

# Religion Teacher Update

JANUARY 2007, Vol. 1, No. 1

THE COUNCIL FOR SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL EDUCATION

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS OF RELIGIONS AND ETHICS IN MIDDLE AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

## Facing Evil in the Religion Class

BY SHER SWEET

What do you say when the question of God and evil comes up in your classroom? What theological questions, for example, should you explore when confronting the horrors of the Holocaust? Rabbi Lawrence Kushner in his book, *God was in this Place, and I, I did not know*, confronts the question of suffering, God and evil head-on. In chapter three of this wonderful book about Jewish spirituality, Kushner begins the section titled "Action in the East," with this paragraph:

Forget about a good person who contracts a terrible disease and dies prematurely or about a wicked one getting rich and living to a ripe old age. Let's go right to the core of the question about evil. Consider a random image from myriad nightmares and agonies human beings have inflicted on one another. It would inevitably come up sooner or later in the conversation anyway and, as it invariably does (and perhaps should) silence furthers discussion. ( 59-60)

"In questioning why God did not stop the Holocaust, students often wonder why God intervened in biblical times but not now"

Kushner then goes on to describe a horrific photograph in Yad VaShem (Israel's Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem) in which a huge pit is filled with hundreds of naked, wounded and dead bodies. "In the center of the mural, at least as large as the viewer, there are three people: a mother, holding her infant child to her bosom, faces the trench. Just behind her, at point blank range, a young German soldier trains the sights of his rifle at the woman's head, about to shoot." (60)

Kushner asks the inevitable question: Where is God? Kushner's answer is: "God was there. See, we have a photograph. There is God, over there in the ditch, in the mother's terrified eyes, even in the psychosis of the Nazi soldier." (60) His response is challenging and discomfiting to students, but stimulates a fruitful discussion. Instead of asking "where is God?" Kushner wants us to ask: "Why do human beings do such things?" What's more, Kushner believes "blaming God not only absolves us but increases

the likelihood that we will allow such horrors to happen again." (61) Others respond differently to this issue by asking if God is impotent or absent in the face of such destructive evil. In questioning why God did not stop the Holocaust, students often wonder why God intervened in biblical times but not now. Kushner turns this question on its head:

"Why didn't God do anything? To ask such questions assumes that God occasionally intervenes in human affairs without human agency. Yet countless events remind us that God does not work like that. Indeed, while it contradicts literal readings of some sacred texts, we suspect that God never has. God did not die in the Holocaust, only the Deuteronomic idea of a God who, through suspending laws of nature, rewards and punishes people.

CONTINUES ON PG . 4

### CSEE 2007 Institute on Teaching the World's Religions

San Francisco, California  
(actually, San Anselmo, just north of the City by the Bay)  
Saturday, June 23-Wednesday evening, June 27  
San Domenico High School

#### Selected Topics 2007

Hands on Hinduism: Activities for the Classroom  
Sunni and Shia: About the Divide  
Buddhist Texts for the Classroom  
Integrating Science and Religion  
Kabir: Poet for the Ages  
Religion in the Roman Empire  
Medieval Hinduism: Saints, Poets, Literature  
Teaching Chinese Religion  
plus  
what's new in texts, other media?  
what are colleagues in other schools doing?

## The Indigenous Traditions' 'Live With'

BY TED DESMAISONS

Most students wouldn't imagine they could hear a tree or a rock speak. Then again, most have never tried.

In my World Religions classroom, it's not enough just to learn about the major faith traditions. I ask my students to learn from those traditions as well, bringing their own lives into direct conversation with the insights, questions, practices and perspectives of each religion we study.

To that end, one of my favorite assignments comes during our study of native worldviews. After learning how most indigenous traditions believe that every part of the natural world hums with the sound of the sacred and after hearing Joseph Campbell speak in *The Power of Myth* about plant and animal 'consciousness,' students conduct a "Live-With" that asks them to explore that worldview with their own experience and imagination.

The basics: students choose some presence outdoors that they can visit regularly, perhaps a pond, tree, rock, or river. They must find something small (i.e., not a mountain), tangible (as in, not the sky), and wild (not their dorm head's pet cat).

First, they need to start with humility. We read in our *Living Religions* text how "trees, animals, insects, and plants are all to be approached with caution and consideration," so I ask students to 'introduce' themselves before assuming it's OK to continue. They also have to ask whether the being is willing to take part in the assignment, trusting their intuitions for a response.

Next, they need to move to awareness, getting to know their chosen being in detail. I invite them to use all their senses and to watch the being over time at different points in the day and in different lightings. At minimum, they need to spend at least 15 minutes on at least three different occasions.

Third, I ask them to imagine that the being has wisdom to share with them about life in general. If the being could speak, what would it say? How might it respond to specific questions they have? Again, I invite students to listen to their intuitions for responses.

Last, they should offer some thanks to the being before going off to write their 2-3 page paper about their experience and what it has shown them about indigenous traditions.

Some students lap the assignment up with ease while others struggle, not believing they could ever hear any wisdom from a plant or a seed pod. When students bog down, I ask them simply to imagine that they could talk with their being. From that perspective, what might the being say or teach? Inevitably, by the time I grade the assignment, I have heard bunches of students say something like "I can't believe that I got a sense of the pond speaking," or "I never would have imagined!"

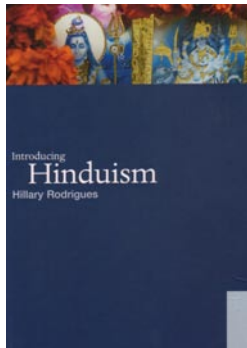
To be sure, this assignment, like all "Live-With"s in a World Religions course, needs some disclaiming. In no way, I tell students, should we pretend that these few sessions constitute a full understanding or complete representation of the tradition we're encountering. For a true follower, the practice comes within an entire context of meaning and commitment that deepens and informs the practice, making it exponentially richer. Others might argue that the assignment disrespects the tradition it includes, appropriating practices that should remain the purview of full-time adherents, rather than dabblers without a full investment of heart and mind. Alternatively, the assignment could be asking the student to contradict his or her own religious beliefs. Asking a student to chant a mantra, practice meditation--or speak with a tree--might take them to places that their faith says they should not tread.

I consider each of these concerns valid, and do my best to address them without canceling the value of the experience as a whole. I caution students that one Live-With does not an expert make and that they need to enter the practice respectfully. I also allow those who feel uncomfortable with the assignment on religious grounds to create a different assessment for the unit. I would offer such an alternative without

CONTINUES ON PG . 4

### Introducing Hinduism

© 2006 by Hillary P. Rodrigues  
Routledge, 388 pages  
ISBN 0-415-39269-1 (paperback)



Routledge's new introductory work on Hinduism is a rich resource for teachers, especially those who may not have enjoyed the luxury of full courses on Hinduism in college or graduate school. Hillary Rodrigues writes as an educator for his peers in the world religions or Eastern traditions classroom. A number of his text's details illustrate his sensitivity to issues faced by colleagues in the classroom.

Some of these are apparent in the book's appendices; the first consists of a time line of Hinduism, and the second a series of pronunciation guides: general terms, names of important individuals, place names, and significant Hindu texts.

Chapters conclude with Discussion Questions, with "Key Points" from the chapter, and finally with recommended titles "For Further Reading." The latter sections have their own internal organization, by subtopics, to facilitate use. In the chapter on the *Bhagavad Gita* and the rise of the bhakti tradition, for example, Rodrigues offers the names of a half dozen titles to learn more about bhakti, a dozen for more about the *Bhagavad Gita* and its teachings, and several titles for further exploration of the lives of Ramana Maharsi, on Mohandas Gandhi (included here because of the influence of the Gita on his life and thought) and on bhakti devotee Sri Caitanya.

The inclusion of current, or related, topics of the kind known to show up in student questions ("So how do the Hare Krishnas fit into Hinduism?") is another nice touch in Rodrigues's text. For example, the "Reform and Revitalization" chapter offers Case Studies on Ramakrishna and the Ramakrishna Order, on the Theosophical Society, on Sri Aurobindo and his Integral yoga, and on Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, among others.

Teachers fortunate enough to have a trimester or more to spend with juniors or seniors on Hinduism

may think about considering *Introducing Hinduism* as a student text; the reading level is appropriate for these students in most Independent Schools. The book's only drawback may be in those cases where teachers feel their students need pretty pictures. *Introducing Hinduism* is black and white, with grayscale photos and an occasional gray box. Routledge does offer a companion web site (self study questions, discussion questions, related web sites), with web links to make up for lack on photos in some cases. The visual limits should not stand in the way: for those looking for a readable, solid introduction, *Introducing Hinduism* fits the bill.

### A Tremendous Discussion Starter

The PBS radio show *This American Life* offered an amazing piece of its always interesting work in December, in a show called "Shouting Across the Divide." The lead segment deals with a Muslim family that had been completely integrated into the community prior to September 11, 2001.

The mother in this family had persuaded her husband that the family would be happier if they left the West Bank and moved to America. The plan was worked, until the daughter's school began using a book to help students understand Muslims, and why "they want to kill Christians." Post 9/11, prejudice, insensitivity, ignorance and fear unravelled what, earlier, appeared to be solid bonds.

The show is compelling, powerful, and sensitively presented. It would make a tremendous discussion starter for students, perhaps as early as middle elementary school, and certainly through high school.

"Shouting Across the Divide" is available for download for about a dollar, but it can be listened to for free on the web.

"Free streaming • Buy a CD • \$.95 download"  
<http://www.thislife.org/pages/descriptions/06/322.html>

## Kushner

CONTINUED FROM PG . 1

“These ideas provoke an explosive discussion in the classroom”

Biblical accounts of earth swallowing villains, seas splitting to save innocents, or wicked nations being blotted out seem now, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, clearly to be metaphors—never meant to be taken literally. If the world of the Bible were so ontologically different from our world today as to permit such divine intervention, then truths from such a time would be irrelevant. For us, the snowflakes and rays of sunlight fall without discrimination on righteous and wicked alike. This is simply how the world works. And all theology after the Holocaust must begin with this acknowledgment. (61)

These ideas provoke an explosive discussion in the classroom. Kushner proves himself to be a formidable “God-wrestler,” and we are invited to wrestle with these ideas as well.

Rabbi Kushner raises other interesting and provocative ideas as the chapter continues. I have had wonderfully complex discussions about questions like: What does Kushner mean by “bad” and “evil,” and what is the difference between them? How much “evil” is mankind’s responsibility? Why is there evil in the world? How is God related to “evil” and how does this differ from Christian theology? What does Kushner mean by his analogy of God being like the ocean? While Rabbi Kushner raises more questions than these, I only use a piece of this chapter so that my students don’t have their heads spinning.

Kushner is a gifted writer who can take difficult ideas and address them with complexity and simplicity. The nuances of Kushner’s ideas and the way he expresses them give my best students a lot to chew on. In addition, Kushner leaves you with as many questions as he answers. Kushner’s clarity and insight makes his voice one that would enrich any classroom. This resource works well in a World Religions course that I teach to sophomores, but it would be equally effective in a course on Judaism or the Holocaust.

*Sher L. Sweet teaches in the Religious Studies Department at Northfield Mt. Hermon School*

## One Teachers Assignment

CONTINUED FROM PG . 2

hesitation.

In the end, I love reading the papers. Many students express surprise and wonder at their ability to connect with their being. Some report that ‘nothing happened’ but that they simply felt peaceful. All say that they have an improved understanding about the non-human “Other” that makes up so much of the indigenous worldview. And this, for certain, is what I hope: that a full-bodied experience of the perspective lodges differently in their memory banks than a simple description of that same perspective ever could. Once they’ve lived the exercise into their bones, their bones carry the insights for the rest of their lives.

*Ted DesMaisons teaches in the Religious Studies Department at Northfield Mount Hermon School*

### About Religion Teacher Update:

CSEE’s *Religion Teacher Update* is a free publication for teachers of the world’s religious traditions. Please pass it on.

If you are not on our email list (not shared, used only by CSEE) to receive future issues of *RTU*, email “subscribe” to <worldrel@csee.org>

This issue of *RTU* was edited by the Religious Studies Department at Northfield Mount Hermon School. Submissions (also to <worldrel@csee.org>) regarding innovative programs, good resources, interesting assignments and other ideas are both welcome and invited.

**The Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education**  
800.298.4599  
www.csee.org  
<worldrel@csee.org>

# Ten Issues that Should Arise Whenever we Teach Religion

by Terry Hansen

(Note: This is part I of an article that originally appeared in *CSEE Connections*. Since that issue did not reach a number of religion teachers, we reprint it here.)

Those of us who teach religion at the high-school and middle-school levels, as well as many of our colleagues who teach religious studies at the college under-graduate level, need to face more squarely than we have so far a significant and enduring problem; we simply cannot do our jobs. I would like to explore the origins and ongoing dynamics of, and some possible solutions to, this problem.

“It is my contention that if we teach our courses with these kinds of polarities in mind, we will be doing justice to our students and to our subject, no matter what constraints or conditions we face”

Our job, as I see it, is to provide opportunities for our students to engage with the contradictions and complexities within and among religious traditions. The problem is that most of us, through no fault of our own, are asked to do this job under impossible conditions. Some of these conditions include “world religions” courses crammed into cramped scheduling slots; “essentialist” courses in which the core meanings and values of

a tradition must be clearly spelled out in distorting and reductive ways; religion departments whose mission seems to be merely to serve as adjuncts to chaplaincy programs; and the resistance of the traditions themselves to their own internal diversity.

My reflections are the result of almost thirty years of teaching in independent schools, the past dozen as chair of a Religion and Philosophy department. I have been fortunate enough to be able to teach full semester courses each in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Philosophy of Religion. In my experience, even with this advantage, it is difficult to faithfully evoke even a fraction of the complexity of the subject matter. How then can those who do not have the benefit of a semester program like mine even begin to do justice to the material? The answer, of course, is that teachers do the best that they can with what they have.

What I propose is that we frame our courses, however expansive or constrictive our schedules may be, within

## Do We Teach either/or, or both/and...?

- Beliefs / practices?
- What scholars write / what believers do?
- Men / women?
- Internal / external diversity?
- Textual analysis / other kinds of intelligence?
- Is our teaching disciplinary / interdisciplinary?
- Buddhology / Buddhism?
- Spirituality / religion?
- Postmodern / modern?
- Is religion a problem / a solution?

a series of polarities. This two-part article is a fuller and, I hope, more articulated attempt to formulate the content of a past CSEE/RSiSS workshop presentation called “Ten issues that should arise whenever we teach religion.”

The ten polarities are: belief vs. practice; scholars vs. believers; men vs. women; internal vs. external diversity; textual analysis vs. other kinds of intelligence; disciplinary vs. interdisciplinary; buddhology vs. Buddhism; spirituality vs. religion; postmodern vs. modern; religion as problem vs. religion as solution. It is my contention that if we teach our courses with these kinds of polarities in mind, we will be doing justice to our students and to our subject, no matter what constraints or conditions we face.

I was lamenting to a Greek Orthodox friend of mine about how few religious people seem to understand their own theologies. He gave me his characteristically exasperated look and said, “sometimes it’s just about the food.” Of course, he’s right. My mother has been a faithful Roman Catholic all of her life and I doubt if she could formulate, even on her clear days, one jot or tittle of her belief system. So when we teach that the Four Noble Truths are what Buddhists believe, what are we really saying? I have had many Thai, Japanese, and Chinese students in my classes who call themselves “Buddhist.” Few of them could recite the Four Noble Truths. It would be impolite, let alone colonialist, of me to tell them that “true” Buddhists can recite them. I can guarantee you, however, that if my friend’s Greek Orthodox diners, my mother, or my Asian students were asked to tell what they do when they practice their religions, I would get very knowledgeable answers.

*Terry Hansen teaches philosophy and religion and is chair of the department at Oregon Episcopal School, in Portland*

CONTINUES IN NEXT ISSUE