

(Inadvertently) Instructing Missionaries in (Public University) World Religions Courses: Examining a Pedagogical Dilemma, its Dimensions, and a Course Section Solution

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(Inadvertently) Instructing Missionaries in (Public University) World Religions Courses: Examining a Pedagogical Dilemma, its Dimensions, and a Course Section Solution

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Abstract. *In this article, I explore an ethical and pedagogical dilemma that I encounter each semester in my world religions courses: namely, that a great number of students enroll in the courses as part of their missionary training programs, and come to class understanding successful learning to mean gathering enough information about the world's religious "traditions" so as to effectively seduce people out of them. How should we teach world religions – in public university religious studies courses – with this student constituency? What are/ought to be our student learning goals? What can and should we expect to accomplish? How can we maximize student learning, while also maintaining our disciplinary integrity? In response to these questions, I propose a world religions course module, the goal of which is for students to examine – as objects of inquiry – the lenses through which they understand religion(s). With a recognition of their own lenses, I argue, missionary students become more aware of the biases and presumptions about others that they bring to the table, and they learn to see the ways in which these presumptions inform what they see and know about others, and also what they do not so easily see.*

Keywords: World Religions; Missionary Students; Public University; Religious Studies Pedagogy

Introduction

Each semester, on the first day of my world religions courses, I start class with introductions, asking all of the gathered students why they have registered for this class in particular.¹ I tell each of them that I want a robust and well-thought out answer to the question; a simple "it was open," "it fits my schedule," "meets general education requirements" or "does not start at 8 a.m.," will not do. I tell them that I want to know more, and I do so as an exercise to demonstrate the way the course will be conducted all semester: as a forum in which they will be required to not only think and actively participate, but also to leave simple, unexamined responses at the

¹ This article relates to and reflects on my experience while teaching at a public university in the American South. Though my teaching context has changed, I retain the present tense in this article for the sake of narrative flow.

door. I tell them that this is a class in which we will seek to complicate our understanding of a host of issues and questions, and we start on the very first day.²

The more time goes by, the more I experience immense difficulty asking these first day questions. The reason for my difficulty is because the main answer I receive, consistently, from students at this religiously conservative, rural southern school, is one that I am incredibly uneasy hearing. “I am taking this class,” many students respond, “because I want to be/am training to become a missionary and I think this class will help me learn about other peoples’ religions.” What they do not say, of course, is what logically follows from their statement: namely, that they are taking my world religions course “to learn about other people’s religions,” so that they can gain the tools necessary to try to *eradicate* those religions.

What is the responsible pedagogical (and ethical) response to this dilemma? Given this kind of student class constituency in this setting, and given my role as a scholar-teacher of religious studies in a *public* university, how should I teach a world religions course? What are/ought to be my student learning goals? What can and should I expect to accomplish in a course with this constituency? How do I best conduct myself pedagogically and ethically so as to maximize student learning, while also maintaining my professional and disciplinary integrity?

Much has been written about how scholars ought to appropriately teach world religions courses (Ramey 2006; Ramey 2013; Southard and Payne 1998; Locklin, Tiemeier, and Vento 2012; Patton, Robbins, and Newby 2009, and many others). Much has also been written about the best ways to approach students from conservative, evangelical backgrounds (Simmons 2006; Trelstad 2008; Smith 2013; and Gravett, Hulsether, and Medine 2011). However, the literature is

² Many thanks to the editorial staff at *Teaching Theology and Religion* for their remarkably helpful feedback on drafts of this article. Many thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers whose thoughtful suggestions helped me think through the questions and issues raised herein. All of their voices come through in the final draft of this article.

quiet on this particular dilemma: the question of how to teach students who enroll in public university world religions courses as part of their personal missionary-training programs. This is a complicated dilemma, and one that has been at the fore of my mind since I began my tenure teaching world religions in the South. The questions with which I wrestle in this article are not whether or not we want students to be missionaries or whether or not we support students in their missionary endeavors: such questions are (and ought to be) outside the pedagogical and legal purview of religious studies.³ Rather, in this article I investigate whether, to what extent, and most importantly how and what students can learn about the world's religious traditions if they come to class with the understanding that learning means gathering enough information about these traditions so as to successfully seduce people out of them.

Missionary Students, Pedagogies, and World Religions Courses

Missionary Student Approaches to World Religions

One semester I started class introductions by asking students to simply state their names so I could jot them down for attendance, pronunciation, and so forth. After just two students had stated their names, the third student asked if I minded if he stood up to introduce himself. I said I did not mind – why would I – and he proceeded to stand up and say: “Hi, I’m Roger and I love Jesus.”⁴

³ For a great piece on what falls under the umbrella of legality in teaching religious studies in public universities, see Webb (2002). See also Minor and Baird (2013). (This volume, *Reinventing Religious Studies*, contains a “Teaching Religion” section which is a great overall resource on legality, and other, religious studies pedagogical issues). For discussions on the limits of the role of the religious studies professor in the (public university) religious studies classroom, see the works of Russell McCutcheon, notably McCutcheon (2001). See also the thought-provoking exchange between McCutcheon and Omer in McCutcheon (2012) and Omer (2012).

⁴ Student names in this piece have been changed to retain anonymity.

At first, I was taken aback. How in the world was I to respond to this? There were so many things unfitting about his introduction, not the least of which was its contextual inappropriateness (this being an academic, public university course). But teaching is a “live show,” and before I could even think of how best to respond, I was blindsided: the next student to introduce herself stood up and did the same thing: “Hi, I’m MaryEllen, and I love Jesus too.” Following this, seven or eight more students stood up and followed suit.

After class I reflected on the situation and tried to figure out what was behind it. Why had so many students introduced themselves in this manner? Was it just a whim of the first student, after whom the other students followed out of guilt (“I have to be courageous and showcase my love for Jesus, too”)? Or was it a pre-planned group initiative?

It turns out that it was a combination of both. The student who started the chain later told me he had attended a national gathering that beseeched evangelical missionary college students to be more open to, and enthusiastic in and about, witnessing on campus. This event, the student explained, was designed to teach them how to share their enthusiasm for Jesus to everyone on their campuses, especially in their classes.

The event in my class, therefore, was by no means an isolated one. In fact, it was just one instance stemming from the many national missionary outreach programs wherein students are taught and encouraged to witness to other students as well as to faculty members. For example, it is not unusual for individual students to stand up and witness in my classes, or to try to persuade me and other students to accept Jesus (by bringing us books, inviting us to events, sending us e-mails, and so forth). Additionally, students frequently make remarks in class that are intended to raise opportunities to talk about Jesus, even if the class topic does not warrant it. For example, students make comments such as “There can be no love without Jesus,” when the topic of the

day is “Hindu conceptions of *bhakti*.” I have had students raise scriptural depictions of the messiah from the book of Daniel when the topic of the day is “Muslim views of Muhammad.” There are many such episodes.

These are examples of my most outspoken “missionary students.” For the purposes of this article, I define missionary students as students who take world religions courses as part of their personal missionary training programs. Typically, these students are Evangelical Christians who are training to become missionaries through their various churches, parachurch organizations, or other campus faith groups, and who typically plan to go on a mission trip immediately upon graduation. My impression is that missionary students comprise approximately half of the students in my world religions courses each semester, and these students typically bring to class some, if not all, of the following views:

1. They understand learning (in this course context) as “collecting the facts” about “world religious others” that will be the most helpful in getting these “others” to convert to Christianity and accept Jesus as their personal savior.
2. They believe that the only thing in life that matters (ultimately) is Jesus. (As I have heard many of them say on multiple occasions, “Life is dead without Jesus.”) As a result, they interpret all religious beliefs other than their own to be not only wrong, but also harmful, misleading, or worse – dangerous “deceptions of Satan.” At the very least, they are distracting beliefs from which others must be rescued.

3. They understand others' ritual practices (and often ritual practices in general) as "idolatry," or at least as "frivolity."
4. They understand others' religious lives as being entrapped, miserable, and empty because they lack Jesus. Therefore, they do all they can to remedy this emptiness by offering Jesus to everyone who "lacks Him."

With these views, missionary students enroll in "World Religions" so they can learn about the views of "others" and thereby be more effective at introducing them to Christianity on their mission trips.

My Approach to World Religions

In the years since 9/11, interest in world religions at the college and university level has increased significantly. According to a white paper entitled "The Religion Major and Liberal Education," world religions courses – along with other courses which do not focus exclusively on Christianity – have increased substantially at both four-year universities and two-year colleges since 2001 (AAR-Teagle Working Group 2008). Some courses, such as those on Hinduism and Islam, have even doubled. This increase is not just at public institutions; these courses are also being increasingly offered at parochial colleges and universities, as these institutions aim to "re-conceive and to globalize the study of religion on campus" (AAR-Teagle Working Group 2008, 5).

Despite their popularity in religious studies curricula, however, many scholars have criticized world religions courses. One of the most outspoken critics of these courses is Tomoko

Masuzawa. In her book, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (2005), Masuzawa argues that world religions courses are problematic because they have their bases in ideologically biased historical discourses: namely, the discourses surrounding the production of the term “world religions” itself. Under the guise of inclusive nods to pluralism and multiplicity, early discourses on world religions underhandedly promoted ideologies of Christian and European supremacy. And since world religions courses are rooted in these problematic discourses, and even extend them through their course titles, course categories, and the “traditions” they cover, Masuzawa suggests that world religions courses perpetuate these ideological problems of the past. Yet despite these problems, she rightfully notes that religious studies departments continue to offer these courses in increasing number. Economic opportunism is one of the chief reasons they do so: world religions courses boost enrollment numbers. “In the unapologetic free market and entrepreneurial climate pervading universities and colleges in the nation,” she argues, “it is clear that the consistently large enrollment figure in world religions courses... has been the single most powerful argument and justification for maintaining the steady budget line and faculty positions in the religious studies departments and programs” (Masuzawa 2005, 9).

Given the course’s origins in historically problematic discourse, as well as the vastly different ways in which the course can be taught (AAR-Teagle Working Group 2008), it is necessary for the instructor of world religions to be critically reflective of her own motivations for and biases in teaching the course. It is especially incumbent on me to do so, given my critique of my missionary students’ motivations in taking the course and my argument in favor of examining lenses. Put simply, my goal in teaching world religions is to have students in my course come to understand the religious traditions we cover on the terms of those who practice

them. Admittedly, this is a somewhat naïve goal, and therefore needs some qualification. First, when I state that I want students to understand the world's religions "on the terms of those who practice them," I am not suggesting that it is possible to have a "purely insider" perspective (after all, a purely insider view is impossible, because religions are not containers, nor is the so-called "inside" homogenous). However, just because one cannot have a pure insider perspective does not mean that one cannot strive to be *better* at understanding religions from the perspectives of those who practice them. Second, the stated goal of the course must be qualified because the viewpoints and practices of any given religious tradition are multiple. Religious traditions are not homogenous or monolithic.⁵ Rather, the perspectives and practices of those who call themselves adherents to any given religious tradition are many and varied, and to expect students to understand religions on the terms of all of those who practice them is impractical. It is especially impractical given the nature of the world religions course: a course expected to cover enough religious traditions to justify its name cannot possibly aim to paint students a picture of religious practitioners' perspectives that is both multiple and nuanced. After all, the world is a big place to cover in a semester. Finally, while I believe that it is important for students to understand practitioners' own perspectives on their religious 'traditions,' I do not believe that such understanding should be students' stopping point. Students of religion are scholars of, not mouthpieces or mirrors for, religious insiders. Therefore, they should aim to be critical investigators of religions and not "caretakers" of them (McCutcheon 2001). However, before students are able to be critical investigators of religions, they must first understand religions through the (albeit multiple) perspectives of those who practice them.

Having stated these qualifications, my primary aim in the course is nevertheless to try, however imperfectly, to help my students understand religious practitioners as those practitioners

⁵ Neither are they "entities" that exist, *a priori*, in the world.

understand themselves. This is because I know that most of my students are not religious studies majors or minors and also that world religions is often the only religious studies course that many of my students will take. Therefore, it strikes me as important to use the course as an opportunity to help my students encounter religious others authentically when they interact with them in their communities, in their workplaces, in their clinical settings, in their travels, and in their civic lives. By authentically, I mean that I would like my students to encounter religious practitioners with an unbiased viewpoint: one that aims at an open and honest understanding of them in their human fullness, and one that avoids “flattening” them through bias, stereotype, romanticization, and so forth. In this vein, I limit my world religions courses to covering just four “traditions” (though I vary these traditions by semester) to avoid the caricature of religions that studying too many in one semester almost necessarily entails.⁶ Further, in order to give my students a close-up opportunity to understand others from others’ own perspectives, we frequently take field site visits as a class to religious centers in the area, and have guest speakers visit our class. Students are also asked to conduct ethnographic interviews with religious practitioners.

Finally, in concluding this section, it is important to lay out my own biases in teaching this course. As Marit Trelstad effectively argues, instructors must engage in critical pedagogy: a reflexive pedagogy whose tools are designed to expose naïve pretensions to objectivity in the classroom, favoring instead methods that showcase the reality that all views are constructed, including those of both the students and the instructor (2008, 198). In keeping with this reflexivity, I admit that my own course goals betray my bias towards an anthropological approach to religious studies. They also likely betray my sensitivity to and awareness of the

⁶ I have engaged students in learning about Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and even American “fringe” groups.

consequences that biased and problematic understandings of religious “others” have produced for the religious groups that I am trained to study (Hindus and Muslims, especially, but also Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs). These are biases that I share with my students, always taking time each semester to discuss with them (and allow them to critique) the decisions I make in organizing the course, including the decisions I make for the reading material, topics and questions for discussion, and perspectives and practices to cover in class. In this way, the course is not just about “content,” but more importantly the process and production of knowledge.

Adjusted Pedagogies

If the goal of my world religions course is for students to understand the world’s religions on the terms of those who practice them, then I must adjust the course and my pedagogical approach when the course is largely enrolled by missionary students whose conceptions of, and organizational schemas for, religion make it difficult for them to understand these practitioners on their own terms. But in what ways should I adjust the course?

Though I am the first person to look at this teaching dilemma with respect to missionary students in particular, several scholars have investigated the ways in which we can most successfully teach “religiously conservative students” (Trelstad 2008) and “devout students” (Smith 2013) who struggle with academic approaches to religion.⁷ Missionary students are a sizable subset of both conservative and devout students, as Trelstad and Smith describe them

⁷ Trelstad uses the term “conservative” in her essay to refer to students who “self-designate themselves with this label” and whose religion “centers on trust in external authorities such as religious leaders, religious doctrines, or the Bible” (2008, 192). Of “devout students,” Smith writes that “this group does not represent the attitudes of the majority who are looking to develop themselves spiritually or religiously, but they are a significant minority (20-25 percent). [I suspect there are great regional differences here; in the South, devout students are certainly the majority.] It is this group who are also the hardest to convince that academic methods can produce a better understanding and appreciation of religion and they often put up the greatest resistance to such an approach especially if they come from a conservative Christian background that has shaped their religious faith” (2013, 134).

respectively. For example, Marit Trelstad (2008) argues that if we want religiously conservative students in our courses to learn, then we need to ensure that we are “trustworthy educators,” recognizing and treading respectfully through both their critique (and fear) of unilateral pedagogical models and the dramatic life consequences and faith crises that students can experience as a result of our courses.⁸ Gravett, Hulsether, and Medine also discuss the “cultural expectations [that] students from particular places [such as the South] bring to religious studies classrooms in public universities,” (2011, 158). They also discuss the ways in which we should be attuned to and make programmatic adjustments in light of these cultural expectations so as to both enrich students’ learning experience and also tailor it to their regional learning needs. However, while Trelstad, Gravett, Hulsether, Medine, and others address the pedagogical question of how best to teach religiously conservative students, they do not specifically address missionary students, or students who enroll in the course to prepare themselves for introducing others to Christianity during upcoming mission trips. Further, their work focuses on the issue of teaching religiously conservative students as it arises in Christian studies classrooms and contexts, and as it arises when academic approaches to Christianities conflict with students own Christian faith. Useful as their pieces are, they have a limited utility for addressing the problem of teaching missionary students in world religions courses.

Two scholars, however – John K. Simmons (2006) and Brian H. Smith (2013) – have addressed the issue of teaching religiously conservative students in the context of world religions courses or with regard to world religions materials. In so doing, both scholars turn to the idea of

⁸ Amongst several others, Tite (2003) and Smith (2013) also discuss these “faith crises.” For a more general, though nonetheless very useful, discussion of the ways in which (and reasons for which) pedagogy ought to be both situated within and also acutely aware of and attentive to the particularities of students as emplaced beings (with particular local, cultural, and so forth, identities), see Miller, Patton, and Webb (1994).

neutral enthusiasm. Simmons, who developed the idea of neutral enthusiasm along with Walter Capp, argues that

We, as instructors, need a pedagogical strategy that helps us *get out of the way of the content we present... Neutral enthusiasm...* preserves the important neutrality of classroom presentation in religious studies courses. Yet, at the same time, it is a strategy that celebrates the unavoidable evocative power present in the intellectual territory that is religion. Neutrality in presentation, observing but not editorializing, *allows the content to do the work.* (Simmons 2006, 38-39)⁹

Brian H. Smith utilizes and expands upon Simmon's neutral enthusiasm. Throughout his article "Teaching the Devout Student: Faith and Scholarship in the Classroom," Smith offers a great many thoughtful and useful pedagogical tools to help students apply historical-critical methods to learn more about, and see and respect the multiplicity within, their own traditions (Christianities). However, when discussing how to get them to do so with regard to religious traditions outside of Christianities, he turns to neutral enthusiasm.

Many devout students know little about religions other than Christianity, and often what they do know is inaccurate and incomplete, sometimes based on negatively biased treatments of other faiths in the churches in which they grew up. I have found it possible to offset some of this bias with an objective portrayal of the teachings and practices of various religions, and by acting as what John Simmons calls a "neutral enthusiast," who can be excited about the moral and

⁹ "Neutral enthusiasm" is italicized in original. All other italics are added for emphasis.

spiritual messages in these traditions without proselytizing (2006, 38). One need not uphold one religion as best, or put some down, while explaining the different spiritual paths of each and *letting the evocative spiritual dimension of each make its appeal*. (Smith 2013, 141-142) ¹⁰

To state it bluntly, I think that the method of neutral enthusiasm – letting the [evocative] content of world religions simply appeal by itself to students, and “observing but not editorializing” course materials – is, at worst, impossible. Making a syllabus and choosing which texts to present, which to cut, which ones are “evocative” enough, in which order to arrange the texts, and so forth, are all themselves acts of editorializing. Furthermore, neither religious traditions nor their “evocative spiritual dimensions” (whichever dimensions one decides these to be), have an agency of their own with which to simply “stand up” and “appeal” to students. At best, however, neutral enthusiasm is an ineffective pedagogical strategy in contexts wherein a large percentage of students are missionary students. Even if the so-called “evocative dimensions” did have such agency, missionary students arrive with presumptions about and lenses for understanding other religions that prevent them from being open to other religions’ so-called “evocative spiritual dimensions.” In fact, because of the lenses they bring to class, missionary students have a hard time understanding such traditions, let alone finding them “appealing” or “evocative.” (I also do not think teaching students to find religions “appealing” is an appropriate goal in a public university.)

Neutral enthusiasm is not the way to help missionary students learn in a world religions course. Because missionary students understand learning to mean collecting the facts about world religious others that will be the most helpful in getting them to convert to Christianity,

¹⁰ Italics added for emphasis.

their lenses themselves are stumbling blocks to understanding and seeing world religious traditions other than their own objectively. Therefore, if missionary students are to see world religions neutrally and to understand them on practitioners' own terms, time needs to be spent not just on the world religions (or the content) per se, but on having students examine the lenses through which they look at these religions. Even if instructors are in the way of the material, and even if it were possible for instructors to get out of the content's way (which I do not believe it is), it would not be sufficient. Rather, students must see the lenses through which they view the world's religions, and recognize the ways in which their lenses prevent them from learning about others. The instructor's role in this pedagogical context is not to step out of the way, but rather to lay these lenses on the table as objects of inquiry in class, just as much as (if not more than) the content that students see through them. All students can benefit from examining lenses, not just missionary students.

(Re) Framing the World Religions Course with a New Course Section

In order to resolve the world religions missionary dilemma – in order to help missionary students learn about world religions by helping them see their lenses and recognize the ways in which these lenses prevent them from learning – instructors need to actively design their world religions courses so that critically examining lenses is both a priority and a deliberate course objective. One way to accomplish this, I propose, is to begin each world religions course with a two- to three-week course section that is specifically designed to help students recognize that religions are always viewed and presented through lenses (social, political, theological, and so forth), and to help students to see the ways in which “religions themselves” look different depending on the lenses one uses to look at them. More specifically, the aim of this experimental

course section (which I call “Examining Lenses”) is to get students to see that the frameworks for looking at the world’s religions, that they themselves have, are also lenses – lenses that are rooted in particular historical moments and theological perspectives. The purpose is not to pass judgement on lenses, but to help students to see that the lenses with which they initially come to class are informed by a set of presumptions that make it difficult for them to see the ways in which the world’s religious practitioners see themselves.

Because critically examining our lenses and learning to recognize the situatedness of our knowledge are tools that are valuable to all religious studies students, an Examining Lenses course section can be productively appended to the beginning of any world religions course, regardless of the constituency. However, the Examining Lenses course section is especially useful to and necessary in world religions courses with high numbers of missionary students.

Persuading students to critically examine the lenses they use to understand others, and preparing them to look more neutrally at religions other than their own, involves three concrete steps. These three steps, or learning objectives, comprise the three curriculum components of my proposed Examining Lenses course section.

1. First, students must be guided to the realization that their views are lenses and that, as such, they are not simply “mirrors on reality.” Moreover, students must realize that their lenses are biased, and that their lenses prevent them from seeing the ways in which others see themselves.

Though teaching students to recognize that they have biased lenses is very difficult, it is in many ways the biggest and most important component (and challenge) of the course

section. It is this realization that helps students (re)shape how they approach the rest of the course materials both organizationally and structurally, as well as conceptually.

Further, this realization is instrumental in paving the way for students to learn more productive ways in which, and categories through which, to see religions other than their own more objectively. As the famous adage says, you cannot fix a problem if you are unaware that you have one.

2. Second, I must help students to see why – that is, how, in what ways, and for which reasons – their lenses are biased. In designing this second course section component, there is great pedagogical flexibility, as instructors can approach the question of why using different methods: historical, theological, anthropological, political, sociological, and so forth.
3. Once students have recognized their lenses and why their lenses are not productive for the scholarly study of world religions, the third part teaches students a set of tools, critical terms, and new comparative schemas with which to more neutrally and academically understand religious traditions other than their own. The role of this third component, in other words, is to construct with students alternative frameworks with which to more effectively study religions. As with the second learning component, there is great pedagogical flexibility in the third component with respect to method and approach – the kinds of frameworks one helps students construct – and these differences will likely reflect the instructor’s own training (as a historian of religions, anthropologist, philosopher, sociologist, and so forth).

Here is an outline of a set of course exercises – which I call “Missionary Encounters” – that help to achieve the first objective, since it is this objective which is both the biggest obstacle and the most important component of the Examining Lenses course section. Only after students master objective one, can instructors individually tailor ways for students to master objectives two and three. It is to a discussion of these exercises that I now turn.

“Missionary Encounters”

I call the set of exercises I designed Missionary Encounters (hereafter ME). They consist of a series of activities in which students come face to face (and are asked to grapple) with missionary texts and polemics by reading and discussing exchanges between missionaries and religious locals. What follows is a composite of exercises that I have used successfully in my courses along with some new ideas. In my experience, these exercises work best if they follow a brief section on introductory “front matter” (for example, discussions of “what is religion,” “what is religious studies,” and so forth). This helps to prepare students for – and helps us to be upfront with them about – the kind of intellectual endeavors to expect in class, and it helps to reduce the degree to which students find the ME reading materials and exercises to be controversial.

In order to conduct the ME exercises, the instructor picks a particular location and historical context – such as India, 1900 to the present – and selects a set of primary textual exchanges between missionaries and religious locals (Hindus, Muslims, and so forth). This exercise works best if one chooses exchanges from the contemporary period: I have found that if the class reads polemical exchanges exclusively from the past, students presume that the issues

and misunderstandings that they read about have already been resolved and are therefore no longer operative or relevant. Further, in order for this exercise to be most successful, the lenses that are on the table for examination should be as similar to the students' lenses as possible. In my case, therefore, it works best if the missionary sources that the students read are evangelical missionary accounts.

Reading Set 1. Because my area of specialization is in Hinduisms, my ME exercise has students read and discuss exchanges between evangelical Christian missionaries and Hindus in India in the contemporary period. The exercise begins by asking students to read the website of the Gospel for Asia (GFA) as well as excerpts from books written by the GFA's founder and president, K.P. Yohannan (2004; 2011). The GFA is a large-scale and very active group of evangelical missionaries who work primarily in what is known in evangelical circles as the 10/40 window. The 10/40 window is the region of the world that lies between 10 and 40 degrees latitude north of the equator, and includes North Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and much of central Asia. This region is one that many missionaries believe to be particularly resistant to Christianity; it is, therefore, a continued target of heavy evangelism and missionary activity. This region is also one that many of my missionary students have visited or will visit on a mission trip, and the GFA is the kind of organization with which they feel great affinity. Although there are a number of missionary excerpts they could read for this section, those from the GFA are quite apropos.

The first activity of the ME exercise is reading missionary accounts on the GFA's website. On the GFA's website, students immediately see its main flag:

Gospel for Asia is reaching the most unreached in South Asia with the love of Christ. You can help us train, equip, and send out laborers to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with lost men, women, and children who have still not heard His precious name. Your partnership will impact the spiritual and physical well-being of those in desperate need as we love in word and deed. (Gospel for Asia 2016)

As they continue to explore the site and read excerpts from Yohannan's books (2004; 2011), students read descriptive tales about missionaries going out "into the field" and sharing the good news of Jesus with Indian "locals" (most of whom are Hindu). The GFA's website describes Hindu locals as living in immense poverty, both economic and religious (which, for the GFA, are not entirely unrelated). Hindus are also described as being misled by, and living under the charms of crooked Hindu religious leaders. However, in the GFA's accounts, once Hindus convert to Christianity (which they do easily, happily, and without question), their religious and economic circumstances dramatically improve. Consider, for example, the following excerpt:

With his wife, he set an apostolic pattern similar to that of the apostle Paul. On one evangelistic tour that lasted 53 days, he and his family traveled by bullock cart and foot into some of the most *backward* areas of the tribal state of Orissa. There, working in the intense heat among people whose lifestyle was extremely *primitive*, he saw hundreds come to know the Lord. Throughout the journey, *demons* were cast out and miraculous physical healings took place daily. Thousands of the tribals – *who were enslaved to idols and spirit-worship* – heard the Gospel eagerly.

National missionary Jesu Das [Sanskrit= servant of Jesus] was horrified when he first visited one village and found no believers there. The people were all worshipping hundreds of different gods, and four priests *controlled them through witchcraft*.

Stories were told of how these priests could kill people's cattle with *witchcraft* and destroy their crops. People were suddenly taken ill and died without explanation. The destruction and bondage the villagers were living in are hard to imagine. Scar, decay, and death marked their faces, because they were totally *controlled by the powers of darkness*.

When Jesu Das told them about Christ, it was the first time they ever heard of a God who did not require sacrifices and offerings to appease His anger. As Jesu Das continued to preach in the marketplace, many people came to know the Lord. (Yohannan 2004, 20-21) ¹¹

Throughout GFA texts, Hindus are described as desperate, hopeless, unhappy, captive, as never having experienced real love, and as being religiously lost, financially impoverished, and as gripped by Satan. They are described as a group of individuals greatly in need of aid, yet completely unaware of the one beacon of hope that can raise them out of their hopelessness. This is a narrative with which missionary students have both much familiarity and much affinity.

Discussion Question(s) 1. Despite the fact that this is a narrative with which missionary students have much familiarity (or perhaps because of it), the first assignment of the section asks students to reflect upon the following questions in groups:

¹¹ Italics added for emphasis.

How do the missionaries in the passages characterize Hinduism and Hindus?

How do they characterize the mission and its purpose? How do they characterize Hindus responding to their mission work?

Each group is assigned to write answers to these questions based on the excerpts they read (those quoted above and others), and to present them to the class. Each group takes turns presenting their answers to the class, and the class discusses each group's answers and thoughts on the questions.

During the exercise, there is a range of responses to student groups' answers: many students agree with the missionary positions in the texts, and some agree but feel a slight discomfort discussing them. Inevitably, however, several students (some even quite forcefully) challenge the missionaries' presentation of Hinduism and question whether or to what extent it may be biased. They do not challenge on content – they have yet to learn about the Hindu traditions – but rather on categories of understanding which they see to be prejudicial (use of terms like “primitive,” “witchcraft,” “powers of darkness,” and so forth). Their questions lead to a back-and-forth discussion about the ways in which Hindus might respond to the missionaries' characterization of them, and the ways in which Hindus might see the mission differently than the missionaries see it. This discussion is remarkably effective pedagogically, because it sets students on the road to seeing that though there is “one religious event” (the mission), there may be numerous and diverse perspectives from which to understand it (a point that will be reinforced to them in the second set of readings). This is a key step (as I will later discuss) in students' learning that their views on “religious others” are lenses.

Reading Set 2. Having read, written about, presented on, and discussed in class the positions of GFA missionaries in India, the class focus shifts to an examination of Hindu responses to missionaries. Though there are a number of source authors from which to choose, two authors whose writing excerpts are useful for this exercise are: Sita Ram Goel and Arun Shourie. Though both are rather contentious figures (although no more so than GFA missionaries), both are well known in, and active contributors to, Hindu-Christian missionary polemics. Further, both discuss the GFA (mission and missionaries) in their works, making them good “conversation partners” for students to discuss in this activity.

Sita Ram Goel (1921-2003) was a trained historian (University of Delhi) who authored a great number of writings (including several books) on the topic of Christian missionaries in India. Part of Goel’s mission was to expose Christian missionaries as deceptive and threatening extensions of the colonial project, and as individuals seeking to win religious converts through socio-economic manipulation (Bauman 2011).¹² Consider the following, wherein Goel writes:

Let us imagine that one day a Muslim missionary arrives in a poor section of America such as a part of the Catholic Hispanic (Mexican Origin) section of San Francisco. Well supplied with zeal and petro-dollars from his own country, he learns Spanish, builds a Muslim cathedral along the lines of a Catholic building, outfitting it with pews, organs, choirs, and so forth. Preaching from a Christian Bible appropriately edited according to the Koran, he puts on the clerical collar

¹² Aside from being an extremely well-researched and argued piece of scholarship on Hindu/Christian Missionary polemics, Chad M. Bauman’s “Anti-Conversion Authors, Altered Definitions of Religion, and Conversion as an Altered State” (2011) is a great piece with which to familiarize oneself with the contours of Hindu responses to missionaries, as well as the key players in these responses.

and black robes of a Catholic Priest and holds Sunday services which look just like Mass, except that prayers are to Allah and Mohammad instead of Jesus. In ministering to the local people, he tells them that his Islamic faith is just a slight variation of Christianity, one which puts the crowning touches on it. Their father's religion, Catholicism, was, he says, flawed but a good preparation for Islam. He gives loans to those in need, which need not be repaid if one joins his Church. He opens an orphanage, and raises the children as Muslims though their parents are Christians. When accused of deceiving the people, he says he is only adapting his religion to the local context and expressing his Muslim charity and divine call to evangelize... This is the situation the Hindu finds himself in, though it has developed over several hundred years.... (Goel 1988, 87-88).

Seeing it as economic manipulation in the name of religion, Goel was a staunch opponent of Christian missionary activity, and a polemicist extraordinaire. In this regard, his writings stand in stark contrast to (and intellectually in conversation with) Christian missionaries' including those of GFA president KP Yohannan (and other GFA missionaries). Goel even cites GFA texts in his work:

in order to raise money for their missionary work abroad, the evangelists have to paint lurid pictures of the depravity of heathen countries. For example, the Texas-based *Gospel for Asia* group, while emphasizing the need of redeeming the Hindus, recently wrote: "The Indian sub-continent, with one billion people, is a living example of what happens when Satan rules the entire culture... India is one vast purgatory in which millions of people... are literally living a cosmic lie!

Could Satan have devised a more perfect system for causing misery? (Goel 1988, 227-228)

Though space limits prevent me from citing more passages here, for the “Hindu responses” portion of the ME exercise, students can also read excerpts from the works of Arun Shourie. An economist by training, Shourie has served as the editor of both the *Indian Express* and the *Times of India*, as well as in the role of a high-ranking government minister in India’s BJP government (Bauman 2011). Like Goel, Shourie has authored a number of works on missionary activity in India (including Shourie 1994), and also like Goel, he is an anti-missionary polemicist who views Christian missionary work in India as deceptive and manipulative, and as threatening to both Hinduism as a tolerant and peaceful religion, and to India as a secure and thriving nation. His works in many ways bear similarity to Goel’s.

Discussion Question(s) 2. Despite the fact that it is difficult for them, the second set of discussion questions asks students to reflect upon the following questions based on the excerpts they read in Reading Set 2 (those above and others):

How do the Hindus characterize the missionaries? How do they characterize the mission and its purpose? How do they characterize missionaries characterizing them?

As with the questions in Reading Set 1 about the missionaries, students gather in groups to reflect on these questions about the “Hindu responders,” to write answers to them, and to

present their answers to the class. Following the group presentations, there is a class discussion of the groups' thoughts on, and reactions to, the discussion questions.

Student responses to the excerpts vary, though they are, understandably, much more passionate than their reactions to the missionary accounts. The students who raise issue with the prejudicial nature of the missionary characterizations of Hindus feel vindicated in reading Hindu responses: they are happy there are, in fact, local responses to the missionaries, and they are pleased to discuss differences in perspectives on the mission itself. Other students, however, are completely shocked by the Hindu authors' characterizations of missionaries and the mission, having never before considered that anyone has (or could have) such a negative view of missionaries.

Whatever their responses to the exercise, however, missionary students learn important religious studies lessons. For example, the students who are surprised that there are negative and even hostile views of missionary work are at least able to see that there are different viewpoints: they see, for example, that the Hindu responders have different views of Christian missionaries (and the mission) than the Christian missionaries have of themselves. Students see that at least some Hindus think that Christian missionaries are exploitative; that some Hindus think that Christian missionaries intentionally misrepresent Hinduism so as to win converts (in what the Hindu authors see to be a very corporate, business-like fashion); that some Hindus believe that missionaries evangelize not out of love, but out of greed for money and power; that some Hindus believe that missionaries are economically manipulative of disadvantaged groups; and that some Hindus even believe that missionaries are damaging India's integrity and security and violating Hindus' legal and religious liberties.

Just seeing that not all locals are receptive to or happy about the message missionaries bring is a pedagogically useful lesson for students to learn. I liken the importance of this lesson to the valuable pedagogical realization that students in courses on “Asian religions” often experience upon learning that, to their surprise, Asian religions are not just (or even mostly) about yoga, mindfulness, or finding clarity, enlightenment, and inner peace. Though these lessons are difficult for students, and in some ways disappointing for them, they are nonetheless important lessons for students to learn if they wish their inquiries into religion(s) to be honest ones. Therefore, though reflecting on Hindus’ negative reactions to missionaries is a difficult activity for missionary students, it is one that is eye-opening for many of them. Many students come to class with the well-intentioned, but not fully accurate, belief that missionary work “rescues” local people, and that locals who are evangelized accept Jesus gladly, willingly, and without hiccup or difficulty. It is pedagogically helpful, therefore, that students understand that the situation is a lot more complex “on the ground,” and that there are, in fact, many different perspectives on missionaries, missions, and missionary activity.

The most pedagogically valuable part of this exercise – what most helps students accomplish the learning goals of objective one of the Examining Lenses course section – is that upon seeing a variety of views on missionary activity, students come to realize that although the rescue narrative is *their* narrative account of events, it is not necessarily others’ account of events. In other words, students learn – by seeing, through primarily textual exchanges – that there are at least two dramatically different ways of understanding the mission and missionary activity. Further, they learn that answers to questions about the mission – what it “is,” what it looks like, what it brings, what it accomplishes, and so forth – are multiple, and that the answers depend on whom one asks. By allowing students to directly see that Hindus and Christian

missionaries have different views on – and quite literally see and know different things about – various religious phenomena (including the mission, Hindu ritual, and so forth), this exercise opens the door for students to learn that what one sees and knows of religious phenomena in general can depend on the perspectives and lenses that one brings to the table. This exercise, therefore, shows students not only that everyone has lenses (themselves included), but also that our lenses direct what we see about others, as well as what we do not see about them (including, often, others’ own views on themselves).

There is yet another pedagogical lesson in the ME exercise that is worth noting. Though a few missionary students are angry upon reading the Hindu response excerpts, most missionary students have a different response. Rather than being shocked or offended at the excerpts, most missionary students feel saddened. This is because they believe that the missionaries (whom they see as being in India, helping the poor, and sharing the Gospel *out of love*) are greatly misunderstood by the Hindu authors. What is at the root of this misunderstanding, they believe, is a failure on the Hindu authors’ part to understand the “intentions” of the missionaries, to see the “full story” behind their actions, and/or to see the “real” picture of who the missionaries are. What the students mean, of course, is that the Hindu authors have failed to understand the missionaries because they have failed to see or understand them on their (the missionaries’) own terms. And since the missionary students feel that Hindus have radically misunderstood the missionaries’ perspectives, they cannot help but acknowledge the possibility that the missionaries (and themselves like the missionaries) might also radically misunderstand the Hindus (and practitioners of other religious traditions) for the same reasons. In other words, students see that this misunderstanding can work in both directions, and they see that if what others think of the missionaries is not necessarily what the missionaries think of themselves, then

what the missionaries think of others, is also, therefore, not necessarily what others think of themselves. Through a series of in-class discussions and through their group responses and presentations (and preferably also through individual response papers), students come to see both the educational value and the position of integrity that come from learning about and trying to understand others, on their own terms. This is a huge step in helping not only achieve the goals of the Examining Lenses section (of which the ME exercise is a part), but also in achieving the goal of the course.

Finally, besides helping students achieve these realizations, seeing the ways in which the GFA missionaries and the “Hindu responders” characterize and – according to each group’s self-reports – mischaracterize each other, is also pedagogically valuable because it brings the students who feel saddened at these misunderstandings to ask a series of critical questions. Examples of these questions are, “what accounts for these differences in perception,” and/or “what factors cause the groups to see/ misunderstand each other so dramatically?” Whether they ask these questions because they have a vested (religious) interest in them (the answers could make them better missionaries) or because they genuinely wish to know the answers to them (or both), is unclear. However, in either case, these questions provide a perfect pedagogical moment for instructors to help all students in the class see the ways in which biases and agendas – theological, political, or otherwise – can color perceptions and interpretations that groups and individuals have of each other. This opens up an opportunity to point out and to discuss with students the ways in which the missionaries’ lenses are biased – where their interpretations are skewed or misrepresentative of Hinduism(s), in what ways, and most importantly why – and to do the same for the Hindu responders’ presentation of Christianities. Having done this, I can delicately show students that if the goal is to understand others – and especially if the goal is to

understand others on their own terms – then theologically and religiously polemical lenses are not the best lenses through which to do so. This opens up the opportunity for me to teach students new comparative categories through which, and methods by which, to understand the world’s religious practitioners in ways that are less partial, less biased, and more charitable, objective, and academic.¹³ And is this not, after all, the pedagogical purpose of the world religions course?

Conclusion

In this article, I raised a pedagogical problem that often comes up when teaching world religions at a public university in the rural South. This dilemma is that although I am here to teach my students about the world’s religious traditions – traditions that are loved and cherished by those who practice them around the globe – many of my students want to learn about these traditions only so they can effectively convert people out of them. The problem with this is not a religious one, but rather a pedagogical one: if my goal in a world religions course is for students to understand other religions on the terms of those who practice them, then certain lenses are problematic. These include certain frameworks with which many of my missionary students come to class: for example, understanding learning as “collecting facts” about “others” that will be most helpful in getting them to accept Jesus as their personal savior; interpreting “others” beliefs as being “wrong” or “harmful”; understanding “others” ritual practices as “idolatrous” or as “dangerous”; and/or understanding others’ religious lives as being empty because they lack Jesus.

¹³ I have found the “third term” approach to comparative religions, suggested by Jonathan Z. Smith (1990), to be very useful in this regard.

As a solution to this dilemma and as a way to help students achieve my goal for the course, I use an experimental course section I call “Examining Lenses.” This section was designed not to convince students that their lenses are “wrong,” but rather to open students’ eyes to see that they are informed by a set of presumptions that may make it difficult for them to see the ways that the worlds’ religious practitioners understand and characterize themselves. This is precisely what Robert Ford Campany notes about metaphors in his well-known article, “On the Very Idea of Religion (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)” (2003). In this piece, Campany directs our attention to the importance of critiquing metaphors, and argues that scholars ought to closely examine the metaphors they use, not to detect whether these metaphors are inherently correct or incorrect, but rather so that they might detect the elements that these metaphors hide. “What [they] hide,” Campany argues, “might turn out to be something well worth seeing, and sometimes the hiding serves a latent ideology or set of interests, or encodes an uninvoked but silently looming model or set of expectations based on the resemblance implied in the metaphor” (Campany 2003, 294). We can, I think, say the same for lenses. If learning involves reflecting not just on the “content” of knowledge, but also the ways in which we know it, then critically examining our lenses – like critically examining the metaphors we use – has a central role to play.

Though the set of exercises that I propose in this article address the pedagogical dilemma of how, practically speaking, one can teach missionary students in the context of a public university religious studies class, it leaves largely unresolved the ethical issues that I raised at the outset of the article. The ethical challenges of this dilemma are both large and complex, primarily because they tie into some of the most challenging debates and issues within our field today. One of the primary ethical issues, in my opinion, has to do with puzzling over the

boundaries of religious studies as a discipline. In my understanding of religious studies, the field is predicated on the view that the religious content of students' beliefs is and ought to be outside of our legal or disciplinary concern.¹⁴ In other words, in our classrooms we ask students to bracket their own religious views as much as possible, keeping their personal religious commitments out of classroom discussions as well as out of writing assignments, essays, exams, and term papers. As faculty, we aim to do the same: trying to the best of our ability to keep our own religious views out of the classroom, not promoting any one religion, or religion generally, while also not denigrating it. A central question, then, for me became: if students' religious views are "off the table," can we – ethically speaking – address them if and when they prohibit learning? Put more strongly, is it wrong – that is, does it contradict our values as a field – to address them at all?

I have struggled so much in response to this question largely because it struck me at times that teaching missionary students in world religions was not something I could do effectively without sacrificing fidelity to the field of religious studies or my commitment to its values. For example, I have wondered whether it is possible to teach students with missionary lenses about world religions without also teaching them to *appreciate* the religious traditions about which they learn in the course. I have pondered greatly, that is, over the question as to whether it is possible for students to learn about or understand religions if they do not value them. In this vein, I have wondered whether perhaps my solution to the dilemma ought to be to help my students find some lessons or virtues in the traditions I cover that they might like and/or find praiseworthy or respectable, so that they might come to appreciate these traditions. Moreover, I even contemplated that perhaps the starting point of my pedagogy in world religions ought to be

¹⁴ In the fall of 2013, Indiana University held a symposium focused on the issue of religion and law. The reader can find video recordings of the key speakers here presentations here: <http://indiana.edu/~relstud/news/schempp>.

helping students see that there is something ultimately worthwhile in what other religious traditions have to offer, perhaps even something that they might learn from: something, for example, which they might seek to emulate or incorporate into their own personal character building. On many occasions, I have thought that doing so might even be the best way to teach missionary students about others. This is based on the idea that to see and understand religious others as they see and understand themselves might require that one first appreciate the qualities about the traditions that meaningfully sustain the lives and practices of those who claim affiliation to them.

Simply put, although I think these are worthwhile goals, and although I think that they might also be an effective solution to the missionary dilemma, I do not think they are goals appropriate to a religious studies classroom in a public university. Choosing lessons and virtues from religious traditions to impart to students, or selecting values or virtues for them to emulate or appreciate in their own personal lives seems to me to be promoting particular religious teachings (after all, one must choose the lessons or virtues to be worthy of presenting in class to promote to students) (Minor and Baird 2013, 107). It also seems to me to be teaching religion to students, as opposed to teaching them *about* religion (Minor and Baird 2013, 107). In other words, I “remain to be convinced that the inculcation of values and the formation of character based on those values differs in any significant way from the religious instruction that might well take place within a religiously sponsored educational institution” (Minor and Baird 2013, 108). I also do not think that my aim as a professor is to get students to “understand others and what makes them tick so that [they] will like them more.” (Minor and Baird 2013, 108). Rather, I see my goal as helping students understand others so that they can encounter them authentically (that is, in their human fullness and without “flattening” them through bias, stereotype, or

romanticization) in their personal, work, community, and civic lives. This is why in my world religions course I have not tried to solve the missionary dilemma by teaching students to value, appreciate, or learn from other religions. Rather, I have simply encouraged students to critically challenge, complicate, and situate the very categorical lenses, interpretive frameworks, and conceptual schemas through which they view the world's religions – especially if these lenses prohibit them from understanding others on their own terms. In other words, I have simply encouraged them to evaluate the utility of their theological lenses as academic tools or frameworks for understanding others. Seen in this light, the exercise I put forth for missionary students is not that different from those I employ for other students whose lenses give rise to organizational schemas that are not productive for learning about religion. These lenses include, for example, those of students who view religious traditions (especially those originating in Asia) through romanticized or orientalist lenses, as well as those who view religion through overly rationalist frameworks, such as when some philosophy and/or science students take religion courses only to refute the content presented, rather than to learn about the ways in which religion is employed in meaningful ways in the lives of those who practice it.

In conclusion to this article, I would like to acknowledge that I know there are some who will read this article and think that my solution to the missionary dilemma does not go far enough, just as I think that solving the dilemma by teaching missionary students to value other religions goes too far. The challenge of the missionary dilemma in public university religious studies class settings is real, but the solutions are difficult and variable and involve trade-offs. In many ways, the solution I propose herein is a work in progress: one that comes with certain benefits (to the integrity of the field), but one which also admittedly has many downsides (such as leaving the cultivation of virtues like respect and appreciation at the door). The challenge to

instructors in this pedagogical situation is to develop solutions that are both effective and mindful of the complex issues and multiple parties that it involves. It is my hope that my proposed solution offers instructors a platform from which to think about this dilemma, as well as a workable place to begin addressing it.

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