TEACHING THE INTRODUCTORY COURSE IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES
A Sourcebook

edited by

Mark Juergensmeyer

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THE BERKELEY-CHICAGO-HARVARD PROGRAM:  
RELIGIOUS STUDIES IN THE LIBERAL ARTS

This volume is a product of the Berkeley-Chicago-Harvard Program, a five-year series of institutes, workshops and related projects aimed at enlarging the role and scope of religious studies in the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum. The objective was to collect resources to assist teachers of undergraduate courses in religious studies—especially those teachers whose training has been limited to only one religious tradition—and to provide reflection on the changing nature of the liberal arts curriculum, and the role that religious studies plays within it.

These two objectives are linked. The basic courses in religion have within recent years begun to move away from the periphery of the liberal arts to which they have been banished for over a century. Increasingly they have come to occupy a more central location in the college curriculum. In many schools the “world religions” and “introduction to religion” courses serve as integrators for the humanities and the social sciences. These courses give an overview of the history of world civilization, provide a window on the cultural dimensions of global politics, and supply a way of perceiving many of the modern quests for personal meaning. This three-volume sourcebook and other projects related to the Berkeley-Chicago-Harvard Program were created to facilitate this new and expansive vision of religious studies in the liberal arts.

The Berkeley-Chicago-Harvard Program was funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and was sponsored by the Office for Programs in Comparative Religion at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley; the History of Religions Program in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago; and the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School. The codirectors were John Carman (Harvard), Mark Juergensmeyer (Berkeley), and Frank Reynolds (Chicago).
INTRODUCTION

Mark Juergensmeyer

If you are a teacher of religious studies in a liberal arts college, the introductory course may be the most important one that you will ever teach. Students who will never take another religious studies course—perhaps never another course in the humanities—will take this one. Students contemplating religious studies as a major will take it to see if there is any point in going further. Asian-American Buddhists will take it to gain a sense of their cultural roots; and so will Jewish students, and Protestants and Catholics. Business majors will take it to understand the cultural aspects of a growing international market. Political science majors will take it in hopes of understanding the cultural side of current world tensions. Former philosophy majors will take it in hopes of finding a discussion of questions regarding the meaning of life that they failed to find in Philosophy 1: Current Trends in Linguistic Analysis. And students of all sorts will take it with the expectation that the history of world civilization is best viewed through the lens of the world religious heritage.

These are heady expectations, and the chances are pretty good that you won’t live up to all of them. But then, no one ever does. We would like to help you live up to more of them, however, and create a course that is not only useful for responding to this wide range of student interests, but also intellectually exciting to teach.

There is no one way to teach the introductory course, and no perfect syllabus—not even the ones provided here. Teaching is an intimate and personal experience, the creation of a set of relationships between the teacher and the material, and the teacher and his or her students. The way you design your course and the way you teach it will depend upon you: how you understand your role and location in the university, how you perceive religion as a subject to be taught, how you see the relationship between intellectual and spiritual activity, and how you go about
the art of teaching. The old world religions parade—"if it's Tuesday, it must be Taoism"—is as likely to be as stultifying to the student as it is to you. Nothing projects a greater sense of vitality than a course that the teacher believes in, one that has integrity, substance and intellectual vision. We hope this sourcebook will help in designing such a course.

This volume is a product of the Berkeley-Chicago-Harvard project on teaching Religious Studies in the Liberal Arts, and our thanks go to the hundred or more scholars involved in the project. The "Berkeley Team" that organized this volume consisted of Karen McCarthy Brown, William Darrow, Ninian Smart and myself, augmented by the twenty five college teachers who participated in the summer institute in Berkeley in 1987 and contributed much to the shaping of this volume by writing articles for it and by providing helpful comments on an earlier draft that was circulated during the institute. The hard work of the staff of the Office for Programs in Comparative Religion and a host of graduate assistants brought this volume to completion. We appreciate especially the labors of Andrew Davis, Gurudharm Singh Khalsa, Darrin McMahon, George McKinley, Natalie Reed, Amelia Rudolph, and Yvonne Vowels. Our thanks to this fine staff, the supportive staff of the NEH, and the many distinguished scholars who have written for this sourcebook who have been motivated by the conviction that the introductory course is truly an important course, and worth all the effort.
doctrines for which there is indisputable empirical evidence", it has been quipped), and at their best they feel, in *Imitatio Christi*, that they should bear the sins of the world. It is appropriate specifically to the Christian, therefore, I suggest—to us Christians—to locate this topic here.

My other five lectures on the Christians, however, are more positive. One, for instance, is on the idea of God. My treatment attempts various other things, such as the role of ideas in religious life and of doctrine in Christian; but *inter alia* presents the theistic movement as one of the most consequential movements in human history—a movement in which the Church has participated, and whose rise, spread, development, and current phase are impressive, are rewarding to study.

The final lecture in the course begins by recalling the opening sentence of the opening lecture: "We human beings have been religious now for a very long time, and in a great variety of ways". What I have hoped to do is in significant part to get across the ubiquity, the variety, the persistence, of human religiousness; of (our!) human involvement in this mighty matter. As I have stated in that final lecture, religion does not raise people above the human level, only to it. I usually conclude that hour by a quotation from each of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian authorities suggesting that each aims at enabling us to be human properly. I also aver that from world religious history, as we have been studying it, we may infer a culminating principle. To be religious is not necessarily to live well; it is to take the question of living well, seriously.
The introductory course serves the primary function of introducing the student to college level work, to work in the liberal arts. Its particular subject matter is of secondary inter-
est (indeed, I suspect it is irrelevant). All of my remarks this evening aim at unpacking this proposition from several vantage points.

First, it is necessary to step back and reflect, briefly, on the nature of the liberal arts curriculum. As I have written elsewhere, as one surveys the more than three thousand institutions of higher learning who, together, offer 534 different kinds of bachelor degrees, it becomes apparent that there are a multitude of spatial arrangements, the ways in which the blocks of courses are organized: general requirements, major requirements, prerequisites, and the like. Each is appropriate to the peculiar institutions. What remains more or less constant are the temporal arrangements. Whatever we do we must do it in the equivalent of four years. Regardless of the academic calendar, there is almost always less that four full days of teaching time in a year-long course, less than one hundred hours of class meetings. And, there is no reason to presume that any student who takes one course on a given subject will necessarily take another one. Less than one hundred hours may represent, for a significant number of students, at best, their sole course of study in a particular subject matter. It is at this point—with the introductory course—and not with the major that curricular thought must begin. For within such a context, no course can do everything, no course can be complete. The notion of a survey, of 'covering,' becomes ludicrous under such circumstances. Rather, each course is required to be incomplete, to be self-consciously and articulately selective. We do not celebrate often enough the delicious yet terrifying freedom undergraduate liberal arts education affords the faculty by its rigid temporal constraints. As long as we do not allow ourselves to be misled by that sad heresy that the bachelor's degree is but a preparation for graduate studies (a notion that is becoming pragmatically unjustified; it has never been educationally justifiable), then there is nothing that must be taught, there is nothing that cannot be left out. A curriculum, whether represented by a particular course, a program, or a four-year course of study becomes an occasion for deliberative, collegial, institutionalized choice.

I take as a corollary to these observations that each thing taught is taught not because it is 'there,' but because it connects in some interesting way with something else, because it is an example, an "e.g." of something that is fundamental, something that may serve as a precedent for further acts of interpretation and understanding by providing an arsenal of instances, of paradigmatic events and expressions as resources from which to reason, from which to extend the possibility of intelligibility to that which first appears to be novel or strange. Whether

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this be perceived as some descriptive notion of the “characteristic,” or some more normative notion of the “classical,” or some point in-between, matters little. These are issues on which academicians of good will can responsibly disagree.

What ought not to be at controversy is the purpose for which we labor, that long-standing and deeply felt perception of the relationship between liberal learning and citizenship.

I would articulate the grounds of this relationship as follows. From the point of view of the academy, I take it that it is by an act of human will, through language and history, through words and memory, that we are able to fabricate a meaningful world and give place to ourselves. Education comes to life at the moment of tension generated by the double sense of ‘fabrication,’ for it means both to build and to lie. For, although we have no other means than language for treating with the world, words are not after all the same as that which they name and describe. Although we have no other recourse but to memory, to precedent, if the world is not forever to be perceived as novel and, hence, remain forever unintelligible, the fit is never exact, nothing is ever quite the same. What is required at this point of tension is the trained capacity for judgment, for appreciating and criticizing the relative adequacy and insufficiency of any proposal of language and memory. What we seek to train in college are individuals who know not only that the world is more complex than it first appears, but also that, therefore, interpretative decisions must be made, decisions of judgment which entail real consequences for which one must take responsibility, from which one may not flee by the dodge of disclaiming expertise. This ultimately political quest for fundamentals, for the acquisition of the powers of informed judgment, for the dual capacities of appreciation and criticism must be the explicit goal of every level of the liberal arts curriculum. The difficult task of making interpretative decisions must inform each and every course.

If I were asked to define liberal education while standing on one leg, my answer would be that it is training in argument about interpretations. An introductory course, then, is a first step in this training. Arguments and interpretations are what we introduce, our particular subject matter serves merely as the excuse, the occasion, the “e.g.”

This may seem a bit airy-fairy to you, so I shall begin again. An introductory course is not best conceived as a first step for future professionals, nor is it best conceived as an occasion for “literacy,” for initial acquaintance with some aspects of the “stuff.” An introductory course is concerned primarily with developing the students’ capacities for reading, writing and speaking—put another way, for interpreting and arguing. This is what they are paying for. This is what we are paid for. We are not as college teachers called upon to display, obsessively, those thorny disciplinary problems internal to the rhetoric of professionals (e.g. in our field, the autonomy and integrity of religious studies). Our trade is educational problems, common (although refracted differently) to all human sciences. So, there are formal tests for an introductory course: it must feature a good deal of self-conscious activity in reading, writing, and speaking, because it is not enough that there be required occasions for such activities. In my own courses this means weekly writing assignments on a set theme which requires argumentation. Each piece of writing must be rewritten at least once regardless of grade. Please note: this requires that every piece of writing be returned to the student with useful comments no later than the next class period. In addition, there should be written homework. (Examples: Take pages 21-25 of Durkheim’s Elementary Forms and reduce his argument to a single paragraph using no words not in Durkheim; or, Here is a list of 33 sentences from Louis Dumont, state the point of each in your own words.) At least once a quarter, I call in all students’ notebooks and texts. After reading them through, I have individual conferences with each student to go over what they’ve written and underlined and what this implies as to how they are reading. But this is insufficient. It is not enough that there be all this activity. Both the students and we need help. We need to provide our students with models of good writing. Wherever possible, beyond its intrinsic interest, each text read should be exemplary of good writing and effective argument. We also need to make available to our students the sort of help others provide. For example, in my introductory courses I regularly have the students buy Jack Meiland’s little book College Thinking: How to Get the Most out of College and discuss portions of it with them.

Even more, we need help. At the most minimal level, most of us do not know how to write a proper writing assignment so as to make clear to the student what is expected of them. Most of us can recognize mistakes in writing and poor argument, we can circle them or write a marginal comment, but most of us do not know how to correct the mistake. We do not know how to help our students improve in the future, how to prevent the problems from recurring. These are not matters where sheer good will or pious wishes help. For example, circling spelling or grammatical errors has been shown, from a pedagogical point
of view, to be a waste of time. We need to go to competent professionals and be taught how to teach writing. This is the basic requirement for a teacher of introductory courses.

This raises a larger question: the professional responsibilities of college teachers. Bluntly put, we have as solemn an obligation to ‘keep up’ with the literature and research in education and learning as we do in our particular fields of research. Even more bluntly, no one should be permitted to teach an introductory course who is not conversant, among other matters, with the literature on the cognitive development of college age individuals, with issues of critical reasoning and informal logic, and with techniques of writing instruction. While there is some art in teaching, it is, above all, a skilled profession.

To move to the particular question, “How I Teach Introductory Courses in Religion?” I have taught introductory courses in all three modes described by this project: the survey, the comparative, and the disciplinary. From a pedagogical standpoint, there is no difference between them. They all require explicit attention to matters of reading, writing and speaking, to issues of interpretation and argument—to that most fundamental social goal of liberal education, the bringing of private adherence to the pedagogical rule that “less is better.” For example, my year-long survey, “Religion in Western Civilization,” is organized around a single issue: “What is a tradition? How are traditions maintained through acts of reinterpretation?, and three pairs of topics: kingship/cosmology; purity-impurity/wisdom; voluntary associations/salvation. Note that the first member of each pair is preeminently social; the second, ideological. This allows a modest introduction of theoretical issues into a course which consists, essentially, of reading “classic” primary texts.

All three modes require explicit recognition of the educational dilemma of breadth and depth. Each of my introductory courses divides each topic into two parts. The first, usually entitled “the vocabulary of x” features the rapid reading of a wide variety of little snippets simply to get a sense of the semantic range of the topic and to experiment with what clusters of relationships can be discerned within the vocabulary. The second part features the slow and careful reading of a few exemplary documents. Each section of each introductory course is preceded by a lecture in which the topic is introduced; but, of more importance, in which the syllabus is “unpacked.” The students need to know what decisions I have made, and why? What have I included? What have I excluded? They also need to hear some cost accounting of these decisions.

That is to say, I want my students to use the syllabus as an occasion for reflection on judgement and consequences, to be conscious of the fact that a syllabus is not self-evident, but (hopefully) a carefully constructed argument.

Beyond these generalities, I have two, and only two, criteria which govern the selection of the example and the organization of the syllabi: one has more to do with the form, the other with content.

Each of my introductory courses is organized around the notion of argument and the insistence that the building blocks of argument remain constant: definitions, classifications, data, and explanations. If we are reading second-order texts together, we have to learn to recognize these in others; if we are reading primary religious documents, we may have to construct them for ourselves. In some of my introductory courses, we devote the first week to explicit attention to these matters, thereby building a vocabulary by which we can identify and discuss these elements in subsequent readings. In other introductory courses, the courses themselves are organized around these rubrics and we spend the entire term exploring them. For example, any introductory course must begin with the question of definition (“What is civilization?” “What is western?”)–I have my students take out a piece of paper and write their answers to these questions within the first five minutes of the first day of the course. We spend the rest of the period classifying their answers, discussing them, and discussing what makes a good definition; or a unit of a course might be designed to display the question of definition (in one introduction, I use as readings: Penner and Yowan, W.C. Smith, R. Otto, P.Berger, M.Spiro and R.B. Edwards).

The second rule is more central: nothing must stand alone. That is to say, every item studied in an introductory course must have a conversation partner. Items must have, or be made to have, arguments with each other. The possibilities are manifold; the only requirement is that the juxtaposition be interesting. For example, in what you have termed disciplinary courses, I search very hard for readings which contain two representative scholars who employ identical data (e.g. Piddocks vs. Orans; the Kronenfelds vs. Levi-Strauss); or for a striking juxtaposition which reveals hidden implications in a given position (e.g. showing Leni Riefenstahl’s “Triumph of the Will” after reading Durkheim’s Elementary Forms; reading the classic pornographic novel, The Story of O after reading Eliade and others on initiation).

Congruent with a concern for the relationship between the enterprise of liberal education and citizenship and with the observation that critical
inquiry as often taught ("there's always another point of view") too frequently results in cynicism, the students must not be left with mere juxtaposition. There must be explicit attention to the possibilities and problems of translating, of reducing, one item in terms of the other. And, there must be explicit attention to consequences and entailments. What if the world really is as so-and-so describes it? What would it mean to live in such a world? What acts of translation must I perform? What would be gained? What would be lost?

Finally, if possible, there should be a "laboratory" component in an introductory course. The students should have to do something which fosters reflection on all of the above. It can be based on observation (for example, in the unit on purity/impurity I have my students describe an actual mean, determine the rules which governed it, and attempt to reduce them to a system. This is in no way the same as the ancient rules; but, it provokes thought). It can be based on a real research, for example, in my Bible and Western Civilization sequence, each student chooses a Bible printed before 1750 from our rare book collection and attempts to determine the significance of the format. The text is in each case the same, but the Bibles look very different. Why? It can be explicitly argumentative (for example, I have my students write a "tenth" opinion, employing some particular perspective, on some recent Supreme court decision involving religion after reading the transcript—e.g. What would Durkheim have ruled in the Rhode Island creche case?).

In sum, there is nothing distinctive to the issue of introducing religion. Its problems are indigenous to the genre of introductory courses. The issues are not inherently disciplinary. They are primarily pedagogical. This is as it should be. For our task, in the long run, is not to introduce or teach our field for its own sake, but to use our field in the service of the broader and more fundamental enterprise of liberal learning.

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**How I Teach The Introductory Course**

Robert N. Bellah

I thought this was going to be a very easy assignment—"How I Teach The Introductory Course"—and then when I thought about how in fact I teach my introductory course it became more problematic. The course is not an introduction to Religious Studies or Comparative Religion, but to the Sociology of Religion. Yet over the years I have turned it into a course that deals with what I see as the major theoretical and historical issues of the religion of humankind. Sociology of Religion indeed turns out to be one part of this course, but I think it really is an introductory course to Religious Studies. I must say that I come by this notion partly out of my own professional socialization, if I can speak sociologically. Talcott Parsons was my teacher and he believed that there was nothing that could not be included in what he called the general theory of action. For good or for ill, he included it all.

In teaching the introductory course in religious studies, which is for me the Sociology of Religion course, I try to weave several things together. I try to develop what might be called a general phenomenology of religious consciousness that is rooted in social scientific work and social psychology in particular. Simultaneously, I try to develop the scheme of religious evolution about which I have written some years ago. Then I try to build into the course detailed examples in which we deal with primary data and get a sense of the tangible concreteness of religion in a particular context. I always try to do two quite different examples to help the student see the contrast between some of the major world religions.

The last time I gave the course, the two examples I used were early Christianity and early Confucianism. I used Wayne Meek's book, *The First Urban Christians*, and selected readings from Mark, Acts, Matthew and several of the Pauline Letters that Meeks uses, particularly in his discussion of the nature and structure of the Pauline communities. For