I have never known a time of such rapid swings both in the academy and in the world. Is “Religion” losing its importance once again except as a problem? Our students increasingly identify with spirituality but not religion. Look at this PEW chart:

http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/us-public-becoming-less-religious/

However an SSRC study in 2007 just under a decade ago claimed,

More than ever, religion has become a hot button topic on college campuses. “Scholars and administrators are noticing that our students are more religious than previous generations of college students, and they don’t have a clear sense of why,” notes Darren Sherkat, a professor at Southern Illinois University. Mark C. Taylor, a visiting professor in Columbia University’s department of religion, agrees. “More college students seem to be practicing traditional forms of religion today than at any time in my 30 years of teaching,” he wrote in a New York Times editorial.

Our department has seen a sharp drop in majors very recently but this fall my REL 101 is fully enrolled even when restricted to incoming freshman and rising sophomores.

In the American classroom we may face a more hostile environment, not because of deeply held religious beliefs, as was more often the case, but rather due to an allergic reaction to “Religion” in general.

I am emphasizing this because World Religions more than almost any other course is subject to current attitudes toward religions.

The biting New York Times video complication of Donald Trump rallies shows this.

Unfiltered Voices by By Erica Bernstein, Nick Corasaniti and Ashley Parker August 4, 2016

“Muslim is not a religion, partner, it's an ideology”
Walls do not make the best image for a course in cross-cultural studies.

Meanwhile Religious Studies as an academic field continues on its own roller coaster. After decades of concern over the propriety of comparison and the methods of phenomenology, both are once-again in revival. Concerns over postcolonialism, (now decolonization) continue at the same time that Great Britain looks less and less great and may become merry old England once again. Race and ethnicity concerns become more crucial but so has nationalism quashing the supposed “fading states” theory and the power of globalization—which becomes a major point of debate with free trade given sinister overtones rather than the gleeful celebration of cosmopolitan harmony.

At Syracuse some of the other colleges within the university require our courses and our classes continue to fill students prerequisites. But the problems of ethnically and strategically teaching a course in the World Religions continue to be even more complex. The purpose of this seminar is pragmatic: to think together about the complexities and the problems of teaching religions in the current global context. But, pragmatics cannot be separated from theoretical reflection. The irony of an introductory course is that it seems to demand the resizing of complexity—the production of clarity. But, this is the process has been resisted by sensibilities in religious studies as essentialism and unconscionable colonialism. Yet these courses continue to remain central to the curriculum of departments of religious studies throughout the country at least for the present. Ironically, as students in the USA seem less concerned with religion, offering of such courses increasingly appear in Singapore and China—so as a recent special issue of NUMEN was titled, we may have to de-Orient Religious Studies meaning reconsidering the role of religious studies outside of the United States.  

I consider this a crucial moment for re-thinking world religions because theory is in flux and so are the balances of power in the world in unexpected ways.

When I reviewed my syllabi for this seminar from S2015, S2012, F2005, and F2003, I found that a lot had changed in the decade. In the earlier versions, I had emphasized postcolonial and postmodern perspectives and their influence on the field, then the importance of migration, of cosmopolitanism, of a mixing world. However both postmodern theory and the positive sense of migration and cosmopolitanism now seem in retreat from an American and European context but also beyond.

So for this semester, I want to move back and forth between

- Currents of changing cultural-political sensibilities that affects teaching and learning in the religions of the world
- New theories within the field as well as new reconsiderations of our past that must also be considered.

The problem again is with descriptions of the generation we supposedly are teaching and evaluations seem to disagree.

What attitudes do our students bring to the classroom from the world in which we live and the debates underway about college in general supposedly millennials and a new unnamed generation

Millennials. In October 2004, researchers Neil Howe and William Strauss called Millennials "the next great generation," which is funny. They define the group as "as those born in 1982 and approximately the 20 years thereafter." In 2012, they affixed the end point as 2004.


What are the characteristics of the current undergraduate—especially first years?

- Are we dealing with media-addiction?

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- Is there a retreat from internationalism back to localism?
- What attitudes toward religion are really changing?
- What will be expected in a college classroom and of college in general?

**OLD PROBLEMS AND NEW TRENDS IN THE FIELD OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

(1) Do we know too much at this point for easy charts: You can still purchase this for $4.99:

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**The Big Religion Chart: Comparison Chart**

The Religion Facts "Big Religion Chart" is an attempt to summarize the major religions of the world - Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and dozens more - into a quick-reference comparison chart. It is not intended to be a substitute for advanced religious study and exploration, but a fast overview, with links to articles of greater depth. It is our hope that this chart becomes a useful tool for you to compare basic religious beliefs and practices of the world's religions and belief systems. Over 30 religions and belief systems are currently listed. We have been very inclusive with what is regarded as a "religion." If a group does not appear, it doesn't mean it's not a religion or doesn't matter; the chart is not comprehensive and will continue to grow. Links go to more in-depth ReligionFacts articles (see also the list of religions). Thank you for reading ReligionFacts.
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This audacity still continues in *Comparative Religion for Dummies* and the *Charts of World Religions*. But not all would agree that charting is a problem. Respected scholars in more cautionary tones nonetheless call for facts and offer categorizations:


*And more important—what does making a chart say about this kind of approach? What are the pros and cons? And note the publisher.*

(2) In spite of the clamor of students, I am certain that we cannot maintain an approach that "covers" the Major Religions (Traditions) piecemeal week by week. But many world religions course continue in this way.

My argument: this very box mentality has caused so much real conflict—our past practices has had unintended but serious consequences. Times have changed and with it the need to accept "blurred genres" and very tenuous boundaries that supposedly set off "Hinduism" from "Islam" or "Christianity" from "Buddhism" while at the same time many do want to build walls—or at least find appropriate boxes. But such an approach to blending and blurring does not work via the Traditions is not easy to teach at the introductory level.

(3) Migration and resettlement are real—there may be attempts to halt this but the facts remain.

But not only are "Easterners" settling in Europe and the United States, but some "Westerners" are now moving to Singapore, Beijing, and even India in search of work. **You may work abroad during all of part of your career.** Amid these global transformations, the so called traditional religions are far from dead or dying but seem to rapidly transform in a new variety of setting: the new metropolises of Asia, Latin America, Africa and in the older cities of the "West." Among the changes is the "pizza-effect"—many of the textbooks created in US and Europe on these traditions have become templates for many middle-class people within these traditions who strive to re-create a common worldwide sense of being Buddhism or Muslim etc. continuing a practice that began with religion scholars in the 19th century.
(4) But beyond this we lived in a shared world at least a shared middle-class world that is reaching to many new localities.

I no longer put this \textit{only} in terms of migration or diaspora, which remain important ways that communities and academics interact with “multicultural” experience but the world of the migrant \textit{has already been a shared world}. Questions of insider/outsider, so crucial just a few years ago, are increasingly questioned just how other are any of us to each other?

The romanticized image of encounters with pristine others notwithstanding, neither ethnographer nor “informant” comes to this world innocent of the other. Both are always already inscribed in a world of encounters between the “us” and “them” of anthropological discourse. “They” (like us) are already the subjects of the modern empire, globalization, nation building, and discourses of self and otherness; “we” are would be representers, translators, interpreters, and brokers of (their) difference in the modern world.\(^{5}\)

(5) The once prevalent theory of Tradition and Modernity makes little sense now.

And yet, some students are still looking for the exotic and the exciting out. The world’s religions have outrun our textbooks and many of our theories of traditionalism and modernity. The most modern cities—and I can prove this—are actually in Asia; the urban world is outpacing the rural but world religions textbook still do not reflect this. Notice this typical cover and my own photos

(6) And, the all of

movement and the shifts economic and cultural, yet year after year, students in the face of so much changes demand all the more clarity and certainty in of the classroom, \textit{looking for and judging the authenticity of Religions}:

What is the real Islam? Who is really a Christian or a Jew? Who is a Hindu? Students want clear answers sometimes to fit nicely into a handy packet, and on top of this we compete with series like \textit{Judaism for Dummies-Making Everything Easier}. But the search and assumption of authenticity remains very real.

(7) At another level, many students come with a prior set of assumptions, not about a particular tradition but about “spirituality” influenced by very popular reading—Joseph Campbell and our own Huston Smith. Often our students want the kind of nondenominational “spiritualism” associated, often unwillingly, with the late Mircea Eliade (may he endure).

(8) Ongoing issue of theology, science and the study of religion continued to be debated. Books by Russell McCutcheon and others from the North American Association for the Study of Religion have openly criticized the mixing of the “science of religion” with “hidden theology” but now not everyone cares.

However recently the influence of science not as a methodology but as a means of legitimation has even more force in the popular imagination and in the academy. And with the continued popularity of cognitive science, science is back!

(9) Most intriguing is the re-introduction of religious methods taken mostly from Buddhist practices that are melded with cognitive science into the new field of contemplative studies/ wisdom research that seriously questions old pedagogies. I find this very important for its shift from the dominance of hidden Protestant Christian sensibilities to the new underlying but often-unacknowledged Buddhist perspectives.

(9) The lingering problem of boundaries between “religious” and non-religious continues. This is often part of the discourse of spirituality—“we are not religious” etc. But also avowed atheism, many form of Marxism have the tone and color of the religious. Note that these grey areas force a discussion of the contours of “religion” at its edges. In courses on World Religions, how do we handle those human activities, narratives, and ideologies that act like religion, quack like religion but are not named as such? These blurred areas sometimes meld more closely into the political or social realms.

(11) And finally, World Religions textbooks are big business:
Living Religions (10th Edition) 10th Edition 2016 by Mary Pat Fisher (Author), Robin Rinehart (Author) $159.03!!

And our own Huston Smith’s The World’s Religions (originally published as The Religions of Man Harper, 1958 made him a millionaire early in his career!

**READING:**

I add some very recent publication plus some classic oldies.


Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (2014)


Later choices:


ASSIGNMENTS: There will be no major research paper for this seminar. Shorter "search and find tasks" and "reader’s response" essays will be spread throughout the semester as a series of smaller projects. Some of the tasks are indicated below, others will be assigned as talk and work. And the final project will be very practical: **Design and defend your own course syllabus for a world religions course.**

The response essays will be due via email to ALL members of the seminar by Sunday 10 am before our Monday meetings without fail. A short report on the "search-and find" tasks is also due via email to all of us at the same deadline. I compile these adding my comments and print out the final compendium before the class. The point of this process is, of course, to share insights and information but also to leave a record of our work.

A note on the format for weekly response:
Please format your responses in word and name them for example--Smith-Jan22.docx*Please use MSW format or PDF—my Big Mac cannot read other formats. Responses should be about 1 to 2 pages—the length may vary week-by-week.

Do not fall into the usual graduate-student-syndrome of critique for critique’s sake. It’s OK to like something and even more important to find what might be useful. Watch out for what I call the formulaic critiques, that filter we tend to apply almost automatically to anything we read----you know of what I speak....

Really read the pieces and make sure you understand the perspective before launching into critique. Listen and use a bit of the contemplative pedagogical strategies that we can discuss.

**SCHEDULE**
INTRODUCTION AND SETTING THE ISSUES

1. August 29: Question of Definition: Looking for underlying “definitions” of Religion or Looking for our use/invention of the “The Category ‘Religion’”

- Our field has a major issue: should we or should we not define our subject—religion? I want to begin here because so often there is a definition expressed or implicit in many of the textbooks and many of the courses offered in World Religions.
- But another issue is how do we work internationally not just in our topics but also in the acknowledgement that religious studies and the study of religion are now international [and always were but under other names]

Step 1: read:


Step 2: read


Response due at 10AM August 28 2016

PART I: “WORLD RELIGIONS” AND “RELIGION” AS A PROBLEM


All of these works come out of a Critical Theory perspective—Masuzawa’s work followed her In Search of Dreamtime: The Quest for the Origin of Religion (Religion and Postmodernism) (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

She is currently Professor, Comparative Literature/History at the University of Michigan but was my colleague at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in Religious Studies when she wrote this.

This is a long book –look at the whole book but concentrate on Introduction, chapters 1, 2, 3, 6, 8 and 9. I have included 6 on Islam because of the extreme relevance now.

PDFs

McCutcheon is the clearest example of those advocating a strictly “empirical” (hence “scientific”) approach to the study of religions. His targets are the kind of scholars who inhabit this department—defenders of some kind of religiosity within/between/among various materialities. Those of us who openly lay claim to the lineage of Mircea Eliade fall particularly under critique. Like many in the North American Association for the Study of Religion, McCutcheon defines religion as a social formation—do you hear Foucault. Now the NAASR meets rather unobtrusively with the AAR—especially since the 2010 AAR president Ann Taves remains an active member.

McCutcheon reworked and republished his essays, the last reworking the Discipline of Religion. His work and ideas was the subject of rather passionate debate in JAAR.

Reading: McCutcheon, The Discipline of Religion, Introduction + 2, 3, 4, 8, 9. Also

Russell T. McCutcheon, “It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!”: On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves


PART II: REVISITING ONCE DISCARDED METHODS AND CATEGORIES: COMPARISON AND MYTH

Myth was once the primarily form of comparison, and comparison was the heart of the field. In structuralism, which we now know only via poststructuralism, myth was the prime data!

4. Sept. 26: Comparison Questioned

For many Eliade is still the Master of History of Religions as a discipline but a decade ago his pre-War relationships with a Fascist regime in Romania greatly tarnished his image and led to a reevaluation of his work as well. Jonathan Z. Smith, a colleague of the late Master as well as his most serious critic, provides some of the most balanced and serious discussions not only of Eliade but also of the difficult enterprise of classification, morphology, and comparison.

Reading: Smith, Relating Religion

Instructions: I want to tackle the critics of comparison. J.Z. Smith’s Relating Religion, although from 2005, is now a classic—and a must-purchase for your library.

We will read chapters 2, 3, 7, 8, 11, 12, 16 all about the processes of categorization, classification, and comparison—this is dense and should be enough for the week—then the following week look at the re-emergence of comparisons in a new textbook.

Since J.Z. Smith concentrates on Eliade’s Patterns of Comparative Religion—which remains a monumental work, we will look at a copy

5. Oct. 3: The Return of Comparison?

Comparison seems to have returned to Anthropology and to religious studies—with the publication of"

He has done major comparisons between India and China and this is his reflection on the process—we will read selected chapters (PDF)

Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (2014)—There are copies available on Amazon for about $30—as well as some used already.

6. Oct 10: The Return of Myth?


NOW WE ROLL

**PART III: THE NEW CONNECTORS: BLURRED AND BLENDED**

*Note we cannot do all of these so you have a choice:*

WE HAVE THREE SESSIONS OCTOBER 17, 24, 31

Global Consumerism and Religion


Considering the Material World—Moving from models of belief


The study of visual culture has broadened to a more general interest in material culture. We need to read these carefully to ask if this trend toward the human body means a renewed sense of common personhood?

But for the purposes of this seminar comes the questions, how do we integrate “objects” into our teachings.


Changing Spaces: Religion, Cyberspace and the Internet

With issues of sacred space and time so central to older formulations of universality in religion, the emergence of the category of cyberspace may rejuvenate discussions of commonality in a different key while simultaneously questioning constructions of personhood, bodies, and even key practices such as ritual.


Dealing with Popular culture as religious


Deal with New Paradigms: Pedagogy and Mindfulness


Taking Account of Violence and Religion.


PART IV: PRAGMATICS

10. November 7: Textbooks: Reading an old classic and a new contender.

I begin my own version of Religions of the World with two texts that are iconic: Huston Smith’s The World’s Religions (originally published as The Religions of Man Harper, 1958) and Stephen Prothero, God is not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter (Harper-Collins, 2010). Note that Harper-Collins, a major popular and not an academic press, published both books, which continue to sell well to the public at large and for use in classrooms. [Huston Smith sold enough books to become a millionaire quite early in his career.]

Assignment: Read H. Smith, I. Point of Departure (1-11); X. A Final Examination (384-391) Prothero, Introduction (1-24); Chapter 9 and Conclusion (317-340)

We will later compare to Craig Martin, A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion (Routledge, 2014) who does not include traditions and intends the book to be a introduction to the study of religion not introduction to religions).

1. In spite of their stark differences, both use the “traditions” model and attempt to cover what they understand and the major religions. Pick the same two “tradition” in each and then read and compare their coverage. Pick something you know about and something less familiar to you.

What difference do you see in their coverage and how they present the Tradition?

2. Then look closely at the table of contents in both:
   - How do they arrange and order there lists of religions, on what basis, and why?
   - What ultimately is the logic of their template—Prothero is specific, Smith implies?
   - How can you see this at work in their description of the tradition in question?
11. **November 14: Errors in World Religions: The Textbook Nightmare.**

Without training in the religions of Asia and often without considering these complex systems as sources for theory as well as for “data”, world religions textbooks continue to repeat the same slogans. I call these the 101 Errors in World Religions. We will look at polytheism and monotheism; God/s; atheism; sin; heaven; this worldliness and otherworldliness, and most important the entire concept of “traditions”, etc.

*Search & find task: Find and review a textbook on world religions. (I have a large collection that I will share with you)

See: Guidelines for World Religions textbook analysis

THANKSGIVING/AAR November 21-


As much as I may deplore the over emphasis on the notion of specific religions, there are religious systems in the world linked by a common sense of—just that—commonality. Sometimes, as in the case of Hinduism, this commonality began as a by-product of British attempts at classifications, yet now this handy category has become a serious identity for many Hindus. In dealing with religious systems like "Islam" or "Christianity" or "Judaism," I prefer to adopt a Sanskrit term, *sampradāya* to describe them—that is as lineages of discourse that may prescribe but not necessarily describe religious behavior. No one "tradition" is defined by a single *sampradāya*—but rather represents a cluster of these all speaking within a finite vocabulary. We will try to work through the major "traditions" to consider special problems with each. Seminar members should select one "tradition" for consideration.

*Search & find task: Find and review textbook or a good case study for one of the usual array of "religions" in the world.

13. Dec 5 last classes: presentation of draft syllabi

14. Wednesday Dec 7: Special seminar to present draft syllabi with dinner at 255 Cambridge Street 6:00 pm-9:00 with dinner.

**FINAL VERSION OF THE FINAL SYLLABUS WITH JUSTIFICATION DUE:**

**Wednesday Dec 14 at 10 AM.** THERE ARE NO EXTENSIONS AND I DO NOT GIVE INCOMPLETES.