made even more complex by the eventual adoption of the term as a category of self-identification by many Indians. All categories are political.) The model of religions as monolithic and separate also reinforces essentialist assumptions which produce pseudo-issues such as “the problem of syncretism.”

A third area which must be addressed is that of filling in the cells of the matrix. As mentioned above, Taoism had a set of pseudo-“historical founders” created for it in order to fill in the cell under the category “founder.” Again the case of Hinduism does not fit the matrix analysis because many “Hindus” claim that the tradition is based upon the Vedas, held to be eternal and absolute, rather than upon any founding figure. Do we then say that the founders are “really” the ancient sages who are supposed to have heard the texts of the Vedas, thereby filling in the cell of the matrix in opposition to the view of adherents? Or do we leave the cell empty, which the attentive student – trained by us to think in terms of filling in the cells of the matrix – may well experience as a deficit, an implication that Hinduism is deficient in that, unlike other “world religions,” it lacks a founder.

Finally, the cells do not allow room for illustrating the nuances within each religion between folk traditions (or everyday beliefs and practices of lay people) and scriptural or priestly traditions (controlled primarily by religious professionals).

This discussion should demonstrate that the problems with the matrix model are more than simply a matter of minor adjustments – getting the right list of analytic categories and the proper set of “world religions.” It is rather that this approach is fundamentally flawed, and that a study of religious pluralism based upon this Procrustean method will be equally flawed.

The Course Per Se

Our overarching goal was to present the diversity of religions in a wide variety of specific contexts, not as a set of texts or practices which could be easily parceled out in the abstract. Therefore, an appropriate contextualization for world religions is "Religious Pluralism in the U.S." In the fall of 1996, the two of us co-taught a graduate seminar on religious pluralism in the United States. This was sponsored by a Newhall grant from the Graduate Theological Union (GTU). The seminar attempted to bring a post-colonial perspective to bear on this topic, particularly in relation to the pedagogic issues involved in teaching such an introductory survey course. Students in the seminar were given a variety of tasks intended to move them beyond the standard formulaic memorization of beliefs, practices, names, and events.

For their own work students chose one particular religious tradition on which to focus. They were expected to pursue four tasks which were aimed at assisting them in developing their own insights into the process of representation. First, they were to select a fictional or autobiographical work to read, research, and report on to the seminar (the list of readings is available online at <http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu>), in order to give them access to a first person narrative describing the religious experiences of people involved in the religious tradition. Second, students were to review a variety of standard textbooks to see how the religious tradition they had chosen is usually represented. (A set of guidelines was prepared; see appendix.) This task was intended to set in contrast authoritative third person descriptions of a religion with the first person narratives. The third task was to perform a site visit to a temple/shrine/church/mosque/? to observe the tradition in action, for a third perspective – in addition to the first person narrative and the third person authority. The goal here was not to claim that any one of these is the exclusively true representation, but rather to create a critical sensitivity to the issue of representation. The fourth task was more directly oriented toward their pedagogic training; they were to compile a narrative bibliography of materials which could be employed to teach a section of an introductory survey course on the tradition they had chosen.

In order to demonstrate how issues of representation impact the study of religion, we began with a session on the Native American Bole Maru tradition, for several reasons. First, as Joel Martin has pointed out (1991), the use of Sioux or other Plains groups as exemplary of Native American spiritual traditions is so prevalent as to have become virtually stereotypical, obscuring the great variety of Native traditions, particularly the many spiritually-based movements which resisted foreign domination. Additionally, Bole Maru is a modern

phenomenon, a "hybrid" blend of healing traditions of the Pomo peoples with Christianity, thus illustrating an example of a creative religious response to changing historical circumstances. Many Western scholars have asserted that change was impossible (or highly undesirable) in indigenous contexts, thus concluding that Native American traditions were "incompatible with modernity" and necessarily doomed.⁸ Further, the Bole Maru tradition is an important correction to the almost exclusive focus on two other modern phenomena, the Ghost Dance and Handsome Lake's prophecies. The Ghost Dance was made famous through the massacre of Mnikowoju Lakota people at Wounded Knee, and is discussed by scholars generally in a negative, or pitiable, light as a demonstration of a movement which resisted Euro-American domination and led to devastating tragedy. As Martin points out, the Ghost Dance is often contrasted with the prophecies of the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake – as described by anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace (1972) – whose movement "embraced" Christianity, and was evaluated by Wallace as "successful," implying that acceptance of Euro-American domination was a better choice than resistance. Despite its shortcomings, Wallace's work on the Seneca, together with his related creation of the category of "religious revitalization movement" (1956), is often used today without critique.

There are several excellent resources which assisted in our exploration of issues of representation and Bole Maru. We assigned Said's article, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology and Its Interlocutors" (1989) in order to introduce the post-colonial concerns described above, as well as others. Fortunately for religious studies scholars, there is an excellent account from an insider, Greg Sarris, himself a Bole Maru practitioner and scholar, which recounts in first person his (and his family's) experience with a classic ethnographic film depicting a family member conducting a healing ceremony. Sarris discusses the ethical implications – for himself and for others – of showing and discussing the healing ritual performed in the film *Sucking Doctor* to a general audience (Sarris 1993). Other helpful resources include a rather standard treatment of the Bole Maru tradition by two Native American writers who are not Pomo, and accounts by non-Native anthropologists.⁹

These selections were used as background for the class to enter a discussion of the relative value of the differing kinds of written sources (i.e., how did the location of the writers affect their accounts of Bole Maru), and whether or not we should view the film and what would be our purposes for doing so. Also, if the film was considered a ritual performance, should the cultural restrictions imposed by the Bole Maru practitioners be observed by the students; i.e., should menstruating women view the film?

The group decided to view the film (although if any had reservations, there was certainly no pressure to participate in the viewing). The cultural opacity of the film offers an excellent opportunity for students to reflect on questions such as, “Is there anything truly relevant in my own cultural experience that helps me in ‘entering’ the experience of the film?” “How can I know if I am properly understanding the action?” “Is it justifiable or ethical for an uninitiated person to participate in the film?” The most basic question for the class was, “Can we enter the experience in an ‘authentic’ way, or due to the nature of its cultural distance from those of us in the class, is the film only a ‘spectacle?’”

What Didn't Work

First, the number of different tasks meant that the students could not spend an adequate amount of time on any one of them, particularly given the extensive set of assigned readings. Any one of these four could have been the single assignment for the seminar. Second, several of the students had seemingly never encountered a narrative bibliography, and even when the instructors had thought that they had communicated their expectations, the students had difficulty with the intended format of the assignment.

The site visit proved to be the most problematic, ironically as a result of exposing the students to a post-colonial perspective. The ethical implications of seeing the other as a kind of spectacle, an intellectual voyeurism, led to such a heightened self-consciousness that several of the students found it difficult to engage in site visits at all. In some religious studies departments the site visit seems to have become a very popular assignment, and the authors are conflicted over it. Firsthand contact cannot be replaced by text – written or filmed. It forces students to problematize their own location and relationship to a living faith community. However, when semester after semester monks, ministers, priests, gurus, and other community leaders are besieged by undergraduates motivated only by the desire to fulfill a required assignment, this can generate ill-will toward the university, not to mention the cause of interreligious understanding. One of us knows a Buddhist priest who upon being approached for an interview, asks students what they have read in preparation for the visit. If they've not themselves made the effort to prepare for the interview, he refuses. By studying in preparation, having made a personal investment toward understanding the tradition, it is to be hoped that site visits would not devolve into the viewing of a spectacle.

Concerns regarding site visits raise deeper questions related to the post-colonial agenda. Specifically, the ideal of academic freedom to pursue knowledge for its

own sake has led to exploitation and denigration of many of the peoples and cultures which became the objects of the colonizer's gaze. Therefore, many aspects of culture, including those related to religion, should be considered intellectual property, which is *not* free for the taking. Rather, a new paradigm of cross-cultural (and religious) studies must be employed which is based on a reciprocal relationship. Rather than a scholar in the field feeling entitled to mining whatever riches he or she can put hands on, the valuable gift of information should result in a mutually accountable relationship between those who seek to understand and those who own cultural property.

As this applies to site visits, students should not be anonymous “drop-ins,” who are only seeking information. For the best results, there should be a relationship of respect and trust between the instructor and the members of the communities (or their leaders) who will be receiving the students. At the very least, a phone call to the site is required, with questions about how and when students might be welcome, any restrictions they would like to make on visitors, and appropriate etiquette or dress to be observed. Students should also be reminded about the customs for various institutions: they are first guests, and second, researchers. If it is culturally appropriate, students might be encouraged to take an inexpensive offering as a gesture of respect – some fruit, flowers, tobacco, or a small monetary donation, and/or offer a word of thanks when such would be welcomed. Instructors, too, should not forget to express gratitude for hospitality at the end of the semester, and inquire if the site visits created a burden for the community.

What Worked Well

The use of fiction as religious studies texts provided a fresh perspective for understanding religious or spiritual traditions in their cultural contexts. In some cases, fiction is the most accessible written form in which insiders present this aspect of their cultural knowledge. However, even though fiction is treated by the dominant culture as subjective expression, Talal Asad (1993, 284) points out that the use of this genre did not protect Salman Rushdie from accusations of blasphemy in *The Satanic Verses*. Therefore, we must remember that the portrayal of religious traditions, whether in fictional or non-fictional sources, is taken seriously by insiders, and must be handled in the classroom with appropriate sensitivity.

Also, in order to bring less traditional sources for the study of religion into the classroom, there was extremely positive response to the use of music, videos, and Hollywood films which featured sympathetic treatments of religious themes; we used “The Chosen” and “Little Buddha.”

In order to provide another source for the evaluation of texts, we brought in a number of guest speakers to address the description of their own traditions. These speakers, although all were insiders, had different locations: some were faculty or students at the GTU, others were community workers (including a pastor), another was a volunteer who made these kinds of presentations on a regular basis. Although all were long-time, active participants in a religious institution, and therefore equally qualified to discuss their traditions, not all were equally received by the students. In hindsight, it would have been instructive to have an extended discussion of how the students' expectations impacted their evaluation of the speakers. Another important question raised by the presentation of Islam was, "How does the fact that dominant media for the most part portray this religion negatively affect both the students and the spokesperson?"

Conclusion

The point has been made recently that the study of the world's religions can be done here in the United States, and our classrooms are now populated with members of the religious traditions about which we are teaching.¹⁰ This situation opens up a variety of opportunities at the same time that it requires an increasing sensitivity to the issues of representation. Students who are themselves insiders will scrutinize our "received textbooks" in ways we may have never thought to do ourselves. A post-colonial critique opens the door to increasingly diverse and profound levels of cross-cultural encounter.

Notes

1. The understanding of "colonialism" is also variously applied – situations which fit the classical economic colonialism of the fifteenth through nineteenth centuries at one extreme to virtually any situation in which a minority is oppressed within a dominant culture at the other. The summary of post-colonialism which follows relies in large part on the introductions to three anthologies: Ashcroft et al. (1995), Tiffin and Lawson (1994), and Williams and Chrisman (1994).
2. "Traditional" is also a highly contested term. It has been used in the past as a way of describing a "pre-contact" (i.e., contact with European or Euro-American outsiders) static, reified religio-cultural complex, which was incorrectly assumed to have changed very little or not at all through history. Here, we use "traditional" to imply a religio-cultural complex with ancient roots, which places great value on continuity with the past, and has changed in varying degrees throughout history.
3. These writers and their points of view were supported and echoed by some Europeans, notably Jean-Paul Sartre. This relationship between post-colonialism and European post-modern (and post-structuralist) thought was continued in succeeding generations, as noted with Foucault below.
4. Interestingly, post-colonialism was not recognized as an academic discipline until, through Said's work, post-colonial writing was put into direct dialogue with European philosophies; one might question if the Eurocentric bias was effectively displaced in this process.
5. The matrix model problematically assumes the western notion that "religion" is an easily identified, clearly delimited field across cultures. For those cultures in which there is no attempt to separate secular from religious matters, the concept of "religion" is itself inappropriate or irrelevant.
6. The division of Buddhism into these two categories is itself problematic. There is a third form of these forms. Also, the term "Theravada" only identifies one particular lineage out of a wide range of lineages which shared a set of doctrinal positions distinct from the Mahayana. For a discussion of the problematics of these categories, see D. Seyfort Ruegg's presidential address (Ruegg 1992). This article includes a critique of Said's treatment of Sylvain Lévi, one of the founding figures of Buddhist studies.
7. *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, s.v. "Hinduism." This article argues at some length against "disinventing Hinduism," eventually opting for Gabriella Eirchinger Ferro-Luzzi's combination polyethnic and prototypic approaches. Unfortunately such sophisticated definitional strategies are often lost on students who seem to generally assume that all singular terms identify singular entities. Rather than retaining a term which can mislead students, it might be better to employ a phrase, e.g., "South Asian Religions," which is clearly a cover term.
8. If this premise accepted, the student will be led to the false conclusion that cultural genocide of Native peoples is regrettable, but inevitable.
9. The account can be found in: Beck and Walters (1977). The brief standard ethnographic account is Meighan and Addell (1972).
- 10 See, for example, Eck (1996).

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APPENDIX

Religious Pluralism in the United States: Textbooks on Religion in the United States

Things to Consider

1. What is the organizing principle? Are the chapters arranged by religions, by chronology, by region, or by some other thematic principle?
2. What is considered worthy of mention (selection implies importance)? Are the same events, people, institutions mentioned by several authors? What purpose(s) are served by these examples? Are the events mentioned actually historically pivotal or are they being presented as emblematic?
3. How much attention is paid to the plurality of causal factors? Or, is the explanatory structure flattened out as a linear causality?
4. What can you determine about the positionality of the author? Does he/she tell you about his/her location? What agenda does the author have in mind (other of course than money, tenure, and fame which are givens)? Is that made explicit or is it kept implicit?
5. What is taken as normal/normative?
6. What metaphors are employed? Are they sustained over the course of the work? Do they lead to implications not supported (that is, argument by analogy)?

Textbooks for Review

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