Response to the "Alternative Approaches to Introducing Religion(s): Engaging Method and Theory in the Classroom" Panel

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T. Nicholas Schonhoffer
University of Toronto

The Introduction to World Religions class is well canonized in the field, and should be familiar to everyone here. After perhaps introducing a few methodological issues in the first couple weeks, we pound through, in sequence, the big five so-called "world religions," and a few other "religions" of our choice, closely following one of the many, though largely interchangeable, text books. For some students, this will be the only class that they take in Religion, or even in the humanities. For other students, it will be their introduction to subject or branch of subjects that they will continue studying throughout their university education, and perhaps continue to pursue either professionally or as a hobby throughout their lives. It is an important class, and one which should honestly introduce students to the possibilities that the academic Study of Religion offers. Ian, Sarah and Jesse have, therefore, produced a very significant critique of the current institutional state of our field. Building off the theories of Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln, they argue both that our current introductory class fails to meet the standards of liberal education, and, importantly, that alternatives exist, which avoid the pitfalls of a World Religions class.

Ian argues that the canonical model of teaching World Religions reinforces several normative narratives. World Religion classes tend not to discuss why they select the religions and the aspects of these religions that they choose to cover. These examples are instead taken as self-evident data for what really constitutes both religion and particular religions. By discussing, for example, the Nicene Creed, but not the practices of the contemporaneous Egyptian monks reading the *Pistis Sophia*, the class selects what constitutes normative Christianity. By taking the

Nicene Creed as a general example for Christianity, the creed is taken out of the social-historical contexts that have given it shifting meanings, in, for example, the Arian controversies of the fourth century, or the modern ritual context of a Catholic Mass. By taking the creed for granted as an example of Christianity, three separate levels of normative conclusions, therefore, fall into place: (i) conclusions about the transhistorical meaning of the creed; (ii) the transhistorical essence of Christianity, and; (iii) the transhistorical definition of religion.

Sarah and Jesse both propose models of teaching that not only seek to escape from this normative discourse, but to actively deconstruct it. Jesse suggests focusing the class on topics of classification, myth, and ritual. In all cases, the class would de-familiarize students with their preconceptions about these topics, and then go on to show how classification, myth, and ritual are continuously employed discursively by human beings to think about and construct the worlds and situations that they occupy. This class has the significant advantage of deconstructing generalized conceptions of unified religious phenomena, in favour of an understanding of how human beings, in particular situations, have used classification, myth, and ritual to think with.

Sarah begins her essay by noting Smith's understanding of the goal of liberal education as "training in argument about interpretation,"[1] and the primary goal of a 100-level class as to introduce students to college level scholarship. This premise, I think, underlies all three essays and may be a matter that needs further discussion, since alternative understandings of the purpose of liberal education exist, one of which I intend to discuss later in this response.

Sarah goes on to argue that a sheer wealth of data presented in an Introduction to World Religions class stands in the way of achieving this goal. Data memorization takes the place of learning "how to *think* about and *analyze* religion." She, therefore, proposes structuring the class

[1] Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Introductory Course: Less is Better," *Teaching the Introductory Course in Religious Studies: A Source Book,* Ed. Mark Juegensmeyer (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1991): 188.

around principles of definition, classification, comparison, and explanation. This would ensure that the class is not about teaching the students facts about religion, but methodological steps that would allow them to learn how to study religion, "emphasizing university level discourse analysis." Sarah's vision of the class has the advantage of a high degree logical consistency with its stated goal. The structure of the class is designed to fulfill the ethic espoused by Smith's philosophy of education. Her class, therefore, clearly escapes from many of the questions of legitimacy that dog introductory classes both inside and outside of religious studies.

Ian, Jesse and Sarah have clearly described the problems with the world religions course, and offered alternative to avoid these challenges. Tomoko Masuzawa, who has also criticized the conception of World Religions in her book *The Invention of World Religions*, notes that some of these same issues are widely recognized by instructors of World Religions classes, who:

> not infrequently complain that such a comprehensive treatment of the subject in one course, or even two courses, is impossibly ambitious or inexcusably simplistic, as it is bound to be too broad a survey, too flattening an analysis. It would be an unmanageable survey indeed, unless, perhaps, one begins with the scholastically untenable assumption that all religions are everywhere the same in essence, divergent and particular only in their ethnic, national, or racial expression. Of course, this is an assumption alarmingly prevalent among the world religions books now available on the market.[2]

What Masuzawa is noting here is that many of the concerns that this set of papers identify are widely recognized, and I don't think should be controversial. Where I think the papers presented here become significant is not in their identification of the hazards either of this flattening of religions into an universalizing essence, or even in the not as widely recognized concerns that Masuzawa skilfully supports with her extensive genealogy, that the discourse of World Religions was "from the very beginning … a discourse of secularization; at the same time, it was clearly a

[2] Tomoko Masuzawa, The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was preserved in the Language of Pluralism (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005): 8-9.

discourse of othering."[3] This sort of deconstruction is, in many ways, the easier stage in the project that I have seen outlined here today. It is a necessary stage; without clearly identifying the problem, a solution cannot be tested. It is, however, in proposing solutions to this problem: models for an introductory class designed to escape from these challenges, that today's papers really become interesting.

In producing this constructive project, Ian, Jesse, and Sarah have gone beyond the instructors Masuzawa identifies, who recognize the essentialization that the class forces, but continue to "take this teaching assignment in stride, taking the state of affairs more as a matter of convention and practical necessity than as a matter of principle."[4] They have even gone beyond Masuzawa, who despite her devastating critique of the concept of World Religions, in her conclusion explicitly notes that she provides no solution, writing:

> If the scientific efficacy of religion the world religions discourse is put in doubt, what alternative method, what new strategies should be adopted in its stead in order to conduct basic research, or to teach an introductory course on various religions? It behoves me to acknowledge the legitimacy, reasonableness, and urgency of such questions even though I am unable to answer them here.[5]

Even under severe criticism, without a viable alternative; the World Religions model will continue to be used. Where the papers presented here are remarkable is that they have not only identified the problems with the world religions class, but proposed models for teaching an introductory class with the intention of avoiding these challenges.

I would further suggest that the proposed alternatives to the World Religions class are largely successful in fulfilling their intention to avoid the triple discursive traps of essentialization, secularization, and othering. Bruce Lincoln and Jonathan Z. Smith are well chosen theorists to base the class on, since both have dedicated much of their theoretical work to

[3] Masuzawa 20.
[4] Masuzawa 8.
[5] Masuzawa 327.

combating just these challenges, and remain relentlessly self-conscious of them in their constructive works. Following their methodology for an introductory class, therefore, successfully goes a long way towards avoiding these three discursive traps.

I am, therefore, largely in agreement with the position that Ian, Jesse, and Sarah have advanced. That having been said, for the sake of fostering further refinement of these ideas and dialogue on this topic, I would like playfully propose three complexes of critical questions; perhaps these might be understood as question that I can imagine someone else wanting to ask: (i) about the new normative principles that result from a dependence on Smith and Lincoln, (ii) about the advantages of a traditional world religions class for creating cultured individuals, and (iii) about the potential advantages of using a traditional World Religions class in a deconstructive manner.

It is likely impossible for humans to operate without normative ideas. One of the major goals in Ian, Jesse, and Sarah's papers has been to overthrow the normative narrative that has guided studies of World Religions up to this point. In doing this, however, they risk replacing the old normative narrative with a new one, and one that offers its own potential challenges. These suggestions must, therefore, be implemented with rigorous self-awareness of what new normativities they create, and how these normativities affect the way we tell stories about our world. Of particular concern to me is their reliance on Jonathan Z. Smith and Bruce Lincoln as the theoretical backbone for this course. This use of Smith and Lincoln has the potential to create a new canon for authoritative theories on religion, which can detract from critical thinking. It is for this reason, I think, that theoretically oriented introductory classes, like those often offered by Sociology departments, make special efforts to present a variety of theoretical positions, though this runs the risk of falling back into a flattening survey of a different kind.

While I have great respect for both Lincoln and Smith, there are locations where they share positions that are contestable and not shared by many practitioners of the critical Study of Religion. One area that immediately stands out is that both theorists strongly trend, in the sociological sense, towards Idealism. "Idealism" in the sociological sense refers not to the holding of unrealistic principles, but the idea that the driving force in human sociality is ideation and discourse, and is frequently contrasted with more materialistic understandings of society. Lincoln, in his "Theses on Method" defines religions as "that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal,"[6] while Smith in defines religion, as Sarah quotes in her paper, as the "relentlessly human activity of thinking through situations."[7] In its primary sense then, both Lincoln and Smith locate religion in human thought and language, and this tendency has, if anything, been exaggerated in the proposals for an Introduction to the Study of Religion advanced here today, which have relentlessly stressed understanding religion as a discursive phenomenon.

While this is, in general, a position that I am sympathetic to, it does exclude numerous and legitimate roads of critical enquiry in religion, particularly from relentlessly materialist Economic or Psychological perspectives. In this sense, following the narratives established by the methodology of Smith and Lincoln might perpetuate seeing religion as something abstract, still of the mind and spirit, rather than of the brains, and flesh, and labour, and food, that makes it a human phenomenon. It might even be accused of leading to a sort of "Gnosticism" – to take the word in its original and probably only valid sense of a modern polemic.

[6] Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 8 (1996): 225
[7] Jonathan Z. Smith, "When the Chips are Down," *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 32.

My first complex of questions, then, relates to whether reliance on Smith and Lincoln as the theoretical basis of this project risks creating new normativities? How serious a problem is the tendency to idealism in Smith and Lincoln for an introductory course? Most importantly, how might the criticisms of a World Religions class and constructions of new Introduction to Religion be different if they incorporated more materialistic approaches to religion, thinking about it in terms like cognition and mechanism, labour and capital, or embodiment and performance?

My second line of questioning involves possible advantages of the current World Religion course that will be lost in new models. Masuzawa notes near the beginning of her book that World Religions classes are popular, often providing the economic basis for supporting Religion departments. Students want to take World Religions classes in large numbers, presumably because they perceive some benefit to themselves from doing so, and I think it would be simplistic to attribute this only the emotionally edifying effects that the dominant narrative of essentialized religions promises. Knowingly or not, I think many students enter the class with another goal in mind, the accumulation of cultural capital, that is of knowledge that they can later trade in for status, and it seems to me that World Religions class is well equipped to provide this.

A student, having taken a World Religions class, may well gain the small degree of general knowledge of facts about religions, and could be fairly well prepared to go out into the world and provide the surface identification of common religious phenomena that allows a person to perform being cultured. Perhaps seeing a statue of Shiva in an Art Gallery or a movie, the student can now identify the deity and say a few words about his general attributes: this is the kind of performance that allows a person to gain recognition as cultured or educated. Perhaps

encountering ritual involving the worship of Shiva's lingam, the student can pull out enough background knowledge to avoid being offensive. In arming the student with a wide range of basic facts, the traditional world religions class provides the student with the potential to gain a degree of cultural capital, and the alternative models suggested today might need to be examined to see whether they would also fulfill this educational goal.

This returns us to the premise of what University Education is about. If it is about teaching students methods of interpretation and critical thinking, then I think that Ian, Jessie, and Sarah are correct that the World Religions class fails. On the other hand, if it is about producing cultured individuals, equipped with the cultural capital to go forth and gain recognition as such, then a traditional world religions class may maintain benefits. In fact, the extent to which it ties into broadly shared normative narratives may be to its advantage.

I suspect this somewhat cynical description of the goal of university education will meet some resistance from those here who are more idealistic (in the non-sociological sense) and in fact, I'm a little uncomfortable with it myself. I don't think, however, that it can be so easily dismissed by the sense of outrage that it stirs. We encounter varieties of students with different needs that we as educators must be prepared to serve. This idea of University as the place where one acquires the cultural capital that allows one preform the status of an educated person is, I think, a common goal, and one we should be prepared to address.

My second complex of questions, then, relates the premise assumed by the papers here that the goal of an introductory class is to teach interpretation and critical thinking. Can we imagine other goals, according to which the World Religions class makes more sense? Perhaps arming our students with cultural capital? Or making enough money to sustain our departments?

Might these concerns have any value? And if they do, how well do the alternative models suggested today meet these alternative educational goals?

My final line of questioning takes the same starting point as the second: the extreme popularity of World Religions courses and their role in the sustaining many Religion departments economically. Here, though, I turn away from the abstract examination of premises to the very concrete question of how best to effect a change in the attitudes of our students. If the World Religions discourse does sufficient harm, that to oppose becomes our ethical duty as scholars of religion – a position that I hold – then the new question becomes one of what the best strategy is to teach our students about this issue?

As has been argued here today, especially in Ian's paper, the World Religions course ties into a narrative about religion that is spread beyond the academy. This narrative contributes the fact that students attend our Introductions to World Religions in large numbers. This results both in more money for our departments to retain us to question the World Religions discourse, and also more students in our classes eager to learn about the World Religions, who we can teach the discourse to in a subversive manner. It is my experience that it doesn't take all that much work for the inadequacy of the discourse to become obvious to students, and an instructor sensitive to the diversity of traditions and assumptions that the students have brought to the class can do a lot within a traditional World Religions structure. On the other hand, there is a risk that if our classes deviate too far from the dominant discourse, that we will be speaking only to ourselves. In fact, my experience dealing with introductory students tends to be that they don't initially respond well to pushing deconstructive approaches too strongly.

The practical question, then, is whether teaching the world religions class offers us advantages in our attempts to deconstruct the World Religions discourse? Is this a case where a

less direct approaches may actually be the most effective? Can we, by teaching World Religions, benefit from the influence of this discourse, which brings us students and then twist this influence against the discourse itself? If we shift too far away from the dominant discourse, then do we risk losing the ability to speak to those imbedded in it? Or will the alternative classes attract similar interest from students rendering these concerns moot?

To quickly wrap things up, I generally agree with the positions taken by Ian, Jesse, and Sarah in terms of the flaws in present introductory courses, and I am particularly appreciative of their constructive offering of suggestions for alternative introductory classes. That said, in the hope of helping refine their arguments, I have suggested three areas where someone more inclined to traditional approaches might object. The first relates to the limits of relying on Lincoln and Smith's theories, and particularly their idealism. The second relates the goal of liberal education, and asks whether there are other imaginable goals with respect to which the traditional World Religions class has strengths. The third and final, asks whether there are strategic reasons why we might continue teaching World Religions classes in the interest of deconstructing the World Religions discourse.