In 2006 I enrolled in Introduction to World Religions (henceforth "intro"). It was a first year class and had around one hundred students in it. We learned primarily through lectures and the occasional movie, and were graded based on multiple choice tests, and several papers to be written on "religious" experiences.[1] The content of our lectures was for the most part dictated by our text book, Michael Molloy's *Experiencing The World's Religions: Tradition, Challenge, and Change* (3rd edition).[2] I knew very little about world religions (or religion in general) going into the class, and when I completed it in the spring I felt that I had learned quite a bit: I now knew that Hinduism was the oldest living religion in the world; I knew that the main beliefs of Buddhism consisted of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path; I knew that some members of Jainism walked around naked, and that Sikh meant "disciple"; I knew that Taoism was more of a philosophy than a religion, and that Confucianism was very concerned with social order; I knew that Shinto was a major facet of Japanese identity prior to WWII; I knew that Judaism was the oldest Western religion; Christianity must be the most complex because it received by far the most attention in the book; and finally that Islam is a peaceful and ethical religion. I also learned that there were a few "other traditions," but as one might expect, we ran out of time, cramming Islam into the last week, and completely missing out on these mysterious "other traditions."

Each of the major religions of the world received a few weeks of review, and this review consisted of both theological and historical reflections (what do people believe, what do people do, and how is this illustrated in their history). I think it is safe to say that my experience is not an isolated one. Introductory courses in general, and introduction to religion courses specifically find themselves faced with the almost unimaginable task of introducing thousands of years of histories which include millions, if not billions of different people. In light of this task, more

often than not they resort to an historical survey which seeks to highlight important "facts" (names, dates, and places for the most part) in an effort to give the student a general outline of a particular phenomenon (be it "religion," "western civilization," "Canada," etc). As I continued my studies, I picked religion as my major, and began taking higher level courses, including several seminars on method and theory in the study of religion. It was in these higher level courses that I began to realize the problems with how "intro" was taught. Phenomena were rarely situated historically or socially, reasons were never given for the inclusion of certain phenomena and the exclusion of other, and finally, religion was treated as a self evident category, which was universal in humans. Everything I learned in intro was challenged and overturned as I completed my BA Honours, and moved on to do my Master's. There is something fundamentally wrong with an introductory course if it provides almost no foundation from which to work. And if we are going to find a better way to introduce we religion, I suggest we start with the course text.

My text book, Molloy's *Experiencing the World's Religions*, introduced religion using an approach which Molloy identified as "comparative religion."[3] Comparative religion, for Molloy, involves the objective examination of "all elements of specific religions," and the subsequent comparison between religions.[4] Using this comparative model, Molloy examines each "world religion" in terms of beliefs/worldviews, community, myths, ritual, ethics, characteristic emotional experiences, material experiences, and sacredness.[5] By "world religions," Molloy means real religions, religions with ancient written histories, distinctive and characteristic beliefs, and a large number of followers: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism (same chapter), Taoism and Confucianism (same chapter), Shinto, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He also includes chapters on oral religions (what other intro texts call "indigenous religions), and alternative paths (what other intro texts call "new religions"). His is an extremely common way

to introduce "world religions." The vast majority of intro text books also have chapters on Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.[6] Many also include chapters on Shinto, oral/indigenous/native religions, Sikhism, Jainism, ancient religions, and Zoroastrianism. A few even include African religion, and secular humanism.

Molloy reviews his "world religions" in an essentially historical mode: he begins with the origins, spells out their doctrines, and then examines their histories. For Christianity for example, his first section is titled "The Life and Teaching of Jesus," his second, "Early Christian Beliefs and History," and the rest of his sections in order, "The Essential Christian World View," "The Spread of Early Christianity," "Influences on Christianity at the End of the Roman Empire," "The Eastern Orthodox Church," "Christianity in the Middle Ages," "The Protestant Reformation," "The Development of Christianity Following the Protestant Reformation," "Christian Practices," Christianity and the Arts," and finally, "Christianity Faces the Modern World."[7] Again, this is a reasonably typical way of dealing with any introductory course. The only major alternative among intro to religion texts is the primary source approach exemplified by Ian S. Markham and Christy Lohr in their intro text, *A World Religions Reader* (3rd edition).[8] Their book contains the same general "world religions" as does Molloy's (although they treat Jainism and Sikhism separately, and include chapters on Zoroastrianism and Secular Humanism), and the same general concepts make up their study of religion (the mind of the tradition, the worldviews, institutions and rituals, ethical expressions, and modern expression). The difference lies in the presentation: where Molloy presents his own historical narrative, Markham and Lohr construct their "world religions" through select primary texts which exemplify the mind, worldview, community, rituals, and ethical and modern expressions of a given tradition. Once again using the Christianity chapter as a case in point: under "the Christian

mind" Markham and Lohr give us John 1:1-13; under "world-views" we get the Nicene Creed, an excerpt from Timothy Ware's "God in the Trinity," Acts 9:1-19, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, an excerpt from Mother Julian's *Enfolded in Love: Reading with Julian of Norwich*, and Romans 8:31-39; under "institutions and rituals" we get Matthew 6:7-15, Acts 4:32-37, an excerpt from John Henry Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: A Reply to a pamphlet entitled "What, then, does Dr. Newman mean?"*, and excerpts from The Didache 7, 9, and 10; under "ethical expressions" we get 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, an excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s *A Testament of Hope. The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, Luke 10:38-42, Galatians 3:22, and Hail Mary; and finally, under "modern expressions" we get "The Barmen Declaration," an excerpt from David E. Jenkins's *God, Miracle and the Church of England*, an excerpt from Carl S. Tyneh's "Which is Christ's True Church," and finally, an excerpt from C. S. Lewis' *Surprise by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*.

While these approaches to the introduction of world religions differ slightly in method, the theory (or lack thereof) which they use is essentially the same. First, it is assumed that religion exists "out there" as a category which is self evident; there is no need to explain how John 1:1-13 functions to explain "the Christian Mind" (there is literally no explanation, the passage is briefly introduced and then quoted with no commentary), or why "the Christian Mind" is a reasonable subject of inquiry in the first place. Second, the history of any given religion is presented teleologically: the birth of Jesus, the life of Constantine, the crusades, the reformation, and Vatican II all belong on a continuum in which early events were the direct causes of later events. This leads to the third assumption, that the historical events presented in each chapter are self evidently important. The authors of introductory texts do not stop to consider why the Council of Nicaea deserves a section in the Christianity chapter, while the daily lives of fourth

century Coptic Christians in Northern Egypt do not. This problem of the perceived relevance of certain historical events stems from an understanding of history from the top down, an approach referred to elsewhere as the "great man" approach. British historian E. P. Thompson addresses this practice in *Making of the English Working Class* (1966) and attempts to rescue normal people doing normal things from the "dust bin of history." The same needs to be done with the introduction of religion.

Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln both advocate approaches to the study of religion which do away with the "great men" approach, and their respective theories of religion can be extremely beneficial to those of us attempting to introduce religion. Smith is of the opinion that a chronological ordering of events is, at best, uninteresting as "[o]ne damn thing after another simply fails at problematizing the subject matter with respect to any intellectual capacity other than mnemonics."[9] Memorizing fun facts does not tell us anything worth knowing about the traditions, and more importantly, about the concepts to which the student in the intro course is being introduced. Additionally, Smith is extremely conscious of the fact that certain data sets are privileged for very specific, even discursive reasons. As a result, in his introductory classes he spends a great deal of time "unpacking the syllabus," explaining to his students what decisions he has made, and why, what he has included, what he has excluded, and the benefits and costs of these decisions.[10] Based on this approach to his course material, Smith argues that "*there is nothing that must be taught*, there is nothing that cannot be left out."[11] Data is not included in the introductory course because it is self-evidently important, but because it connects in interesting ways to other data.[12] The introductory courses described above, then, are exactly what Smith tells us NOT to do. Unlike Smith, Lincoln does not explicitly reflect on his approach to the study of religion, nor is he particularly concerned with the ways which religion should be introduced

and taught. But like Smith, Lincoln would (or does) reject the ways in which religion in introduced by most text books for many of the same reasons.

In many important ways Smith and Lincoln complement one another. Both view religion as a second order category; Smith says so explicitly in his introduction to *Imagining Religion*,[13] and while Lincoln does not say so explicitly, this understanding of religion is at the very least implicit throughout one of his major works, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*.[14] Based on this position that religion exists only within the discourse of the person studying it, neither Smith nor Lincoln examines any given piece of data *for* religion in isolation, and instead they both (typically) employ a comparative approach. Additionally, each scholar draws analogical, rather than genealogical comparisons, comparing "common themes in different and discrete contexts."[15] Initially Lincoln was much more interested in genealogical comparisons, but his more recent work compares data analogically and focuses on how certain themes (especially the discourses of ritual, myth, and classification) function cross culturally to build and maintain social borders. Smith states his comparative theory even more clearly, "*all comparisons are properly analogical* […]. In the study of religion, as in any disciplined inquiry, comparison, in its strongest form, brings differences together within the space of the scholar's mind for the scholar's own intellectual reasons."[16] Both see religion as a human phenomenon that needs to be studied just like, and alongside, other instances of human phenomenon, but it is here where the similarities between Smith and Lincoln end. Their approach to, and their general understanding of their data is rather similar, but some of the conclusions they draw, and certainly their respective ends, are quite different.

Both would agree, for example, that when introducing religion, one of our first concerns needs to be the selection of data and the justification of those selections. This operates on two

levels: the selection of primary texts, and the selection of historical narratives. In the case of the former, too often certain texts are selected in order to present the "essence" of whichever religion that text represents. The problem here is that by assuming that the symbolic essence of a religion can be identified in a text, we fail to situate texts socio-historically. This problem is compounded by the fact that texts "mean" different things to different people at different times. As Lincoln as illustrates with his analysis of the various appropriations of the Neur/Dinka myth of the first cattle raid, the same myth can be altered slightly, or even simply interpreted differently in order to produce a very different reading.[17] This is very much the nature of texts/myths. A contemporary Latin American Catholic woman, John Calvin, and a second century Syrian Christian will all interpret John 1:1-13 differently based on their own socio-historical location. Thus texts/myths cannot be presented as evidence of some ahistorical essence, but rather must be contextualized to have any descriptive use. Markham and Lohr's selection of John 1:1-13 is, therefore, not an example of bad data, but rather an example of a bad use of data. If one was to use John 1:1-13, it should not be used to describe "the Christian mind" (as if such a thing existed), but instead it needs to be situated, and then used to analyze that situation. For John 1:1-13, the most obvious question would be how this passage speaks to the socio-historical situation in which it was produced (a question which would interest Smith), but equally interesting would be to ask how John 1:1-13 has been interpreted in other socio-historical situations (a question that would interest Lincoln). Of course our introduction of religion should not be limited to canonical (or even well known) material. It would be equally interesting to examine fourth century Coptic art, medieval depictions of Mary, or modern tomb stones. No piece of data is inherently interesting, but almost any piece of data *could* be. Thus the problem with the text-

based intro books is not their data, but their employment and analysis (or lack there) of their data.

Intros which focus on historical surveys and "key concepts" are slightly more problematic. I have already touched on the problem of teleological histories, so here I will focus on "key concepts." In many ways the problem with key concepts is similar to the problem of ahistorical texts: phenomena are removed from any socio-historical location and reduced to an ahistorical essence. Ahimsa (non-violence), for example, is presented by Molloy as "fundamental" to Buddhism.[18] Once again the problem here is equating essence with a phenomenon. And while it may be the case that Ahimsa is important to some Buddhists in some places at some particular time, the actual concept of Ahimsa tells us very little about anyone or anything. For that matter, concepts in general are deceptively lacking in descriptive power. Smith illustrates this very succinctly in his essay "Fences and Neighbors" where he shows that even seemingly concrete markers of ancient Judaism are actually quite fluid. A practice which is often used to identify Jews, circumcision, was practiced by many non-Jews in antiquity as well for a number of reasons.[19] Smith goes on to show that even self identification in the form of tomb engravings does not help us get any closer to identifying the *sine qua non* of Judaism.[20] The problem with using concepts to identify members of a religious tradition is that there are no monothetic concepts which can mark the borders of a cultural group. Non-violence, like circumcision, is practiced by a number of groups for multiple reasons: Ghandi practiced non-violence, as did Martin Luther King Jr. Non-violence is also a common practice among various protest groups. The concept, then, is clearly not helpful in constructing a monothetic Buddhism (the implicit goal of these intro texts) as we cannot argue Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr. and peaceful protestors are all Buddhists, nor that all Buddhists are non-violent. As Smith argues,

polythetic constructions of a given tradition need to be implemented in the classification and study of religion.

But perhaps the greatest problem with the current approach to introducing religion is the operating assumption that we know what religion is. Most intro texts echo a definition of religion provided by Melford Spiro who defines religion as, “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally posited superhuman beings.”[21] And while at first glance this definition seems reasonable enough, Smith remarks that,

> Notably lacking in such definitions are alternative taxonomic strategies, particularly those that do not take some modified form of essential definition as their model. There is no attempt at a polythetic classification which eschews the postulation of a unique differentium in favor of a large set of characteristics, any one of which would be necessary, but not sufficient, to classify a given entity as an instance of religion.[22]

This issue, however, is rarely (if ever) addressed in introductions. Instead, they assume a general phenomenological definition of religion, and go on to subdivide religion into “world religions,” Buddhism, Chinese religions, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Japanese religions, and Judaism. This, of course, leads to the obvious problem of what constitutes a “world religion,” and has started what Smith refers to as a “turf war” over which religions should be represented with full chapters in intro texts.[23] Additionally, while this list appears to be self evident (Smith claims that it includes some 74.2 percent of the earth’s population as of 1993), the divisions into these seven categories stems from an older tradition of dividing religions in terms of “ours” and “theirs,” or “true” and “false.”[24] Compounding the problem is the fact that “an ideological emphasis on purity of lineage” functions to exclude non-mainstream practices from being classified as a part of a given “world religion.”[25] The result is a discourse which addresses what *real* Muslims believe, what *real* Buddhists do, and what texts *real* Christians read. As I argue above, the employment of data used in introductory texts is often problematic, given the above observations

of Smith, it is now apparent that it is not only the data which is a concern, but the categories of "religion" and "world religions" themselves.

The way in which we currently introduce "world religions" is more of a discourse on normativity than it is a discourse on critical thinking. The data currently employed to introduce religion functions to tell students what real Muslims do, what real Hindus believe, and what texts real Christians read. The first step in dismantling this normative discourse needs to be the recognition that our data is not unique or a given. The expansion and diversification of our data sets will allow us to illustrate the ways in which "religion" is not a unique "thing," but a human discourse just like any other that should be study, and more importantly, introduced as any other.

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[1] One paper asked us to experience and reflect on "indigenous religion," another required us to attend a religious service and report on it.
[2] Michael Molloy. *Experiencing The World's Religions: Tradition, Challenge, and Change* (3rd edition), (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 2005).
[3] Molloy, 18.
[4] Ibid., 18-22.
[5] Ibid., 6-7.
[6] There are a several books with place Confucianism and Taoism in a single chapter titled "Chinese Religion." Less frequently, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism are found in a single chapter "Vedic Religion."
[7] Placed between "The Eastern Orthodox Church" and "Christianity in the Middle Ages" is a section which he includes in every chapter called "Personal Experience." This section is problematic for its own reasons and will be addressed below.
[8] Ian S. Markham and Christy Lohr, *A World Religions Reader* (3rd edition), (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2009).
[9] Jonathan Z. Smith, "When the Chips are Down," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10.
[10] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Introductory Course: Less is Better," in *Teaching the Introductory Course in religious Studies: A Sourcebook*, Mark Juergensmeyer (ed) (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1991), 190.
[11] Ibid., 187. (emphasis original)
[12] This idea will be discussed much more will be below in my section on how Smith teaches intro to religion.
[13] Jonathan Z. Smith, "Introduction," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.
[14] I should note while both scholars see religion as a second order category, their theories as to what should be placed in this category "religion" (therefore their respective theories *of* religion) differ to some degree, and will be examined below.
[15] Bruce Lincoln, "Preface," in *Death, War, and Sacrifice: Studies in Ideology and Practice*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xv.
[16] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 51. Emphasis original.
[17] Lincoln, "The Politics of Myth," 29-32. Here he shows a marked difference between an older myth of the first cattle raid which is decidedly anti-Dinka, to a more recent one which, in light of socio-political change, is more sympathetic to the Dinka.

[18] Molloy, 132.
[19] Smith, "Fences and Neighbors," 13.
[20] Ibid., 15-18.
[21] Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, (London, 1966), 96, quoted by Smith in "A Matter of Class: Taxonomies of Religion," 166.
[22] Smith, "A Matter of Class," 166.
[23] Ibid., 170.
[24] Ibid., 167.
[25] Ibid., 171.