

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

Teaching Islam in the Contemporary Context

BY JORDAN ELLIOTT

For the past five years I have developed an approach to teaching Islam in a semester length course to high school juniors and seniors. It begins to prepare them for the difficult task of understanding the Islamic tradition in a contemporary context. A very important element of a first course on Islam is having a reliable introductory text. After using, but being frustrated with, Farah's *Islam* and Esposito's *Islam: The Straight Path*, I discovered Annemarie Schimmel's *Islam.Qura* It presents the tradition in a diverse and complex way that immediately destroys the idea of Islam as a monolith. In addition, Schimmel's concise but enigmatic style is an ideal starting point for further exploration. I use her text as the first reading for all of the sections below.

The Beginnings of Islam

My approach to this introduction is to cover three principle topics: pre-Islamic Arabia, Muhammad and the Qur'an.

Schimmel introduces a host of issues in her introduction to pre-Islamic Arabia but does little to explore the complexity

and importance of this period in the two pages she devotes to the topic.

As a result I have relied on Farah's longer 20 page introduction as a second reading. Farah discusses essential issues including pre-Islamic religious trends in the Arabian Peninsula, historical tensions between northern and southern Arabians, and the key features of Bedouin society and culture. I complement this by summarizing Marshall G.S. Hodgson's

major trends in the history of the Nile to Oxus civilization from Volume I of his monumental *Venture of Islam* series. For my students, this places 7th century Arabia in the context of the history they learn in their 9th grade Humanities course. I highly recommend Hodgson, but suspect it is too detailed for most students.

"Schimmel's concise but enigmatic style is an ideal starting point for further exploration"

I use Schimmel as an introduction to Muhammad. Again, her coverage is brief so I turn to Martin Lings' *Muhammad*. This is a difficult text as Lings combines traditions of the Prophet and historical sources into what reads like a primary text. Once students become accustomed to Lings' approach, this book provides fantastic depth to Muhammad's life. I particularly like the sections on the *Hijrah* and the Battle of Badr as ways to add depth to what other scholars provide in their introductions.

Finally, I move to the Qur'an. After Schimmel's introduction I rely heavily on what is arguably my most important source on Islam, Michael Sells' *Approaching the Qur'an*. His introduction prepares students for the depth and complexity of the Qur'an and gives even more on the context into which the Qur'an comes by discussing the history and themes of pre-Islamic poetry, the revolutionary effect of developments in

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Demolition Derby Teaching the Ramayana

BY JIM EHRENHAFT

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?

How to teach the students in my Mythology and Mysticism class about the Hindu concept of *dharma*, as revealed in the *Ramayana*, the Indian epic at the heart of the Hindu tradition for so many Indians? On the surface, a straightforward challenge—*dharma* can be defined as law, order, truth, righteousness, and duty, among other possibilities. Rama, the incarnation of the god Vishnu, is seen by many if not all Hindus to embody *dharma*, and the epic presents a complete account of his life. Surely a careful reading of the epic—we use R.K. Narayan’s re-telling of the Tamil Kamban version—should yield a clear picture of how *dharma* unfolds within the tradition.

However, the clarity quickly becomes blurred as one begins to consider the epic’s events and the consequences of those events at pivotal points. Early on, Rama is exiled from his hometown, the kingdom of Ayodhya. The incident appears tragic on its surface: the beloved Rama was to become king, and the entire kingdom mourns his departure; his father dies of heart-break. The exile occurs through the machinations of an envious stepmother, Kaikeyi, and the manipulations of her maidservant Kooni. Self-interest, exclusively, drives the actions of both women, and thus Rama’s departure emerges through ambition and fear. Justice will ensue, and *dharma* will establish itself, it seems, only if Rama is allowed immediately to return to the kingdom. Yet it turns out that a number of factors complicate the situation. For instance, when Rama’s father, Dasaratha, was courting Kaikeyi, he had promised her father that her child would assume the throne. A king’s primary purpose is to uphold *dharma*, and to break a promise would clearly be a violation of that purpose, and thus constitute *adharma*, or chaos. An additional and powerful piece of evidence is offered up through the man-

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World Religions Grids for Student Presentations

BY ELLEN COWHEY

Half the class has read on chastity and sexual abstinence, in a commentary on Pantajali’s Yoga sutras. On the other side of the table are students who’ve read the 30-something’s blog justifying an American Hindu’s decision to engage in premarital sex and still consider himself within the safety zone of his beliefs. Elliot sits at the head of the table, his lips pursed, his arms spread wide, waiting till his adolescent audience is fully with him.

“Okay, so I’m a kind of traditional Hindu teenager, living in New York City with my parents, and my girlfriend wants to have sex with me, but I’m not so sure it’s okay for me to do as a good Hindu,...but I want to. So, you all are my conscience helping me make this decision. This side of the room is more influenced by the culture I’m living in now with the values of my peers, and this side of the room is more influenced by traditional Hindu teachings and Indian culture. So,... what should I do, and why?”

There was one nanosecond of calm after he stopped speaking and then the battle raged.

“Go ahead, Eliot, you know you want to!”

“Everybody’s doing it!”

“No, not yet! You have not yet reached the householder stage of your life! You are still a student and must still be chaste!”

“You need to save your energy, your focus. Don’t feed your desires or you’ll just increase your karma!”

“Pantajali’s *yamas* indicate you should resist, keeping your yogic path clear.”

After I gave the signal to wrap it up, Eliot calmed the storm. “Okay, okay, listening to both sides of my conscience, I have decided to wait, and that my girlfriend will just have to wait. I don’t want to take on all that karma because I’m not sure my intentions are pure enough.”

In teaching a one semester World Religions course, we have been challenged to cover six religious traditions in any meaningful way in approximately 60 class sessions, including assessments, guest speakers, and our class trip. So in the last two and a half years, my colleagues and I have been experi-

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Ten Issues that Should Arise Whenever We Teach Religion

by Terry Hansen

Editor's note: This is part three of a three-part essay in which religion teacher Terry Hansen outlines "Ten issues we ought to consider whenever we teach religion." In the November issue of Connections, Hansen raised the question of teaching about religions as sets of beliefs versus sets of practices. Hansen is head of the religion department at Oregon Episcopal School, in Portland.

In the previous two installments to this article, I introduced five issues, presented as "polarities," that religion teachers ought to address as they work with students. I continue here with the final five.

"What we teach is not what is. Every teaching is a representation of the truth"

If you mention "interdisciplinary" at a curriculum meeting, you will almost automatically receive nodding heads and general assents. I am not sure, however, that those approvals are unequivocally good for religion. Hence, my sixth polarity: disciplinary vs. interdisciplinary. Of course, we want our programs to be connected to a larger world. I team-taught a religion and science course a few years ago that certainly provoked a healthy response from students. My concern

is that we need to be careful about religious studies. anthropology, psychology, sociology, literature, and History are major contributors to our understanding of religious phenomena. The problem occurs when religion is not given its own voice. I acknowledge that this is a turf battle, and I also acknowledge that "turf" is a nasty word these days. I am simply asserting that religion is sui generis, i.e. that it defines a realm of study that is unique. Thus, I contend, this polarity between disciplinary and interdisciplinary is worthy of our consideration.

I am an advocate of liaisons, including one I consider to be the most important of all, that between religion and the natural world. But I also understand that ecology, environmental studies, "nature writing," and science are not religions. Forgive me if I don't accept the secular thesis that everything is essentially religious, including the economy and the nation. I do accept the notion that when religion combines with ecology it becomes theology. (see polarity #2).

My seventh polarity is perhaps the most abstract of all. What we teach is not what is. Every teaching is a representation of the truth. Engage students, if you can, in that acknowledgement of how limited we are. Do I teach "Buddhism"? Absolutely not. No matter what I call my course, what I have been teaching these many years, is "Buddhology". What is the difference? What I have been teaching is a particular representation of Buddhism, and that representation itself can become the subject of the course. Why am I choosing the texts that form the basis of my course? Why am I teaching religion? Who am I? With these questions in mind, I would hope that

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?
- Buddhism / Buddhism?
- Spirituality / religion?
- Postmodern / modern?
- Is religion a problem / a solution?

students would not come out of my classes with the nefarious assumption that they have "done" "Buddhism".

My next (eighth) polarity is crucial. I recommend that religiously affiliated schools do a much better job than they have so far in distinguishing their religious studies programs from their chaplaincy programs. "Spirituality" is an historical religious phenomenon. It emerged from a specific religious context. Thus, the spirituality vs. religion polarity is a subject for academic discussion. That it has often been portrayed as a church vs. individual issue is a wrong way of framing the question. Even religious practitioners have claimed that "spirituality" is an internal phenomenon, and that "religion" is about ritual and community. While I understand the rationale of that claim, I think that it does an injustice both to religion and to spirituality. Community is not exclusive to religion, nor is internality exclusive to modern post-religionists.

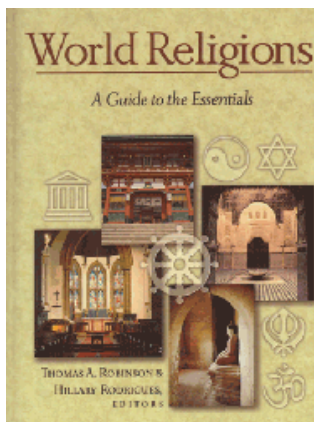
Whenever I hear dismissals of the "postmodern", I am appalled. Do we not see that surrealism is rampant? The "modern" is, of course, defined in many ways. I equate it with science and rationality. To say that we are postmodern is simply to say that we have passed the "Age of Science." Hiroshima and Nagasaki took care of that for us. We are now living in a world in which the crazy is mundane, and we are liberated. That I can talk with students on Monday about asceticism and on Tuesday about birds is a gift. That I can move within the same forty-five minute class period from statues to desire to the transcendent to George Bush is what makes teaching fun. To denigrate the postmodern in favor of the modern is to give rationality more than its due.

So, the final polarity: is religion a problem or is it a solution? The answer is yes. Teaching it is fun. We are not supposed to have fun, of course. It is a dangerous emotion. Might it be classified as a sin? I would prefer to classify it as a practice, in the Buddhist sense. I know a man who has studied the American dipper (a bird known by John Muir as "the water ouzel") for thirty years. When asked to describe what he had learned about this bird, he answered, "nothing."

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)

World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials was reviewed in the last issue of *RTU*. We stated then that Robinson and Rodrigues's "text is readable, useful, and eminently appropriate, either as a text for students or as a personal resource for the world religions teacher." One possible drawback we noted was the lack of photos, which may



be a drawback for students. A subsequent email message from Dr. Robinson noted *RTU*'s failure to mention that *World Religions* does have extensive visual resources, including hundreds of photos, on the CD that comes with the book, and on the book's web site (<http://people.uleth.ca/~robinson/Religion/General/Home.html>).

The CD contains a database of questions that students might use to quiz themselves on factual material regarding religions; for those wishing to avail themselves of it, it has a timer to see how quickly the questions can be gotten through. The questions are arranged by religion. A dictionary of terms is also included, as is a database of photos. The latter are linked to the dictionary such that, for example, when the dictionary word being defined is *Qur'an*, a photo of a stand for a Qur'an is seen. Not all words have accompanying photos, of course: *Salat* displays a Muslim boy doing daily prayer, and *Wailing Wall* shows the wall in Jerusalem, while dictionary entries like *Septuagint* and *Kundalini Yoga* are necessarily unaccompanied. The CD's entry screen also has a button that takes viewers to the book's Web site.

Each religion button in the Web site's navigation bar presents the reader with quick facts about the religion (the founder, dates, the main concepts of the religion, its geographical "home," etc.) and three buttons: one leading to information available either on this site itself or, in most cases, to linked sites—many of which contain a wealth of historical, philosophical, and other data, or photos. The section on Islam, for example, points to web sites at

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Religion Compass

Online Journal for Teachers of Religion
 by Blackwell Publishing
compassales@oxon.blackwellpublishing.com

RELIGION COMPASS is a new kind of online journal, run by an international team of Section Editors, including Marc Lee Raphael of the College of William and Mary, a member of CSEE's Board of Trustees and past workshop presenter.

Religion Compass publishes original survey articles which summarize the state of the field for the educated non-specialist, and includes essays from all the main religions of the world as well as articles on cross-religious methodological concerns. A particular goal is facilitating conversation and exchanging ideas across boundaries.

The journal's intended audience is anyone who is not a specialist in the area, including students and junior teaching faculty, e.g. someone who wants to direct students to a short article to form the basis of a class discussion, or someone who has to teach outside their specialty.

A FREE two-month trial subscription to *COMPASS* can be arranged by contacting compassales@oxon.blackwellpublishing.com. Dr. Raphael has also arranged a 5 percent discount off the purchase price for *RTU* readers who subsequently you subsequently purchase a *COMPASS* subscription.

the University of Southern California, the University of Georgia, and the Religion & Ethics section of the BBC.

One nice point is the rating system for links: "introductory" is a site that may be useful to the general population and thus, to our students; "advanced" is primarily for scholars, or those with a good background in the tradition, and "confessional" means the site is maintained by adherents of the religion and its purpose is to promote the tradition.

Although we looked at other sections, we spent more time with Buddhism, Islam, and Ancient Religions. The Buddhist section has only one link at present, although that link connects its visitor with the usually rich section of the BBC site for the religion. The section on Islam offers more, with a variety of materials on the Qur'an, on Islam in general, and on the major Islamic empires. Much of the latter is offered

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date of the gods, or *devas*, right when the pleadings of Rama's family and the citizens of Ayodhya are at their loudest after they have trailed him out of the kingdom. The *devas* know another primary purpose to Rama's existence, unknown to humans (including Rama himself) save for a few of the most knowledgeable priests. As the *avatar*, or supreme incarnation, of Vishnu he is destined to defeat the evil demon Ravana, who has subjugated the universe, including all the *devas*, for his selfish ends. If Rama were to stay in Ayodhya, he would be unable to fulfill that purpose. Therefore the *devas* want Rama gone into the forests, where he will inevitably encounter the nefarious tyrant.

As we begin class, we discuss the night's reading, and begin to consider how complex the situation has become. At the point where a debate seems inevitable, I call a halt to the discussion, and announce that before we go further, we will acknowledge the conflicting *dharma*s at work in the text, and prepare to bounce them off each other. Should Rama leave or stay? Which course of action would lead to fulfillment of the highest state of order? "This half of the class will be 'Rama Go,' and the other half 'Rama Stay,'" I announce. The students gather in their groups and begin to work their way through the text. After 15 minutes, they have compiled their evidence and commence debating. The ensuing argument inevitably concludes in an open-ended fashion, and when at the end I decline to award victory to either group, the students rarely complain. *Dharma* as question mark has triumphed.

In India on a travel fellowship, I once had the opportunity to listen to a Hindi recitation of the Tulsi Das version of the *Ramayana*. Since I speak no Hindi, I decided to focus as much on how the audience was reacting to the telling of the story as to the sound of the story itself. I found out afterwards that the leader had read the portion where Rama is exiled, and leaves the city of Ayodhya with his brother Lakshmana and wife Sita. As I observed the worshipers, I noticed one elderly man who was struggling to maintain Rama's crossed-leg position. In anguish, he slapped his fist into his palm. I can only wonder, of course, what he was feeling, and why. Perhaps he identified with the citizens of Ayodhya, who were madly lamenting Rama's departure. As they felt the agony of separation from Rama, he underwent the same process perhaps. Maybe he felt anger at Rama's stepmother Kaikeyi for having perpetrated the act, and felt supreme frustration at an incident that could have been avoided if all went as it was supposed to, unless of course one takes into account that if Rama had not been exiled he might never have been able to fulfill the purpose of his incarna-

tion—destroying Ravana. I was not about to comfort the man by telling him that everything was going to be all right, and that this was a necessary step on the way toward Rama fulfilling one of his earthly purposes. I often tell this story to my class after we have concluded our debate, and I'd like to think that at this point any lingering smugness on the part of student-debaters dissolves. As convinced as we might be about what is right in this situation, the text's tensions erode our resolve. *Dharma*'s elusive nature is built in to the story, and perhaps bewilderment rather than a self-satisfied certainty becomes the optimal outcome of our *dharma* demolition derby.

Questions therefore linger: should fate trump individual moral responsibility? How intertwined are cosmic and earthly senses of order, and when divine ends conflict with human *dharma*, what constitutes true justice? What happens when kingly and priestly *dharma*s collide? The *Dharma* Demolition Derby becomes a leitmotif for our consideration of the epic's events and characters as we move through the remainder of the text. It also serves as a window into the Hindu tradition more generally, revealing Hinduism's complexity and tensions. The exercise—and the epic as a whole—becomes an opportunity to see Hinduism not as a monolith, but rather as a dynamic and diverse collection of beliefs and perspectives. The students' spirited debates in regard to this episodes and others like it in *The Ramayana* also exemplify an integral element in the tradition: fun.

Jim Ehrenhaft teaches in the Religion Department at St. Albans School in Washington, DC.

"I call a halt to the discussion and announce that before we go further, we will acknowledge the conflicting *dharma*s at work"

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)

World Religions in Grids (from p. 2)

menting with my “religion grid,” presented to the students with various moral issues on it, and each class chooses for themselves which five topics or issues they will focus on throughout the semester.

Being teenagers, it seems the topics connected with sex seem to hold the most interest, so abortion, pre-marital sex, and homosexuality are often in the running, as well as occasional players featuring death and destruction such as war, capital punishment, and end of the world. Now and again, “Divisions and Branches,” and “Religion’s Role in Government” make a showing. The students facilitate a negotiation whereby they decide which students will cover which topics and which religions. Each student ends up giving two presentations on one moral issue.

Since the decision to have pre-marital sex is so often the diversion point for a teenager from following the edicts of their religion, this assignment allows them to explore realms of religions both familiar and strange that grapple with this question as well as other issues in different ways and for different reasons.

Teenagers who are so often full of reproach for the hypocrisy of adults, seem eager to explore the religious, political, economic and cultural motivations of a Christian president sending thousands to their death in a war he seems to have started, or a Muslim suicide bomber destroying the lives of innocent non-combatants in the name of Allah, or the Jewish granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor choosing to abort the life within her.

Each student meets with the teacher ahead to go over what aspect of the issue and religion they will be exploring in the fifteen-minute of class time they have. Before the actual class, the student assigns the rest of the class about 15 minutes of homework to do in preparation, so they run their proposed homework by me as well as the three focus questions they intend to give the class to answer during or immediately after the presentation.

I encourage an interactive element to their presentation, and near the beginning of the course, we discuss Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences so that can help expand their creative teaching imaginations. When we meet with students ahead, we make sure each student not only has some research on his or her religion and topic, but a specific angle to focus on, and hopefully, an appropriately interactive dynamic planned within that time.

This whole religion grid experiment has been a lot of work but also extraordinarily satisfying. I have seen an avowed

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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?

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>

RTU is edited by Sher Sweet, at the Religious Studies Department at Northfield Mount Hermon School and David Streight at CSEE. Submissions (<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>

Teaching Islam (from p. 1)

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camel load carrying-capability and other related topics. This book only presents translations of the Early Meccan Suras (81-114). However, I push students to a deeper understanding of the complexity of the Qur'an by giving multiple translations of the same Sura. For this exercise I use Sells (who gives up to three translations of a Sura himself, Muhammad Pickthall, and A.J. Arberry). Through this exercise one can gain an appreciation of the depth of the ambiguities inherent in the Qur'an's Arabic. Furthermore, students learn that translations are by nature interpretations and can apply this knowledge to later readings of the Qur'an and Rumi (see below). In addition to this exercise I rely on the CD of audio recordings of Qur'anic recitation provided with *Approaching the Qur'an* to emphasize the way in which Muslims experience the Qur'an.

“Several on-line Qur'an sites provide translations of the entire Qur'an”

Several online Qur'an sites, most notably the *USC-MSA Compendium of Muslim Texts* website, provide three translations of the entire Qur'an. To finish the section on the Qur'an, students do independent research on a *sura* of their choice from the later Meccan or Medinan period using Pickthall, Arberry, the USC site and Muhammad Asad's translation with commentaries--a fantastic resource on the Qur'an.

An additional resource that is very valuable is the six part video series “Living Islam.” The first installment includes useful sections on Muhammad and the Qur'an that begin the process of bringing my students into contemporary issues.

This threefold introduction to the Islamic tradition grounds the remainder of work in my class. If I do a good job, students constantly refer to this material in their interpretations of all later aspects of Islam and related cultural and societal manifestations.

Expansion of Islam

The expansion of Islamic religion, culture and society during and after Muhammad's life is a huge and complex topic. Even in a semester-long course, I have not found a way to cover this in much depth. My current approach is to focus on the Rightly Guided Caliph period immediately following Muhammad. Roy Jackson's *Fifty Key Figures in Islam* provides short but detailed articles on the four Rightly Guided Caliphs and Umayyad figures that come to the forefront after this period. I give students the option of reading one of Jackson's articles and then

spending several class days reporting findings and discussing content as a group.

After this detailed section I provide students with a broad overview of expansion from the Rightly Guided Caliph period to Umayyad Dynasty to Abbasid Caliphate. To conclude I briefly summarize post-Mongul invasion reformations into Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Dynasties ending in dissolution due to World War I and colonialism. Esposito has been my source for much of this information. This brief overview prepares us for the second key text for the class, Carl Ernst's *Following Muhammad* (see below).

Tradition and Law

There is not much time to cover this topic, even in a full semester. I rely on Schimmel's chapters on “The Tradition” and “The Law.” Also, the USC site provides easily searchable collections of al-Bukhari and al-Muslim's hadith collections. After a brief introduction to the science of hadith, I have had much success turning students loose on these collections to explore topics of interest. A homework assignment or two doing this has consistently led to good discussions in class on the importance of *Sunna* and *hadith* and the variety of interpretations possible in the creation of *Shariah*.

Mystical Islam

If you were to ask my students, I expect most would say they find this section of the course their favorite. Over the years I have had a lot of success with al-Ghazali's *Path to Sufism*. This short but complex text epitomizes systematized mysticism. As a teacher, this is the type of text where each new reading reveals new issues and topics. When coupled with an exploration of Rumi's ecstatic mysticism, one receives a nice introduction to classical Sufism. Similar to my approach with the Qur'an, I use multiple translations of the same Rumi verse. I particularly enjoy Helminski's translation and it is interesting to compare it with Barks' heavily altered “translation” and Arberry's very scholarly take.

Shi'a Islam

Over the years I have relied on Heinz Halm's introduction to Shia Islam (his term) as the more detailed reading above and beyond Schimmel. Halm (in translation from German) does a very clear job of describing the stories of the origins of Shia Islam and drama of the life of the 12 Imams including the motivation for “Fiver” and “Sevener” separations from the orthodox “Twelver” group. I particularly enjoy Halm's

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argument that Shia Islam begins as a political movement and only assumes a religious focus in the aftermath of Hussein's death at Karbala as a result of the "Campaign of the 'Penitents'". For further detail I excerpt sections of Halm's detailed discussion of the ritual re-enactment of the events of Karbala (the *Ashura* ritual) with specific attention to the *taziya* passion play. This is a topic that overlaps with the Middle Eastern Literature course (see below).

Contemporary Islam

I have chosen Carl Ernst's *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* to be a follow up for the fundamentals just described. Ernst does a fantastic job with his own summary of many of the above issues, including the Qur'an, hadith, expansion, Sufism and Shi'ism. I am optimistic these sections will reinforce key ideas for my students. In addition, Ernst adds invaluable sections on the origins of contemporary perceptions of Islam in the West and the influence of colonialism. I am particularly interested in using Ernst's updated online resources (see link below).

Middle Eastern Literature

One approach to teaching Islam is to use literature as a gateway to religious, societal and cultural issues. I am incredibly lucky that for the past several years my colleague Debby Schaufler has taught a senior English elective on Middle Eastern Literature.

Although Debby's Middle Eastern Literature class is not focused on teaching about Islam, many of the texts her students read do illuminate aspects of the religion. Two modern Egyptian novels, Naguib Mahfouz' *Arabian Nights and Days* and Nawal El-Saadawi's *God Dies By the Nile*, both deal with the place of religious thought, practice and authority in life. Mahfouz' novel, set in no particular time and place, like the *Arabian Nights*, includes a Sufi sheikh as well as several young men who are torn between finding justice in the "Way of Love" and the way of holy war. *God Dies By the Nile*, like many modern Middle Eastern novels, especially those by women, presents official religious authority as corrupt and oppressive, but too powerful for the poor, especially women, to resist. The Iranian novel *King of the Benighted* by a writer using the pseudonym Manuchehr Irani, is set during the Iran-Iraq war. Before Debby's students read this novel, they study the Battle of Karbala and traditional texts about Ashura commemorations, as the novel presents an authoritarian society obsessed with martyrdom and religious conformity. The author's exploration of the difference between personal observance and official edict in religion is illuminating of profound issues in Islam today. Students also read the classic Persian love story *Layla and Majnun*, which can be read as a Sufi text about the power of love for God and the impossibility of consuming that love. They look at passages from the Qur'an as literary texts, and students also read some pre-Islamic poetry to see the continuity of the Arab poetic tradition as well as how that tradition changed with the advent of Islam. Israeli novelist Amos Oz' *A Perfect Peace* and selected Israeli poems and short stories explicitly or implicitly show

the vanished or semi-present Arab in Israel as well as the linked Abrahamic and territorial past of the religions. Some threads which run through some of the above works as well as short stories, poetry and memoir (e.g., excerpts from Elizabeth Fernea's *Remembering Childhood in the Middle East*, or Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*) include the authority of local religious teachers and Sheikhs, the tension between personal, private religion and official religion, private communication with God and the search for the correct path, the writer's role in religion, religious celebration and commemoration of the past, and the varied and changing role of women in Islam.

Due to Debby's literary approach, students who have taken both courses (concurrently or during their junior and senior years) report having a deep and varied perspective.

Conclusion

I hope this information is useful. Please feel free to contact me about any aspect of the way I have developed teaching Islam (elliottj@oes.edu). I hope to update my section on teaching contemporary Islam when I finish the current semester.

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atheist charging off to buy the Gospel of Judas after his presentation on sacred texts within Christianity. One deeply-brewed Catholic told me he spent the better portion of Christmas break pouring over the Qur'an to find the right passages for his presentation to show how certain surahs, taken out of context, can make Islam seem extremely violent, but when in context, reinforce the idea of peaceful submission to God.

It has changed my idea about high school students ever wanting to be passive recipients of knowledge, and has instead moved me into more of a mode of interacting with each student as researcher/co-teacher/collaborator/presenter.

It shoved me out of my "we don't have enough time to go into that aspect of Hinduism" (and I don't have enough time to go researching it thoroughly enough to present it myself) into allowing the class to direct the deeper channels of study based on their interests.

It also helped me, or rather forced me, to learn a lot more about the contemporary application of teachings in these religions within the context of different communities, cultures and branches of each religion. In addition, it helps me broaden my consideration of source material to more movie clips, excerpts from graphic novels, and more student-initiated interviews with the local faith community.

I have appreciated the opportunity to learn, by these presentations, how my students might want to be taught: simulations, round table discussions, more mixed media, debates, games. Some students still have some dry lectures and deadly methodical plodding power point presentations, but overall, it has been exciting to explore with the students how we can approach our studies with more life. When I meet with a student ahead, s/he will often veto certain group dynamic suggestions based on the makeup of the class, or try techniques successfully that I might have been hesitant to go for. It has stretched me.

Students have indicated that they really enjoying taking charge of the class, including the research aspect, assigning homework, and leading the class in relevant learning/reinforcement activities. In general, they seem to find it stimulating to see how a classmate presents a topic, and as participants, it tends to make them more attentive in class, and they are generally eager to play along with a classmate's teaching agenda.

And while I am often the one who suggests the specific interactive option for their presentation, I just would not have the time and energy to go finding that perfect clip from a particular

movie, or develop all the role prompts for a convincing round table simulation to work in our time period if I were the one doing all the teaching. The energy, computer savviness and familiarity with current media that the students bring to their presentations are fantastic.

Still, there are challenges. Does this sort of 15-minute unit teaching lead the students into a reductionist approach to their topics? Can students navigate their way through the forest of religious propaganda on these topics enough to come up with to any really substance on the issue? Is this doing comparative study of religion in a skewed way that only focuses on the issues that these mostly western students are interested in? Isn't it a whole lot more work? I'll take these questions one at a time.

Does this sort of 15-minute unit teaching lead the students into a reductionist approach to their topics? I think it is important to consider that one requirement is that students present a minimum of two angles on any issue they are covering, backed up by teachings in that religion, textual when possible. Also, I try hard in my pre-meetings to have the students narrow their focus enough to make it a meaningful research and presentation project. So, instead of trying to cover "Women's Role in Hinduism" in fifteen minutes, Margaux explored the connection between the dowry system to rates of female infanticide in India, and explored how or if the dowry system is at all linked to Hindu teachings, or if it is all cultural. Even trying to comprehend the complex relationship between cultural and religious practices and influences has been an important challenge for the students.

Can students navigate their way through the propaganda and forest of opinions on these topics enough to come up with to any really substance on the issue? Doing an internet search, which is always the student's first response, can often bring up the worst of what's out there, which is why I meet with them ahead, and suggest some sources and look over what they've come up with so far. I also look over the homework choices before they are distributed to the rest of the class, and it is why students are required to do a thoughtful annotated bibliography analyzing their sources. I have also found them fairly astute in their awareness of biased sources, although Wikipedia seems to draw them in every time, until I just banned its use, since it's an open source. In some cases, students will assign one half of the class one perspective on an issue, and the other half of the class an alternative look at the topic from within the same tradition, thus using the range of beliefs and assertions presented to their advantage. This also brings them to the question "How do I know what is really true for Islam (or Christianity or Buddhism) on this subject?" and realizing there very well may not be just one

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right answer.

Is this doing comparative study of religion in a skewed way that only focuses on the issues that interest mostly western students? This is a valid question but I also believe that if the students are focused and passionate about their subject, the energy they put into their research may lead them to some of the larger issues brewing for that community, and if not, they have at least dipped into that religion with a lot more personal investment than they would have otherwise, and are that much more likely to get back to it on a future occasion, when some of the other issues might be explored. A colleague who is also trying the religion grid this year, offers the choice of “Contemporary Issues in that Religion” on the grid, which she said has yielded some excellent presentations.

Isn't this a whole lot more work? The first time I tried this, it was a real challenge, and it tested all my organizational abilities, but now that I have come up with fairly consistent schedule, and the students are clear on deadlines and expectations, it is running much more smoothly. It does take extra time to tailor each test to the presentations given in that section, but because I have a packet of their focus questions in front of me, it is not much more work. And while their individual meeting with students do take time, I have really enjoyed getting to know the students better one-on-one. I do have to do more research on topics, but it helps me stay current. I also am aware that harnessing the creative energy of my students and using that to lead classes, is an incredible resource and has made my job more fun.

I recently distributed an anonymous survey on how the presentations were going so far in class, since most students have been able to present at least one, and have been observer/participants in at least eight so far this term. I asked for suggested improvements to the current format, and I was surprised that so many students came up with the same one of two write-in responses: either “don't change anything” or “just give us more presentation time.”

One student shared, “It's a totally different experience to teach the information rather than just hear it. It has been very effective in grasping a greater understanding of larger concepts rather than simply knowing the facts for a test.”

Another student shared that she left the class feeling like somewhat of an expert on her topic, at least within the context of the two traditions she presented on, and has been more aware of news on them since.

Ellen Cowhey teaches in the Religion Department at The Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, NY.

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by the visually pleasing BBC site, and by the web site at the University of Georgia that has long been known as a treasure trove of information.

The Ancient Religions section contained subsections on Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and a section on Ancient Texts that are available on line (e.g., the complete legend of Gilgamesh). The photography from the British Museum is stellar in the Mesopotamia section of the site.

Other resources appear to be available for *World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials*, also, but are password protected for the exclusive use of purchasers of the text. Some of the visual materials we have seen for the text would be of great interest to Independent School teachers of world religions, especially those who are relatively new to the field and have few backup resources.