

Religion Teacher Update

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THE COUNCIL FOR SPIRITUAL AND ETHICAL EDUCATION

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

Tsotsi: An Ethical Perspective

BY GARY PARTENHEIMER

Ethics, I think, is an exercise in empathy. Students in my introductory course are invited into a dialogue across history and culture with thinkers like Aristotle, Confucius, Kant, and Gilligan. Over perennial objections of “How can I possibly judge when I haven’t been . . . ?” they have tried to make the leap with subway hero Wesley Autrey, rescue the raft that carried Elian Gonzalez from Cuba, and attend the sickbed of Terry Schiavo, always in search of a deeper understanding of what is right and what is wrong.

I was introduced to Gavin Hood’s film *Tsotsi* this summer by a colleague who had twice chaperoned NMH’s sophomore Humanities trip to South Africa, and who knew I was always on the lookout for new materials in ethics. I previewed it just after reading an anthology called *White Teachers, Diverse Classrooms* with other department chairs and realized immediately that students of color would

have the rare opportunity to immerse themselves in a world of characters who actually looked like them, while white students would be asked to see persons of another race as normative. And everyone would have to stretch equally to plumb the unfamiliar world of post-apartheid South Africa and its relevance for us.

Tsotsi is a richly engaging film that could certainly stand on its own outside class, or as a discussion starter for any number of worthwhile courses or programs. Based on Athol Fugard’s 1959 novel of the same name, it won the 2005 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film and a series of other cinematic accolades. The vibrant

soundtrack of kwaito music knits together a rich palette of images contrasting downtown Johannesburg and its affluent suburbs with the shantytowns of Soweto; as the characters move through these neighboring but disjunct worlds by light rail, we are left to ponder if they also inhabit different moral universes. Scene after scene inspires debate about central concepts and issues of ethics – yes, the students hate this! – allowing for alternation between viewing and discussion as the story unfolds. (At NMH, the film actually fits

into one 105-minute class period, but I have deliberately broken it up into two days with an overnight writing assignment in between.)

In the opening scene, we meet Tsotsi, (indigenous slang for “thug”) as he leads his gang on a routine day of mischief on the subway. When a pickpocket attempt ends in the senseless murder of a well-to-do commuter who refused to give up his wallet, one gang member gets sick and asks if the others have no decency. Tsotsi responds by beating his pal unconscious, then goes out and commits an even more heinous crime on his own which will eventually change his life. While stealing a Mercedes outside a gated community, he guns down the owner in her own driveway, only to discover that her baby was on the backseat. We learn through flashbacks that Tsotsi’s real name is David, that his mother died of AIDS when he was young, and that he fled from an abusive alcoholic father, living among

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“We learn that Tsotsi’s real name is David, that his mother died of AIDS when he was young, and that he fled from an abusive alcoholic father, living among other orphaned children in a stack of drainpipes...”

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?

Using Mahfouz in the Classroom: The Journey of Ibn Fattouma

BY JAMIE HAMILTON

Life and death, dreaming and wakefulness: stations for the perplexed soul. It traverses them stage by stage, taking signs and hints from things, groping about in the sea of darkness, clinging stubbornly to a hope that smilingly and mysteriously renews itself. Traveler, what are you searching for? What emotions rage in your heart?

Thus opens Naguib Mahfouz' short novel, *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* and student and teacher alike are on a journey to question, ponder, reflect, and critique some of the most profound questions of the human spirit: What is freedom? Does freedom undermine justice? What is happiness? Is ignorance bliss? How is healthy community sustained? By what standards should we judge whether a society is good? Is there such a thing as utopia? And, what do these questions and answers require of us?

I used *The Journey of Ibn Fattouma* as a way to end my term-long course, An Introduction to Islam taught to tenth graders. The students thought it was a perfect way to bring the term to a close as it allowed them to use their newly gained knowledge of Islam to enter into Naguib Mahfouz' profound questions about the way we "embellish our longings with luminous words of piety, and how we conceal our shyness with firebrands of divine inspiration" (13). For the first time they were reading a novel with Muslim characters, references and perspective, and yet they knew it was not a novel about Islam, but rather a story which allowed them to discuss issues about war, poverty, authority, hope and religion. Islam was not viewed as "other" but rather as an avenue by which the students could explore issues that the global community must engage if we are to have a future of collaboration and prosperity. The journey of Qindil Muhammad al-Innabi, known as Ibn Fattouma was not the quest of a Muslim, but the quest every man and woman must make if our assumptions are to be named and our dreams to be lived.

The novel lends itself beautifully to classroom discussion. Each chapter, after the first chapter, represents a land to which Ibn Fattouma travels, and is the perfect length to assign for homework. The first chapter is short, but full of images and conflicts and disappoint-

ments. I usually ask the students to identify the characters and to see if they can name the century the story takes place or where we are geographically. We soon discover that we have no idea where we are, nor do we agree with the time period. A dislodging begins, and we realize that we too are unsettled. Is this a real journey? If so, why is Gebel, the desired destination, yet unvisited? If not, then what is the journey? Why does Qindil want to go on a journey? Why does he say he wants to go on a journey? The first chapter is also full of images: star, flood, dream, torch, flowing garment, closed secret, burning coals under ashes, etc, and lends itself to a close reading as students discover what the images evoke in them. Ask the students to trace the use of star throughout the first chapter and they will feel like poets.

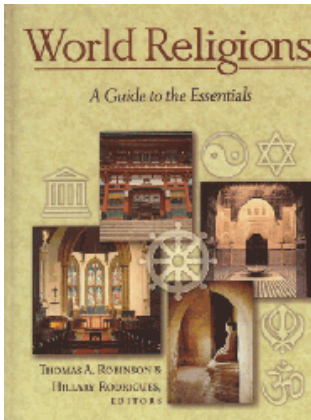
As you move from land to land, you will begin to see that each land has its own governance that mirrors our own civilized history of tribal societies, monarchies, democracy, and communism. Let the students make the connections to the different governing systems on their own. Some classes catch on immediately, others not until the end of the novel. They love discovering this on their own. And while you wait, there are plenty of themes for the students to discuss: Is ignorance bliss? How does one define civilized? When is war justified? Does freedom bring happiness? Does freedom engender morality? When should security trump pleasure? How do we recognize truth? Is it mystical? What is just? The students soon bring in examples from their own lives: the war in Iraq, free speech, the pain of hypocrisy, the burden of abundance, their own tension between responsibility and freedom, and the desire to be real. The students like this book; they feel like philosophers and poets and theologians as they read and discuss.

The last chapter is only a couple pages long, but it ends with a set of questions that provide the perfect paper topics. Students can either analyze the novel or create their own ending. Many students choose to write a creative reflection by answering the last question posed, "Will one day a further manuscript be found describing his last journey?" The following excerpt is from an essay by one of my students who wrote on "leaves of papers," Qindil's journal:

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World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials

by Thomas A Robinson and Hillary P. Rodrigues (Eds)
© 2006 Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 338 pages
ISBN 1-56563-317-2 (hardcover)



We reviewed Hillary Rodrigues's *Introducing Hinduism* in our last issue of *RTU*. Though not fancy, that text has lots to offer the Independent School teacher of religions. The same comments are true for *World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials*: not a plethora of pretty pictures—actually, none at all—but the text is

readable, useful, and eminently appropriate, either as a text for students or as a personal resource for the world religions teacher who—like most of us—does not have an extensive background in all the traditions we are asked to address in the classroom.

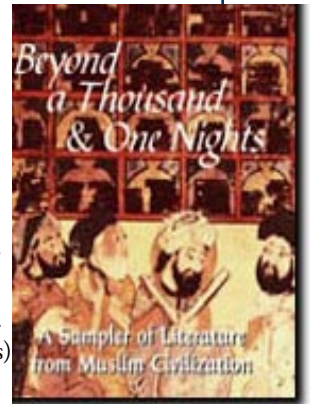
The “gray box” phenomenon is also present in *World Religions*: most 2-page spreads contain a shaded area with a quick glance at issues like the main holidays in Hinduism and how/why they are celebrated, important religious sites in Islam and their significance, the five Ks of the Sikhs...

When we look at new introductory texts we look for a few standard, “key” issues and how a text introduces them. The origins of the Sunni-Shia split in Islam, for example (*World Religions* passes), or the concept of the bodhisattva in Buddhism. Does the text offer stereotypical “platitudes” of the bodhisattva figure as one who refuses liberation until all sensate beings are able to reach it, or the less appealing but convincingly documented figure described by Jan Nattier (*A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra*; University of Hawaii Press, 2003)? In the Ugra sutra the bodhisattva is on a fast track to liberation; and Nattier mentions “Men” deliberately; the Ugra made it clear that it was men, and not many of them, who would be able to reach liberation. (*World Religions* does not pass, but does not fail, either.)

Our bottom line is that *World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials* is a guide to many of the essentials. If teachers do not need a “pretty” text, but want to consider one with good, solid information in a readable format and chapters of an appropriate length, Robinson and Rodrigues’s text is worth looking at.

Beyond a Thousand and One Nights A Sampler of Literature from Muslim Civilization Council on Islamic Education, 2006

Our colleagues at the Council on Islamic Education put this resource together specifically with teachers in mind. The primary sources presented include historical and scientific writing, travel literature, folktales, and poetry. Each selection is accompanied by critical-thinking questions, illustrations using works of art from the period and suggestions for student activities. Pages are reproducible and wire-bound for easy copying.



- Read the thoughts of African scholar al-Jahiz, who explains why paper is better than parchment, just as China’s recent invention was being adopted in Baghdad.
- Read a page from Ibn Rushd’s (Averroes) commentary on Aristotle, a work that Thomas Aquinas read by candlelight, and get medical advice from al-Razi.
- Let al-Khwarizmi introduce the new branch of mathematics called al-jabr (algebra), with formulas and word problems written in the 9th century.
- Learn why al-Biruni studied shadows.
- Read lyric poems from Spain that became part of the romantic, chivalric tradition of medieval songs.
- Laugh as you learn the simple wisdom of Goha, the universal “Charlie Chaplin” figure known across the Muslim world, and ponder deep questions raised by Muslim philosophers.
- Find out what Egyptian scholar al-Jabarti thought of Napoleon’s invasion, and how the Syrian knight Usama viewed the Frankish crusaders.

See more about resources for teaching Islam on the Web site for the Council on Islamic Education, www.cie.org

Review: Field Notes of a Compassionate Life

by Jane S. Baron Rechtman

Field Notes of a Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness

by Marc Ian Barasch

©2005 by Rodale Press (356 pages)

There is no question that in our daily lives, as we read the news, make our way to work, hear of those running the world, and watch or listen to the media of our culture, there seems to be a dearth of compassionate people.

Where are the role models for our lives and those of our children? Where is compassion and empathy for others? Marc Ian Barasch, author of *Healing Path and Healing Dreams*, has written a book that gives one hope: *Field Notes of a Compassionate Life: A Search for the Soul of Kindness*.

“Our closest cousin, the bonobo ape, displays a great deal of empathy for others”

Mr. Barasch is an explorer. In all of his books he takes a subject he’s keenly interested in from his own experience, such as healing from cancer, dreams that heal, and in this one, compassion, and he goes out to find people who exemplify the subject. Like a journalist, he does a good job of listening to and reporting on real people. But unlike a reporter, Barasch makes it personal.

To both himself and us the reader,

he emphasizes the relevance of the material to our lived lives. His reporter nose and self-deprecating analysis keeps the book from being sappy. In fact, in some places, he articulates the very argument us ‘average Joe’s’ might give. And yet, at times his sensitivity cuts to the quick with essential wisdom. Always he writes in a seemingly effortless, conversational style.

Barasch meets with people who are actively living or examining lives of compassion in a variety of ways. He visits primatologist Frans De Waal, whose research showing that our closest cousin, the bonobo ape, displays a great deal of empathy for others raising issues as wide ranging as how we define our animal nature to animal testing. Barasch explores the altruism of organ donors, asking what compels them to give to people they don’t even know? He focuses on individuals such as Zen activist Bernie Glassman and social worker Melody Feldman.

Glassman started a bakery-training program in one of the rough and needy neighborhoods of one of the poorest cities in New York State. He parlayed it into a major social service agency serving people in multiple ways. Melody Feldman started two successful programs that bring together teens from enemy sides of hostile areas in the world – Israelis and Palestinians, Protestant and Catholic Irish, Black and White and Indian South Africans. She gets the kids to really listen to, learn from and understand one another. Barasch writes about Hector Black and Ivan Simpson, the man who murdered Hector’s daughter, in attempting to understand the power forgiveness has to transform lives.

Barasch also reports on the neuroscientific and psychological research on compassion, empathy, and forgiveness. MRI’s can show “this is your brain. This is your brain on compassion.” A group called HeartMath, is investigating through numerous studies, just how invaluable the heart is to the emotional well-being of a person. Psychologists study the biological causes and effects of doing or witnessing good deeds.

Throughout the book Barasch weaves together the wisdom from an array of religious and literary traditions. He uses quotations, stories, philosophical ideas and exemplary figures -- some well known, some less known but equally important -- to nourish our understanding of compassion. In the chapter entitled “Heart Science, Heart Mystery”, which is primarily about the scientific research on the heart, Barasch refers to: the prophet Ezekiel; Anton Chekov; Thomas Hobbes; Carl Jung; Blaise Pascal; Chief Mountain Lake; Mother Teresa; Teilhard de Chardin, Shakespeare; J.D. Salinger; Mattieu Ricard; the Dalai Lama; the philosophies of Sufis, Eastern Orthodox, ancient Egypt, Tibetan Buddhists, early Christian saints, Hindu yogis and his orthodox Jewish grandfather! By connecting these wells of wisdom to cutting edge science, real people and his own experiences, Barasch reminds us that compassion, empathy and forgiveness are inherently human traits that make us and our world a better place when we practice them. I feel better already.

Jane S. Baron Rechtman teaches courses on world religions at The Masters School in New York. She is co-editor of A Compendium of Readings on World Religions published by CSEE

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Ten Issues that Should Arise Whenever We Teach Religion

by Terry Hansen

(Note: This is part 2 of an article from the January issue of RTU. The third and final installment will appear in the next issue.)

The second polarity I feel it is important to discuss is the scholar versus the believer. The ascendancy of academic scholarship and its multifarious approaches to the study of religion, particularly in the past twenty years, is finally beginning to make its way into the teaching of religion at the high-school level. Just as the Academy often has to confront differences between theology and religious studies programs, so independent high schools are now beginning to discuss the different missions of our chaplaincies, our religious affiliations, and our religion departments. To complicate matters further, it is historically true that most of our religious studies programs have indeed evolved from theologies and chaplaincies.

“the role of goddesses and female saints and its often-inverse relationship to the actual status of women”

What does it mean to teach religion without a theological or spiritual agenda? This is an issue I try to present to my students by framing it around the issue of scholarship vs. belief. Clearly, a synthesis between the two is also quite common in religious discussions; but I try to separate them out first before discussing how they can complement and inform each other.

One way I have found to illustrate the differences among spirituality, theology, and religious studies is to explore theodicies. The spiritual issues raised by the problem of suffering, evil, and misfortune involve finding sources of personal meaning and strength in order to address the problem. The theological issues involve various ways in which religious traditions have dealt and are dealing with the problem. Religious studies, however, explore theodicies from the perspective of how “religion” itself was created as a category of discourse, and for that matter, how “theology” and “spirituality” inform our discourse. Granted, this way of delineating the distinctions has a philosophical bias. I use it primarily in my Philosophy of Religion course. But, even when I teach Hinduism and Buddhism, I find it possible to ground my philosophical approach in specific historical and cultural contexts. This is generally not the approach one takes either spiritually or theologically.

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?

As far as how the three complement each other, I see theology as the bridge between spirituality and religious studies. In my school, our chapel program does a nice job of blending general spiritual issues with a generous sprinkling of theology. Our academic religion program, from the other end of the spectrum, tries to locate the relevance of theology in the history of a variety of religious and cultural contexts.

The third issue I raise for our consideration is gender. So much has already been written about this dimension of the study of religion, that I doubt if I can say anything genuinely new about it. In addition to the obvious areas of gender-specific terminology, I find the women’s movement in India to be a particularly profound source of material. For example, the determination of some Indian women to be officially recognized as having the right to renounce can lead to some great discussions about renunciation itself, the recovery of women’s voices in the Upanishads, and responses of religious traditions to challenges from within. Other ways of approaching gender include Carl Jung’s anima/animus dynamic; the role of goddesses and female saints and its often-inverse relationship to the actual status of women; and the way feminist studies need to deal with religious precursors of the modern women’s movement.

The fourth area I would like to highlight is a slight variation on the sometimes-hackneyed ways in which many of our texts deal with religious diversity. In addition to the obvious imperative that we all have to present exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in our courses, I try to spend an equal amount of time exploring the diversity within each tradition. Please let us do everything we can to stamp out statements that begin with “Buddhism says” or “Hindus believe”. I am just as guilty of this sin as anyone else; but I try to do my best to eliminate this kind of talk in my classroom. Unfortunately we cannot solve

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Mahfouz (cont. from p. 2)

Now I was truly on my own. I decided to set aside all thoughts, fears, and hopes for some time to allow complete concentration and stillness. With the earth below me, the tree backing me, and God above me, I simply let go. It was me emerging into my essence, God's grace and the humble earth. With my eyes closed and my hands neatly clasped together in my lap, I hummed and swayed. "Love the work and ignore the fruits." I hummed and I swayed and I hummed and I swayed. Images of Samia and my children whirled around in my mind. Slowly, the darkness and loneliness crept around me. Samia and the children would not leave my mind; I would not leave them. Why am I here? Explain yourself Ibn Fattouma!! Why am I months away from my family and still years away from Gebel? Was I not happy in Halba with my family? Why is Gebel out of my reach? Out of my sight? "Love the works and ignore the fruits." Where is the land of perfection? My mind buzzed, heated and I lost control. With a knock against the tree, I suddenly jolted upright. It was nearly dark.

I could not escape these questions. In attempting to conform to the truth, discover the essence of self, live my inner treasures, and withdraw from humankind, I was certainly honest, concentrating on ridding myself of greed, impatience, impure thoughts, and temptations, but I was also lost.

What was I looking for in Gebel that I could not find anywhere else? As my head spun and my heavy eyelids dropped over my tired eyes, I resolve that my entry and thoughts for one day, end here. Allahafez.

So I say to you- Enjoy! To journey with your students through these pages will be memorable. If you would like to close with another type of creative assignment, I recommend that you ask your students to create a "travel brochure" to one of the lands they visited. Let them use magazines, the internet, and their own artwork to "entice" the traveler to come visit Mashriq, Haira, Halba, Aman or Ghuroub. My colleague used this assignment and the results were creative, insightful, and funny.

I leave you with the last line of the novel, "Knowledge of all this lies with the Knower of what is unseen and what is seen" (148).

Jamie Hamilton teaches in the Religion Department at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, New Hampshire

Upcoming Conference

Teaching Ethics and Social Justice with Roger Gottlieb, Ph. D. Boston, Massachusetts November, 2007

Gottlieb has presented to Independent School teachers on a number of occasions, always with the highest marks. This is our first opportunity to spend two days with one of the most engaging and resourceful educators in the field today. is the author of *A Liberating Faith: Religious Voices for Justice, Peace, & Ecological Wisdom* (2003) and *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and our Planet's Future* (2006)

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.

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RTU is edited by Sher Sweet, at the Religious Studies Department at Northfield Mount Hermon School. Submissions (<worldrel@csee.org>) regarding innovative programs, good resources, interesting assignments and other ideas are both welcome and invited.

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Tsotsi

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other orphaned children in a stack of drainpipes before reinventing himself as a thief in order to survive.

What is morality? Where does it come from?

How does it develop? Does everyone have it, or at least the

“... which one best represented their own ethics, and why?”

potential for it? Are there any universal moral values, or are they always relative to a person's culture or experience?

After these first intense 15 minutes, I have asked students to list what Tsotsi has done wrong, then say whether he is a good person, before and after the discovery of the baby. They also debate what Tsotsi should do about the baby, using his own moral reference frame and

their own. When he breaks into a young widow's house on his street to make her nurse the baby, we must consider if the ends justify the means. And when he ultimately decides to return the baby at great risk to himself, the issue of egoism versus altruism arises. Why this choice, when he could have achieved the same end and gotten away?

One of the most vivid and poignant scenes for discussion lies outside the main plot line. On his way to another robbery, Tsotsi inadvertently jostles a beggar named Morris in the central subway station who spits in his direction. The teenager then follows the elderly man in his wheelchair to a deserted underpass, not to steal his money box, but to ask him why he keeps on living. What is the value of life? Is it absolute, or contingent upon certain qualities? Just as the baby reminds Tsotsi of his own past and suggests a possible rebirth, the beggar – crippled in a mining accident – foreshadows the fatalistic outcome of Tsotsi's current life.

In the tense final scene, Tsotsi stands in front of the gated house where John and his wife Pumla, alive but in a wheelchair, are relieved to have their child back unharmed. The couple has clearly benefited from the end of apartheid, and the baby is now assured a comfortable future behind the gate. But what about Tsotsi/David? Can they forgive him? Should they? The film ends with Tsotsi alone, outside the gate, hands in the air as three police officers – one white, one black, and one colored -- train pistols on him and shout, “Stay where you are!”

In the DVD's bonus features, there are two alternative endings with commentary by director and screenwriter Gavin Hood, in which he explains that they cut the original ending after vehement objections from preview

audiences. A second “Hollywood” ending was tried and similarly abandoned, before the film was ultimately released with a redacted ending that lets the viewer decide. This became my final exam in Ethics this fall, as students viewed and discussed the different endings, then had to write which one best represented their own ethics and why. We are all rooting for Tsotsi to repent and find a new path in life, but we are also left with a disquieting void when asked to imagine a happy ending for the disenfranchised victims of an unjust society. Has Tsotsi's ethical evolution also led to his demise? What is justice for Tsotsi? For David?

NOTE: The film's running time is 94 minutes and is rated “R” for strong language and some violent content. It is in Afrikaans and Tsotsi-Taal with English or Spanish subtitles.

Gary Partenheimer is head of the Religious Studies Department at Northfield Mt. Hermon School

Ten Issues...

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this problem merely by talking, say, about Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. In fact, most recent scholarship finds this to be a largely false, or at the very least misleading, system of classification. Shia and Sunni; Shaivite and Vaishnavite, and many other dualistic typologies like this fail to provide our students with a true sense of just how messy the traditions are.

This becomes a particularly important issue when inviting religious representatives into our classrooms. A recent issue of the American Academy of Religion's quarterly is entitled “Who Speaks for Hinduism?” Those of us who are not Hindu often think we can solve the problem by inviting Hindus into our classrooms. But which Hindu? Granting that there is a long tradition within Hinduism of downplaying its own internal differences, that enterprise is itself only one of Hinduism's approaches to itself. Is it Hinduism or Hinduisms, Buddhism or Buddhisms, Christianity or Christianities, and which ones should we teach? (*To be continued*)

Terry Hansen is head of the Religion Department at Oregon Episcopal School in Portland. This article originally appeared in CSEE's Connections in the 2004-05 school year.