Introduction

Chapter 1 opens the book with a discussion of Christians and religious diversity. It explores how U.S. society has come to be so religiously diverse, and the challenges this diversity poses for Christians. This chapter articulates my theological premises, but lays no claim to having addressed or solved all the theological issues of Christians and other religions. I do not seek to resolve those issues in the book, but to aid Christians in learning other religions. Understanding other religions, I argue, can forge a foundation from which, in the long run, the difficult theological issues may be addressed.

The next section of the book (chapters 2 through 4) explores ideas and issues in three distinct but related fields—learning theory, study of other religions, and theological learning. Many faculty colleagues shy away from learning theory, believing it to be of dubious value, best relegated to the specialists in education. Too many faculty and students rush directly toward engaging subject matter without any critical reflection on the processes, purposes, and issues of teaching and learning. Teaching consumes a great deal of the time and energy of faculty, and learning of students, and yet many think teaching and learning can be ignored in favor of focusing solely on the subject matter at hand. While I share a passion for the subject matter, my experience as a teacher has taught me again and again that the subject matter does not simply teach itself. I have to understand my students, the backgrounds and learning goals that they bring to the classroom, and how best to help them achieve appropriate goals. Learning theory has helped me to understand and evaluate my students and the learning process so that I can be more effective as a teacher. I urge my readers to set aside whatever aversion they may have to learning theory and engage the learning theorists in chapter 2, as their ideas work together with those in chapters 3 and 4 to provide the theoretical background of the learning process that is the heart of this book.

Each of the three disciplines contributes substantially to the articulation of the learning process. Teaching and learning theory addresses the issues of learning within a diverse world, coming to understand and negotiate areas of human difference. The study of religions addresses issues in understanding religious difference, particularly in light of recent critiques of Western approaches to the study of religious others. Theological learning addresses particular issues for Christians, particularly the need to balance between the appropriation of tradition and its reappropriation in light of changing circumstances.

Building on those three disciplines, I articulate in chapter 5 the threads of a process for Christians learning another religion, unpacking some of the elements involved in that process so that each can be examined carefully in its own right.
There is a tendency, when we think about learning or teaching another religion, to focus almost entirely on one of these threads, to have a dominant concern or worry. While that is perfectly understandable, it has the unfortunate effect of obscuring other dimensions of the learning process, so that most approaches to learning other religions are skewed in one direction or another. While perfect balance is a utopian ideal, the unraveling of the threads of the learning process helps to evaluate the effectiveness of various approaches, whether in the classroom or beyond. Without such awareness, it will not be possible to improve or refine the ways in which Christians learn other religions.

Unraveling, naming, and describing the threads of the learning process offer an interpretation of that process. The five threads are (1) encountering difference or entering another world; (2) one’s initial response as a Christian; (3) conversation and dialogue on several levels; (4) living out what has been learned; and (5) internalizing the learning process. Many other interpretations are possible, and some may well turn out to be more useful or productive than what is offered in this book. If the threads of the learning process are suggested as an interpretation of the learning process—a particular reading of it—they are not offered as an “objective” structure or model. The articulation of these various threads is a device to bring to light several facets of what is admittedly a complex process. Its purpose is to develop a particular form of awareness, an alertness to dimensions of learning that may be overlooked, to the detriment of the learner and, ultimately, of the communities in which the learner participates. They are intended to serve as well-written program notes that enable the audience to hear nuances in a work of music or see dimensions of a dance or play they might otherwise miss.

The last section of the book (chapters 6 and 7) turns to the practical aspects of teaching and learning other religions. Based on the learning process articulated in chapter 5 and conversations with fellow teachers, chapter 6 critiques and assesses common classroom strategies and suggests ways of enhancing the process of learning other religions. Chapter 7 moves beyond the classroom to talk about learning in less formal church settings, providing practical guidelines for making the most of such learning experiences. Appendix A provides an annotated bibliography for teaching other religions, and Appendix B offers a checklist of Practical Guidelines for Christians Learning Other Religions.

Nonacademic readers may want to begin with chapter 1 and then move directly to the practical chapters (6 and 7) before returning to chapter 5, which discusses the learning process in more depth. They may then consult chapters 2 through 4 as they are relevant and helpful. Throughout the book I have sought to address both the academic and the broader audience, but chapters 2 through 4 may be a bit “heady” for some nonacademics.

The book contains some deliberate repetition; I circle back to earlier points to clarify how each chapter has built upon earlier ideas. Some readers may not need the repetition; if so, I invite them to skim over these sections and pick up where the discussion moves forward. Other readers will find these sections helpful, seeing ever more clearly how the ideas of the various authors cited are woven together into the threads of the learning process, which in turn helps illumine various approaches to learning other religions.

**WHY MAKE THE EFFORT TO LEARN OTHER RELIGIONS?**

In one way this book is behind its time, since religious diversity has been an increasing fact of the lives of U.S. Christians for decades. In some parts of the country, the inability of Christians to help parishioners deal with the religious diversity of their lives, their workplaces, and their families has driven people from the churches; it is simpler to be “spiritual, but not religious” than to wrestle with the complications of maintaining Christian faith in a religiously diverse world.

In another way, this book is ahead of its time, for theological schools and congregations are still uncomfortable with and resistant to addressing the presence of other religions. There are understandable reasons for this. In the churches and in the theological schools, many Christians feel that they have at best a tenuous grasp of their own heritage, that their primary need is to learn the Christian tradition. The issue of other religions seems a distraction from that task. This book does not argue against the desire for a deeper grounding in Christian traditions, discussion, and issues. It does, however, reject the premise that one must choose between the two. Just as learning another language deepens my understanding of English, and just as coming to know other persons helps me understand myself, so learning other religions brings my Christianity into sharper relief and helps me notice and own what I earlier took for granted.

Second, if they are to confront other religions at all, many would prefer a succinct authoritative summary of the sort offered in the traditional course on the world’s religions. We are impatient; we want our information clear and neatly packaged so that we can take it in and get on with life. We also seek a clear structure or framework on which to rest so that we feel sure of our footing; prepackaged summaries seem to provide that. We don’t like the discomfort of being stretched beyond the familiar, with its unknown consequences. Such indeed is the easier way, but to follow the easier way is to withdraw from genuine engagement with the voices of other religions and to pull back into an increasingly inward-looking, isolated, and atrophied church.

If the lives of Christians are to be increasingly marked by religious diversity in the workplace, the schools, and the family; if U.S. society is to become increasingly religiously diverse; if there is to be any hope that American Christians can provide leadership for the world to move beyond religious intolerance and violence, then Christians must begin to understand and engage other religions as part of their Christian lives and understanding. Learning other religions is a requirement for living as Christians in a religiously diverse world.
Christians and Religious Diversity

THE COLOR-CODED MAP

I remember as a young schoolgirl studying textbooks introducing the world’s religions using a color-coded map of the world. The pink tones of “Hinduism” colored India and parts of Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The yellow tones of Buddhism colored East and Southeast Asia. The blue tones of Islam colored Pakistan, parts of Indonesia, and most of the Arab world and North Africa. The purple tones of Christianity colored North and South America and Europe. The map included codes for “indigenous” religions in Africa, “outback” Australia, Papua New Guinea, and a few other “remote” cultures. Each religion had its territory and its cultural home; the world was divided into religious enclaves, and religions other than Christianity were spatially and culturally removed from my world.

Moreover, the religion texts of my youth taught the origins of the world religions, the stories of “the founders.” Conforming to a Protestant sensibility of seeing “true” religious teaching as associated with “the teachings of the founder,” “true” Buddhism was defined as the teachings of the historical Buddha, and “true” Islam was associated with the life and teachings of Muhammad. The emphasis on origins removed these traditions from my life not only in space but in time. I was only vaguely conscious of the presence of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims in the contemporary world; and, when brought to an awareness of them, I was startled when what I saw and heard of contemporary practices did not conform to the depiction of “true” religion in my textbooks.

Over the past thirty-five years, scholars of religion have come to realize that the depictions in such textbooks were an oversimplified and romantic construction of Euroamerican views of the religious world. The texts all too conveniently removed the “other religions” to a safe distance, spatially, temporally, and culturally; they rendered them exotic “others.” Ironically, the texts sometimes created a “religion” where the adherents had seen no unity, only a plethora of diverse traditions. “Hinduism,” for example, was the invention of European
scholars, not of "Hindus." As Edward Said famously argued, Europeans invented "the Orient" and "orientalism" as an "other" against which they could define their own identity.2

The color-coded religious map of the world was, even in its heyday, a romantic projection. However, subsequent events destroyed any vestiges of its credibility. The forces of immigration and globalization have broken up the large color blocks, as in a giant kaleidoscope, into tiny fragments of colors scattered through virtually all corners of the globe.

The "other religions" (various forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, and indigenous traditions) are well established in Europe and North America, while Christianity has a distinctly global presence. In my own Anglican communion (which has long seen itself as centered in the "motherland" of the United Kingdom), the demographic center of the church has moved to Africa. This shift is challenging Euroamerican notions about who dominates and defines the Anglican communion. Issues of biblical interpretation and church doctrine raised by African and Asian Anglicans at the 1998 Lambeth Conference challenged more "liberal" views of many American and European Anglicans.

The global movement of peoples of all traditions has in many ways challenged unitary views of the world religions. The various "religions" are now adapting to a variety of cultures around the globe, embracing or resisting the forces of modernization, and testing their identification with their "traditional" cultures of origin. American-born Zen Buddhists are conflicted about whether to accept all of the Japanese cultural traditions associated with Zen. Muslims and Sikhs in the United States are conflicted about whether to observe dress codes and customs that would be mandatory in their cultures of origin. Africans and Chinese are creating "new" Christianities strongly "spiced" with their own traditional cultural practices and sensibilities.

The once "remote" religions of my student textbooks now surround me, not simply as institutions (temples, mosques, meditation centers, gurdwaras) but also as people with whom I meet and interact on a daily basis—in schools, in the marketplace, in hospitals, at work, and even in my church. Sikhs drive most of the taxicabs in Berkeley. The X-ray technician who took numerous chest films when I had pneumonia was a Muslim. The admissions officer at my school is a Hindu. My local Episcopal church includes a dozen parishioners in interfaith marriages; several more who have children or siblings who are practicing other faiths; an ordained deacon who spent thirty years of her life as a Hindu; and an active member who practices intensive Buddhist meditation alongside his Christian disciplines. A score of other parishioners have roots in Asian or African cultures and thus bring religious and ethical influences with them from their pasts. It is abundantly clear that I no longer live in the religiously color-coded world of my school textbooks.


One example sums up the change very nicely. In 1893 the World's Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago in conjunction with the World's Fair. This gathering brought leaders of many religions from all over the globe, many of them the first public representatives of these traditions on North American soil. When the planning began for the 1993 centennial of the Parliament, the leaders realized that the religions present at the 1893 parliament now had representatives within easy distance of virtually every major urban center in the United States. The "world's religions" are among us.3

HOW DID RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY OVERTAKE THE COLOR-CODED MAP?

Even during my school days, the color-coded map of the world's religions glossed over religious diversity in the United States. The traditions of Native Americans had long predated the coming of Christianity, but before the 1970s the general public was largely ignorant of these traditions. The publication of Black Elk Speaks and the work of native scholars such as Vine Deloria had not brought knowledge of these traditions to the attention of the reading public.4 Chinese immigrants to the West Coast, working on railroads, in mines, or as servants and cooks, had brought with them Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist practices, but these were not widely known or acknowledged and were often suppressed. Other immigrants brought with them Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim practices, but their small numbers were sufficiently scattered that they were not a visible presence. In 1955, Will Herberg published an influential study of the sociology of religion in the United States, entitled Protestant, Catholic, Jew.5 At that time, not only were these the dominant and visible religions but, as Herberg demonstrated, the religions that influenced the structures and voting patterns of American life. Herberg's book ignored the long-standing presence of Buddhists and other Asian religions, particularly in the American West, and a host of native and immigrant traditions that were still largely invisible to the wider public or expected to disappear as adherents were assimilated to mainstream culture.

The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act began to erode that invisibility. The act ended highly restrictive immigration policies targeted against Asians in particular, opening the doors to new immigrants who brought with them their cultures, languages, cuisines, and religions.

The flow of immigration from Asia and the Pacific to North America was per-

3 For instance, at California State University at Hayward, students in the courses on world religions regularly include adherents of five of the six religions taught in the course (Patricia Shannon, personal communication, June 6, 2002).
haps one of the first signs of globalization, a trend that gathered force during the last quarter of the twentieth century and continues into this one. Globalization is the confluence of several factors: developments in communications that "shrunk" the world by putting every corner of the globe into virtually instantaneous contact with every other corner; the development of an interconnected world economy dominated by transnational corporations, which began to erode the significance of national borders and created worldwide markets for both labor and products; movements of people across national borders, largely in response to opportunities and pressures in the global marketplace; and local adaptations of or resistance to global forces. These movements of people across borders, both voluntary and involuntary, have often created a sense of displacement, a loss of place. Globalization has meant, on the one hand, that one is likely to see a young person in a Burmese village wearing Reebok shoes, a T-shirt with a picture of Michael Jordan, and a Swatch watch while drinking Coca Cola; on the other hand, globalization has meant that the cuisines, dress, arts, and citizens of cultures across the globe are now present across the United States, although the exact "mix" and pattern of global diversity vary from city to city, region to region.

Americans are aware of many issues raised by "globalization" for their communities and their cultures. Small U.S. cities have experienced and benefited from the construction of Japanese factories with Japanese management that have changed (and often revived) their local economies. Other cities are aware that their industries (such as the steel and textile industries) have fallen prey to cheaper labor, more modern plants, or government subsidies abroad. Many Americans are exploring cuisines cooked by their immigrant neighbors; they have moved on from Chinese and Japanese dishes to Thai, Vietnamese, Middle Eastern, Indian, South and Central American, Caribbean, and Ethiopian foods. Public school systems are struggling to meet the needs of children whose first language is not English, as demonstrated by the kindergarten class in Richmond, California, that includes students speaking fifteen different languages. Moreover, immigration has become a volatile political issue—illegal immigration, to be sure—but also the importation of highly trained technical workers from around the globe. In our awareness of the effects of globalization, however, there is a significant lacuna, aptly identified by Diana Eck:

For all this discussion about immigration, language, and culture, we Americans have not yet really thought about it in terms of religion. We are surprised to discover the religious changes America has been undergoing. We are surprised to find that there are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians, more Muslims than members of the Presbyterian Church USA, and as many Muslims as there are Jews—that is, about six million. We are astonished to learn that Los Angeles is the most complex Buddhist city in the world, with a Buddhist population spanning the whole range of the Asian Buddhist world from Sri Lanka to Korea, along with a multitude of native-born American Buddhists. ... We know that many of our internists, surgeons, and nurses are of Indian origin, but we have not stopped to consider that they too have a religious life, ... that they might bring fruits and flowers to the local Shiva-Vishnu temple on the weekend and be part of a diverse Hindu population of more than a million.

Eck goes on to note that living in a global society would seem to require a much greater awareness of other religions.

We cannot live in a world in which our economies and markets are global, our political awareness is global, our business relationships take us to every continent, and the Internet connects us with colleagues half a world away and yet live on Friday, or Saturday, or Sunday with ideas of God that are essentially provincial, imagining that somehow the one we call God has been primarily concerned with us and our tribe.

Diana Eck's book A New Religious America narrates the development of the extraordinarily rich religious diversity of our society and also the ongoing struggle of all of us (Christian and non-Christian) to learn to deal with this new reality.

A NEW RELIGIOUS AMERICA

The backbone of this tale is the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965. The immigrants under this law continued their cultural practices, spoke their native languages, and practiced their religions in what were at first tiny and fragmented communities. They might meet in a home, a storefront, or a rented room, virtually invisible to the community around them. However, as immigrants settled in greater numbers, became economically secure, and had children, each distinct community grew concerned that its culture, language, and religious practice be handed on to succeeding generations. In the 1980s and 1990s, many groups built their own places of worship, hired religious leaders to enhance their worship and educate their children, and established a full range of cultural, linguistic, and religious programs to maintain their distinctive cultural and religious heritages.

These new immigrants came in greater numbers than ever before; they were able to avoid extreme isolation and thus to resist pressures to assimilate into mainstream culture by giving up their languages, their cultural ways, and their religious practices. They could maintain their distinctive cultural and religious roots in this country, while at the same time establishing their place in the broader mosaic of American society through work and community involvement.

---


6 Ibid., 24.
The establishment of Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim communities in the United States often requires considerable adjustment and adaptation on the part of the community. In India, for instance, Hindu temples are local, each representing a god or tradition quite distinct to the region in which the temple is established. In the United States, it is often the case that, while there are sufficient Hindus in an area to support a Hindu temple, immigrants hail from many parts of India and thus worship different Hindu gods and goddesses. In the United States, the compromise, which would seem strange indeed on Indian soil, is to honor more than one god in a particular temple, such as the temple of Shiva and Vishnu in Livermore, California. In India, Shiva and Vishnu represent quite distinct and different strands of Hindu piety. Likewise, while Islam is to a certain degree united by the centrality of the Qur'an and Qur'anic Arabic as well as the obligations for prayer five times a day and fasting during the month of Ramadan, Islam has adapted itself to a variety of cultures as it spread across North Africa, the Near East, and Asia. The cultural differences within Islam are skillfully documented in Clifford Geertz’s Islam Observed. American Muslims establishing mosques and prayer spaces in the workplace often find themselves literally shoulder to shoulder in prayer with Muslims from throughout the world. Only the Hajj, the great pilgrimage to Mecca, offers a comparable diversity of the tradition of Islam. Buddhists have tended to cluster in temples of their own subtraditions, each speaking the language of their form of Buddhism. However, since the entire Buddhist world is represented in Los Angeles, a number of significant Pan-Buddhist organizations have developed to help Buddhists deal with their issues in representing themselves to the wider culture and to other religions in the United States.

These religious communities are also forced to adapt to American ways and styles as their young people are assimilated into U.S. culture. Thus groups have adapted Mormon-style curricula for religious education, family camps for the study of Vedanta (Hindus) or for meditation (Buddhists). They establish youth choirs and youth activity groups as well as schools to teach the young people traditional languages and religious texts. These religious communities maintain the culture and religious identity of the immigrants, but they also are the means by which these traditions are recontextualized into American culture.

The increasingly visible presence and efflorescence of these non-Christian religious institutions has not come without resistance. When Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Hindus, and Muslims were meeting in homes or storefronts, they did not draw the attention of their neighbors, but the building of temples was another matter. For instance, Buddhist Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, outside of Los Angeles, is a stunning complex built on fourteen acres of land. Its membership is more than twenty thousand, mostly Chinese immigrants from Taiwan. The proposal to build this temple gave rise to fierce resistance from its neighbors, who sought to defeat it by means of the zoning laws. It took five years and scores of meetings to negotiate clearances. After the building was completed, the Buddhists set out to build bridges with their neighbors by distributing food baskets to the needy on Thanksgiving and Christmas and offering invitations to the entire community for dinner at the temple on major Buddhist feast days. They also invited outside groups to use their conference facilities. These bridge-building activities illustrate the ways in which Buddhists and others accommodate to American religious and cultural sensibilities, as well as learn the laws and regulations governing religious organizations in American society. Hospitality to outsiders and honoring their festivals (Thanksgiving and Christmas) replicates a long-standing Chinese strategy for living with religious neighbors: participating in neighbors’ feasts and then hosting the neighbors on one’s own feast days as a gesture both of friendship and of gentle education about the nature and virtues of their religious community. This traditional Chinese strategy has served the Hsi Lai Temple well in establishing better relationships with its Christian, Jewish, and secular neighbors.

Resistance to Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Buddhist religious groups sometimes takes uglier forms than fights over zoning clearances. The places of worship of these religious communities or persons with religiously distinctive dress (the dot of the Hindu woman, the turban of the Sikh man, the head scarf of the Muslim woman) have drawn the violence and hatred of some segments of society who are threatened by the presence of an “other.” Because of this xenophobic violence, underscored by the events of September 11, 2001, understanding America’s religious diversity and getting to know our religious neighbors is not merely a desideratum to be sought if we have the time and interest. Ignorance and misunderstanding are sources of tension and violence that have the potential to rend the fabric of an increasingly diverse U.S. society. The only alternative is mutual knowledge and understanding.

A CHALLENGE FOR CHRISTIANS

We are gradually becoming aware of the presence and proximity of numerous religions, but many Christians in the United States have not yet grasped that their religious communities are part of the totality of religions in the world, nor are we as yet aware of the place of other religions in world history. We are only beginning to realize that religious diversity is an integral part of our lives. This is so despite the fact that both biblical history and church history are rife with the ways

---

1 Ibid., 144-48.
in which the presence of other religions have influenced the evolution of Christian communities.

Awareness of the fact of religious diversity has not always led to an understanding or celebration of it. Christians often have a hard time accepting the reality of religious diversity or establishing appropriate relationships with religious neighbors. Their difficulties have deep historical and cultural roots.

One reason Christians have difficulties with the presence of other religions is the long history of Christian exclusivism. The insistence that Jesus Christ is the only gateway to salvation (“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” [John 14:6]) or proclaiming extra ecclesiam nulla salus (“outside the church there is no salvation”) may have helped the fragile, fledgling community of the church establish itself in its early days of persecution, but the claims of exclusivism took on an entirely different timbre as Christianity became the official church of the Holy Roman Empire and other states throughout Europe. In the course of history, Christian claims of exclusivism have often been understood to mean that adherents of other faiths (and sometimes of other forms of Christianity) were beyond the reach of salvation. Those who affirm a triumphalist Christian exclusivism have no reason to establish relationships with persons of other faiths, except perhaps to convert them. While the Roman Catholic and formerly mainline Protestant churches have worked since the middle of the twentieth century to modify and mollify their exclusivist claims by recognizing God’s presence in the lives of adherents of other religions, Christians of all stripes still struggle with the issues of exclusivism. A number of theologians, Protestant and Roman Catholic, have been wrestling with these issues over the past few decades, but there are as yet no widely agreed upon answers to the questions. Nearly two thousand years of exclusivist thinking and habits are not easy to transcend; nor are all Christians ready to transcend them. As theologians have pointed out, all too often the “solutions” to Christian exclusivism raise a host of other problems, including either a vicious relativism or a bland “all religions are equal,” which actually subordinates all particular teachings to some principle or ideal that belongs to none of the traditions or that turns out to be simple.

13 The Christ-centered formulation is Protestant, while the church-centered formulation is Roman Catholic.


ply a restatement of Christian views of the nature of religion. Christian thinkers will continue to debate these issues and look for articulations of an appropriate openness to other religions that do not undermine central Christian values.

Christian exclusivism is also related to the fact that allegiance to Christianity presents itself as a choice that entails renouncing all other religious options. Christians who hold strongly to this view are concerned that engaging another religion might be disloyal or might even lead to conversion to the other faith.

It is certainly true that learning other religions, engaging in conversation with their texts and adherents, changes one. One cannot engage in a genuine conversation without opening oneself to the views of the other; a conversation entails both mutual influence and mutual criticism. Relationships and conversations broaden one’s horizons. As a result, one must reexamine and reappropriate former views and ideas, so that one’s Christian identity is refined and broadened. Such interreligious conversations and influences, both friendly and competitive, have peppered the history of Christian communities. Christian doctrines have been refined and practices have been influenced and enriched by such interactions. Conversion is always a possibility, but only when there are reasons or circumstances that would lead an individual to move from one community to another. The vast majority of Christian interreligious conversations lead not to conversion but to broadened sensibilities and a clearer, if refined, sense of one’s Christian identity.

There are two components to the anxiety about conversion. First, what does it mean to “join” or “convert” to another religion? Some religions actively proselytize, seeking new adherents. In such cases, outsiders are invited to make vows, sign registers, undergo initiations, or declare allegiance to a deity or teacher. Others, including many Buddhists, welcome outsiders to participate in their temples, public rituals, and practices without asking for any formal religious commitment. One could practice many forms of Buddhism rather extensively without ever “joining” the religion or renouncing one’s affiliation with another religion. Second, what does it mean to “leave” one’s own religion, such as Christianity? Each tradition, denomination, and movement within Christianity has its own definition about what is required to remain a faithful member. However, what is unacceptable in one form of Christianity may not be so in another. Stepping beyond the bounds of a particular denomination does not necessarily mean “leaving Christianity.” Before conversion might happen, a Christian would cross at least two layers of “influence” (and each of these layers has many levels). In the first, a Christian may be influenced by the ideas or practices of another religion and may see these as enriching her Christian life and faith, with no intention of “moving to” the other community. In the second, a Christian may find herself influenced by another religion in ways that pull her beyond the accepted boundaries of her initial denomination or church, and she may subsequently seek a more open form.

of Christianity tolerant of these new ideas or practices. Only in rare cases is the Christian so powerfully affected by the new ideas and practices that she decides to leave the Christian community entirely and “join” and exclusively practice the other religion.

In the contemporary world, many people have complex identities because of movements across cultural borders, cultural choices, racial heritage, or intermarriages. One may come from a multireligious household that seeks to honor two or more traditions. Asian American or Asian Christians can have parents or grandparents and other family members who still practice Buddhism, Confucianism, or Hinduism. Such persons often seek to honor and understand the traditions of their ancestors, which have shaped them in important ways, in harmony with their Christian identity and practices. In these cases, the “conversion” (to Christianity) took place in recent history, but the traditions of ancestors are part of the familial “cumulative tradition.” What is at stake is not conversion—leaving Christianity to return to ancestral religions—but contextualization, a reconciliation of cultural and familial identity with Christian belief and practice.

If theologians are wrestling with issues of Christian exclusivism, Christians in the pew are even more confused. In one sense the “ordinary” Christian is far ahead of the theological leadership, for the reality of their everyday lives has drawn many of them willy-nilly into relations with persons of other religions. However, these Christians are often unable to understand theologically their relationships with other religions. They have either not heard of, or cannot accept, the arguments of theologians seeking “a wider ecumenism.” Additionally, Paul Knitter has noted that theologians arguing for more inclusive understandings of Christianity are often totally at odds not only with fellow theologians but with Christians in the church. He writes,

All of these reservations, which come not from the Falwells and Ratzingers, but from some of the more liberal thinkers in our communities, are based on the perceived clash between the new nonabsolutes of Christ and the sensus fidelium. So, if these new christologies [nonabsolutes views of Christ] have any future within Christian theology, they need a better ecclesial mediation in order that they might be “received” by the faithful.

Local Christians involved in dialogue are setting aside the theological issues for the sake of practical relationships. It is not that the theological issues are unimportant, but that they are so difficult. Such practical knowledge and experience of other religions may in fact help Christians to envision and articulate a solution to the theological issues and assist with what Knitter calls their “ecclisial mediation.”

Beyond the theological issues surrounding religious exclusivity and Christian understandings of christology, there is another obstacle for American Christians to overcome in accepting religious diversity and coming to know their religious neighbors. This is the long-standing sense of America as a Christian country. While American citizens are strongly committed to the constitutional principle of religious liberty, they also tend to presume that “Christianity” (particularly Protestant Christianity) is “the” religion of our society.17 That is to say, Christians (particularly Protestants) have a deep sense of Christian entitlement and ideological Christian exclusivism. It can be difficult for some to understand why others make a fuss about posting the Ten Commandments in the public schools, about a Christian prayer before a high school football game, or about including “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance despite the fact that many citizens have religious beliefs that do not affirm “God.” This sense of entitlement and privilege is the product of a long history of Christianity as the dominant or mainstream American culture. A privileged majority is often blind to its privilege; it tends to see its dominant position as a given, simply “the way things are.” The problem, of course, is that society is changing, becoming more religiously diverse, and many Christians now know personally members of other religions. These changes can slowly erode unquestioned assumptions.

BEYOND EXCLUSIVISM?

The history of Christian superiority and entitlement (sometimes coupled with racist attitudes, conscious or unconscious) has hampered Christian affirmation of religious diversity and establishment of appropriate relations with non-Christian neighbors. But the changing fabric of American society, the sheer proximity, increasing visibility, and growing dailliness of encounters with people of many faiths are attracting attention. This is no longer an abstract issue confronted only in occasional news stories but a fact of everyday life. As Eck writes,

It’s one thing to be unconcerned about or ignorant of Muslim neighbors on the other side of the world, but when Buddhists are our next-door neighbors, when our children are best friends with Muslim classmates, when a Hindu is running for a seat on the school committee, all of us have a new vested interest in our neighbors, both as citizens and as people of faith.18

As we come to have a vested interest in our religious neighbors, our ignorance and lack of understanding become increasingly problematic. Considering that we are now the most religiously diverse society on the planet, the religious illiteracy

17 Catherine L. Albanese discusses how dominant “public Protestantism” has been in United States history (America: Religions and Religion, 2nd ed. [Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishers, 1992], chapter 12).
18 Eck, New Religious America, 6.
of Americans is a significant concern. Without better knowledge of religions we are unprepared to live responsibly as citizens in our society, much less in the world. Nor are we prepared to help Christians in our local parishes who have interfaith marriages, whose daughters and brothers are Buddhists, whose best friend is a Muslim, who practice Hatha Yoga and have no idea how it relates to their Christian practices.

However, few see the need for Christians as Christians to understand other religions. Many believe that the primary motivation for establishing a relationship with someone from another religion is to have an opportunity to witness to their Christian faith. However, while it is certainly legitimate for Christians to wish to witness to their faith, they are enjoined by the Ten Commandments not to bear false witness. We need to respect and understand the religions of our neighbors so that we do not unfairly slander or malign them. We need accurate knowledge and solid understanding if we are not to bear false witness; genuine Christian witness cannot be based on false witness against others. The injunction against bearing false witness opens a window for even rather conservative Christians to learn other religions.

My own move beyond a rigid Christian exclusivism is based in my experience. Perhaps because of my personal, everyday experience of diversity in the Bay Area, the very fact of religious diversity seems to compel or demand my understanding and response as a Christian. However, more than the mere fact of diversity, I am moved by my respect and friendship for adherents of other religions whom I have known through my scholarly work. In my thirty-five years as a scholar of East Asian religions, I have been privileged to know remarkable Confucians, Buddhists, and Daoists. These persons are not only splendid representatives of their traditions but also profound and impressive human beings. Because I can sense and appreciate their spirituality and their deep religious wisdom, I simply cannot believe that these people are “outside of salvation.”

Theologically, my relationships with these outstanding representatives of their respective traditions have expanded my sense of God’s presence. The qualities I experience in these people resonate with what I know of God’s love and goodness. As a Christian I believe that God created and is present in the world; I have also come to believe that God can be present in other religions. John Berthrong puts this point very strongly when he writes, “From a monotheistic viewpoint, God created religious pluralism [since God is the Lord of all creation]; our task is to try to understand it theologically, spiritually, and historically.”

I understand that neither my experience nor my theological affirmation of God’s ability to be present in other religions solves all of the theological problems of Christians relating to other religions. This book is not about resolving those theological issues. It starts from a different premise and is addressed to Christians who, like me, feel called to live out our Christian faith in a diverse world by means of respectful relationships with persons of other religions, however much we may still struggle with the theological issues raised by those relationships. My premise is that Christians seeking a more open Christian life can best begin by coming to understand other religions. Understanding (learning other religions) can create a foundation of knowledge from which the difficult and vexing theological issues can in the long run be addressed.

This book argues that learning other religions is a requirement for living as Christians in a religiously diverse world. In doing so, it assumes that such learning both practically and logically comes before the theologian’s resolution of theological and ecclesial relations with the other religions. Learning other religions is a way to cultivate appropriate knowledge and relationships without running immediately into the theological walls of Christian exclusivism or treating the dogmas that form us as static ideals. This learning can create a foundation for informed and ongoing theological reflection; in fact, such learning will entail theological reflection, as will be clear in the learning process discussed in chapter 5. To develop the intellectual foundations for the learning process, we now turn to a discussion of learning theories.

---

20 Berthrong, Divine Deli, 10-11 (bracketed material inserted to clarify Berthrong’s theological stance).
Thinking about Learning

THE CLASSROOMS FOR WHICH TEACHERS WERE NOT PREPARED

The last decades of the twentieth century yielded a dramatic change in the classrooms of higher education—colleges, graduate schools, and seminars. Economic developments, transformations in technology, changes in employment opportunities, and a restructuring of financial aid vastly broadened the population of higher education in this country. In the first half of the twentieth century, students in colleges, graduate schools, and seminars were overwhelmingly young, white, male, upper middle class, and full-time. The traditional canon of Western literature was taught by means of lectures, essay examinations, and term papers. The educational methods assumed a level of cultural readiness for such learning and prepared students for leadership roles suited to their position in society.

In the second half of the century, expanded financial aid, expectations of employers, increasing necessity for two-career households, and the impact of civil rights and other antidiscriminatory legislation (Title IX, ADA) brought more and more working-class students, women, persons of color, differently abled persons, and immigrants into classrooms. These broadly based students tended to be older, part-time (since many had to hold part-time or full-time jobs before and during their enrollment in school), increasingly nonresidential, and possessed of significant life experience either in this culture or another. Whereas colleges (particularly the more elite colleges) began the century educating primarily young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one from relatively privileged social backgrounds to assume positions of influence within society, these same colleges and universities ended the century taking on the general and specialized education of a broad segment of the American work force from diverse social backgrounds and with practical educational goals—a job.

Graduate schools and seminars also changed rather dramatically. When I entered the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University in 1967, classes prior to mine had been advised that one had to be a "gentleman of independent means" to pursue the program. My class and subsequent classes entered on fellowships and scholarships from the government and private foundations. We were certainly not "gentlemen of independent means." In my entering class, about two-thirds were women, only 10 percent had parents with graduate educations, a quarter had parents who did not have bachelor's degrees, and 10 percent had one parent who had not graduated from high school. We did not fit the traditional mold, and the faculty had some adjusting to do.

As the diversity of gender, age, cultural, and class backgrounds among students intensified, faculty and administrators in higher education became concerned about the quality of students' work. The language and writing skills of these diverse students did not "match up" to traditional students; faculty saw the new student body as less interested in and less motivated by the traditional curriculum; these students raised questions from their diverse backgrounds and experiences that seemed to some faculty a digression from the agenda of the curriculum. These students did not appear "ready" for the readings, assignments, and approaches to teaching that had worked for the prior fifty years. But of course these were not traditional students.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire was among the most vocal in claiming that the failures of these students was a failure of their teachers, at least in part a result of "the existing contempt for the learners' cultural identities, the disrespect for popular syntax, and the almost complete disregard for the learners' baggage of experiential knowledge." 1 In other words, the teachers had not yet adjusted to the new social reality in their classrooms; they did not understand their students.

Freire's point was vividly brought home to me in my second year of teaching at Indiana University. Like many faculty, I was both concerned and irritated by intense student anxiety about examinations, complaining that they "didn't know what was expected of them." One day I happened to be listening to public radio and heard an essay on working-class socialization and college expectations. The speaker pointed out that the "standard" college course, centered on mid-term and final examinations, presupposed middle-class socialization. Most middle-class students had been raised to learn and internalize general parental expectations, so that they could understand and meet those expectations with some confidence. Many working-class students, on the other hand, were raised in environments where there were no long-standing, consistent expectations; their parents instead required them to "do what I say, right now." 2 "Because I say so, that's why." The feedback for such demands was immediate (positive or negative), and tomorrow the parental expectation might be entirely different. Students from such backgrounds had little or no experience with learning, internalizing, and acting with confidence on long-term expectations. They sought immediate and frequent feedback from a teacher (praise or blame) so that they could pick up cues about what would be, in their experience, shifting expectations. As I listened to the radio essay, I realized that it was I who had failed those students, not they who were failing me. I began to structure into my undergraduate courses chances for students gradually to learn, test, and understand my academic expectations so

DIVERSE WAYS OF LEARNING

One response to the new student populations evolved as scholars reexamined their assumptions about cognitive development and learning patterns. In 1970, William Perry published a highly influential study on cognitive development in the college years, based on interviews with Harvard undergraduates. Perry’s book served as a resource for many college teachers seeking to adapt to the new student population. It posited a nine-stage schema of moral and cognitive development for undergraduate learners.

A research team of feminist scholars criticized Perry for assuming in his initial sample that male models of learning were a universal norm. The team interviewed 153 women from a variety of “educational institutions”—an Ivy League college, an inner-city community college, an “early college” for students who had completed only two years of high school, an alternative high school for students at risk of dropping out, and a number of family agencies for mothers of young children—asking each subject “what was important about life and learning from her point of view.” From their analysis of the interviews, the feminist

---

4 Ibid., 11 (italics in original).
strongly favor a specific intelligence and to include materials and learning exercises that engage as many intelligences as possible. By extension, the study also suggested that certain cultural backgrounds or social environments might favor particular intelligences and neglect others; thus Gardner’s work became a tool for understanding the learning implications of cultural and environmental differences.

The learning potential of diverse ways of knowing has struck me most dramatically in a doctoral seminar I teach on interdisciplinarity. The seminar engages interdisciplinarity theories in order to help students articulate and critically evaluate the interdisciplinarity of their own work. Interdisciplinarity is challenging because it can either be remotely abstract or too close at hand (it’s just the way I think!). In presenting various models of interdisciplinary collaboration, one student team brought four sets of Legos, which they mixed up and set out on four tables. They divided the rest of the class into four groups, assigned each a table, and asked each to construct a model of interdisciplinarity and explain their model to the rest of the class. The “teaching” team closely observed the patterns of cooperation that each group developed, reporting back on the group dynamics. The team also noted that none of the groups of interdisciplinary scholars had thought to visit another table to locate the piece that would best complete their model. The student groups worked entirely within their assigned boundaries, like good disciplinary scholars.

This learning experience was extraordinary. Although the medium was unorthodox (how many doctoral students get to work in Legos?), we learned from the challenge of working together within a restricted time frame and restricted to the materials at hand, and we learned immensely from the field analysis by the “teaching team” of each group’s dynamics. Each of us left the experience with deeper insight into how to approach and evaluate interdisciplinary work.

**LEARNING FOR EMPOWERMENT OF VOICE AND AGENCY**

Paulo Freire did much to revolutionize educational theory with his pedagogical strategies to help poor Brazilian peasants and workers become agents in improving their own lives. Freire published his widely influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970. Freire aspired to “conscientize” or empower his students through education, to give them agency in shaping their own lives. In order to do so, he sought to understand the minds and lives of his students, to engage them actively, and to bring the voices of their experiences into the educational process.

Freire employed an illustration that came to be widely cited by advocates for a new approach to education. He argued that traditional education was founded on a “banking model,” seeing the student as an empty vessel into which the teacher deposits knowledge so that the student can call upon it when needed. Lecture, drill, and memorization of information in preparation for tests exemplify the “banking model,” which still holds pride of place in many classrooms. The empowerment model, on the other hand, encourages the students to bring their prior experiences (their specific backgrounds and gifts) as assets to the learning process; it builds on those backgrounds and prior experiences to empower the students to understand more critically and act more effectively in work and in life. Learning for empowerment is not about some set curriculum of “information” or “skills,” but about critical reflection on experience and the development of effective strategies for creating a better life and a better world. Education is for living, for practice, for active agency in the world.

Freire’s critique of the “banking model” recalls John Dewey’s criticism of conceptions of knowledge as external to students, a body of facts they store in a warehouse. Instead, Dewey argued that the function of knowledge is to make one particular experience applicable to other life experiences. bell hooks, an African American womanist and a passionate teacher of English, is an articulate spokesperson for involved and liberative pedagogy, which she calls “education as the practice of freedom.” She was inspired by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, having worked with him and engaged him in dialogue. But while inspired by Freire, her own writings on pedagogy reflect her location as an African American, a feminist, and an educator in North America.

In hooks’s first, preintegration all-black school, her black teachers worked with her and other gifted children to nurture their talents and prepare them for work in behalf of the race. Shifting from this environment to integrated white schools, where black students were expected primarily to be quiet and accommodating, was a profound shock. hooks retained her vision of education as enabling despite the fact that integrated public school, college, and graduate school classrooms “began to feel more like prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility.” She had to struggle against increasingly powerful pressures to submit to the authority and hegemony of received views of the white male world.

hooks survived all this with her independent mind and spirit intact and entered the college classroom as a teacher committed to giving her students a taste of education as freedom. Given her own educational odyssey, she was well aware of

---

8 Freire’s pedagogy, particularly in its earliest forms, was predicated on Marxist assumptions; hence agency and empowerment were in those early years collective goals for the base community. However, as Freire entered into conversations with and influenced North American educators, the goals of empowerment and agency began to be understood also in individual terms. I am grateful to Kathryn Campbell for her input on this point (personal communication, May 20, 2002).


12 Ibid., 4.
how traditional modes of instruction marginalized, silenced, and “imprisoned” students whose backgrounds and voices were not part of the mainstream. She knew that teaching must change.

Despite the contemporary focus on multiculturalism in our society, particularly in education, there is not nearly enough practical discussion of ways classroom settings can be transformed so that the learning experience is inclusive. If the effort to respect and honor the social reality and experiences of groups in this society who are nonwhite is to be reflected in a pedagogical process, then as teachers—on all levels, from elementary to university settings—we must acknowledge that our styles of teaching need to change. Let’s face it: most of us were taught in classrooms where styles of teaching reflected the notion of a single norm of thought and experience, which we were encouraged to believe was universal. This has been just as true for nonwhite teachers as for white teachers. Most of us learned to teach emulating this model. As a consequence, many teachers are disturbed by the political implications of a multicultural education because they fear losing control in a classroom where there is no one way to approach a subject—only multiple ways and multiple references.13

hooks argues that teachers must be prepared for the challenge of transforming their teaching for the sake of their students.

She advocates an “engaged pedagogy,” teaching committed to the betterment of students.

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information, but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.14

hooks’s articulation of engaged pedagogy as a practice of freedom is compatible with the conscientization of Paulo Freire in that it is an act not merely of transmitting information but also of empowerment, a development of agency. But hooks’s definition of empowerment is as much intellectual and spiritual as it is political. Her articulation of the spiritual dimension of teaching has had great influence among theological educators; it lifts the “spiritual” out of the realm of the “private” and “personal” into the context of the learning community.

Engaged pedagogy requires building a classroom community where learning can flourish. hooks writes,

Working with a critical pedagogy based on my understanding of Freire’s teaching, I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build a “community” in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. Rather than focusing on issues of safety, I think that a feeling of community creates a sense that there is a shared commitment and a common good that binds us. What we all ideally share is the desire to learn—to receive actively knowledge that enhances our intellectual development and our capacity to live more fully in the world.15

The creation of such a community places the teacher as a learner alongside the students, each engaging the other in order to come to knowledge. The engagement of teacher as learner alongside students undermines the teacher’s traditional “authority of expertise.” In hooks’s model, the authority of the teacher is used to empower students.

The creation of this learning community requires bringing students into active conversation, empowering them to speak, but also teaching them to listen to one another. The teacher must first value the presence of every person and every voice in the classroom. She must also engage the students in the collective effort of learning, speaking, and listening. The teacher must direct students away from sole attention to her voice or from conversing only through the teacher and encourage them to listen and to respond to one another. The engagement and mutual interest require that all bring excitement and passion into the classroom.

hooks argues that eros and passion are indispensable to fostering a love of learning. hooks’s affirmation of passion stems in part from her feminist denunciation of the mind–body split. Both her teaching and the learning she nurtures are fully embodied; they transform the whole person.

hooks seeks to include all of the voices and perspectives in the classroom. She writes, “knowing from personal experience as a student in predominantly white institutions how easy it is to feel shut out or closed down, I am particularly eager to help create a learning process in the classroom to engage everyone.”16 hooks seeks to bring the multiple voices to contribute to the shared issues at hand, and to enhance the learning experience of the group. When engaged pedagogically, hooks suggests, the telling of experience can help an entire class to better understand the world (facts) and better articulate theory (abstract constructs). In the diverse classroom, different experiences and different ways of knowing contribute to the collective learning effort. hooks’s approach to teaching and learning brings critical and intellectual rigor into engagement with multiple embodied experiences.

13 Ibid., 35–36.

14 Ibid., 13.

15 Ibid., 39–40.

16 Ibid., 86.
An example of hook’s engaged pedagogy seeking to include all voices and to attend to the souls of the students occurred in another seminar on interdisciplinarity. This seminar included a highly educated Kenyan student who was on the verge of preparing his dissertation proposal on the relationships of Christianity, Islam, and Bukusu religions in western Kenya. Patrick faced two challenges in developing his proposal. First, his faculty committee, and indeed his English-speaking audience, were greatly ignorant of Kenyan culture and history; this ignorance made him feel that he had to start from the beginning and explain all of Kenyan culture and history. Second, Patrick’s culture conveyed knowledge in the form of vivid oral stories; he thus wanted to tell us “the story of his dissertation.” The seminar participants and I first had to listen to Patrick’s stories; we had to honor his distinctive voice for developing his ideas. As we listened, we were able to engage him in a conversation that helped him “pour” the substance of his stories (his issues and his passions) into the compact, formal genre of the dissertation proposal. In other words, we helped him to meet the formal requirements of the dissertation proposal without losing his voice or agency, without ceding any of his important and impassioned project.

ENTERING OTHER WORLDS: LEARNING AND IMAGINATION

The diverse classroom of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries challenges not only teachers and the “new” student population but all students of whatever background, for the diversity of the classroom is merely a microcosm of the increasing diversity of the world in which all live and work. Learning in a diverse world requires not merely mastering some set of information but also learning to understand and negotiate areas of human difference, envisioning new ways of being and new possibilities.

Maxine Greene constructs her educational theory on the possibilities of the imagination, building on John Dewey’s Art as Experience. Although she recognizes that there are many models of teaching and learning, she explains her focus on imagination:

One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called “other” over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through the strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions.

Imagination helps us to come to know “the other.” She also cites the role of imagination in breaking out of the given, the taken for granted, what Virginia Woolf called the “cotton wool of daily life.” Greene comments,

All depends on breaking free, a leap, and then a question. I would like to claim that this is how learning happens and that the educative task is to create situations in which the young are moved to begin to ask, in all the tones of voice there are, “Why?”

Imagination is also an important means by which human beings expand the horizons of their world. Greene writes,

Most of us can recall the enclavement mentality of our early lives and their odd provincialism. We were probably convinced that normal people, “nice people,” lived precisely as we did, observed the same rituals, and reacted to events in the same way. It took time before we became acquainted with—and were able to accept—the enormous variety of human lives, the multiplicity of faiths and ways of believing, and the amazing diversity of customs in the world. To come to terms with such additional realities always involves a risk; one many adults are still unwilling to take and to see their children take. If those children do have the imagination to adjust to what they gradually find out about the intersubjective world as they move further and further from the views of their original home, they are bound to reinterpret their early experiences, perhaps to see the course of their lives as carrying out the possible (among numerous possibilities) rather than the necessary.

Imagination, for Greene, is not just the isolated ability to envision bits and pieces of the as-yet unthought, but is rather the faculty that expands our horizons beyond “the given” and opens up a vast realm of alternatives and possibilities. Imagination has an ethical and social dimension; it opens up the realm of alternative ways of being in the world, creating new possibilities for human community.

Releasing the imaginations of students is aided by encounter with works of imagination in the visual and narrative arts. The visual arts often depict a strug-

---


20 Ibid., 20-21
gle for meaning, as artists respond to challenges in their lives or their artistic worlds. Likewise, narrative arts or texts are opportunities to explore worlds of meaning. Human beings seek to shape their life experiences into narratives (stories) as a way of making meanings; we must "inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a 'quest.'” 21

Narratives, or stories, re-present worlds of meaning; as readers we are able to enter narrative worlds and explore the meanings presented therein. In fact, as readers we help to create the world and meanings in the text. While the author shapes the text by means of his values, interests, and agendas, the reader brings her own experiences, agendas, and interests to the act of reading. The reader's preconceptions are, on the one hand, a lens through which she encounters the text and, on the other hand, are engaged, stretched, or challenged by what she encounters in the text.

Narratives invite us both to enter new realms of experience in the stories told by others, and to construct our own meaning and identity through the elaboration and refinement of our own stories. Storytelling is itself a mode of knowing ourselves and opening ourselves to the stories of others. Feminists and liberation theologians have developed forms of knowing based on personal and collective narratives. Moreover, narrative ethicists have recognized narrative as a key form of moral discourse. Thus the "narrative" knowing Greenee celebrates has made its way into several disciplines. 22

Greenee's commitment to narrative, the arts, and imagination presupposes education as understanding, not simply as the assimilation of facts. Learners must enter other worlds and engage other perspectives in conversation.

Many teachers and learners have had extraordinary experiences of the power of imagination in the arts or in narratives to help learners enter other worlds and broaden their horizons. One vivid memory from my own teaching life goes back to an honors course I taught at IU in the early 1980s entitled "Sage and Society in Confucian China." Teaching Confucianism to undergraduates at IU was no mean challenge; these young adults were just asserting their independence of family, and they were by no means ready to engage the Chinese family system or the values of filial piety. After having them read several novels about Chinese families, I asked them to compose a letter from a Confucian father on his death bed, offering his words of wisdom and advice to his family. These young students had never before thought of themselves as parents, or imagined what it would be like to be old, looking back on one's life. The imaginative exercise lifted them out of their present situation and gave them a chance to see life, family, and values from a different generational, religious, and cultural perspective. They all reported that the exercise helped them to see the world from a different point of view.

22 I am grateful to James Bruteke, S.J., for raising this point (personal communication, June 6, 2002).

**REALCULTURATION: LEARNING AS COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATION ACROSS LINES OF DIFFERENCE**

Kenneth Bruffee has articulated a process by which students from diverse backgrounds can be reacculturated into the broader world of academic discourse. Bruffee relates how as a young assistant professor in 1971 he brashly agreed to become Director of Freshman English during the first year of open admissions at Brooklyn College. He sets the scene:

In open admissions, some 20,000 new students, many of them lacking the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics needed for college work, entered the City University of New York. These new students challenged the university's faculty in ways that often far exceeded the experience, training, and expectations of scholars and scientists bred in the quiet intensity of library carrels and research labs. To most of us it felt like a rout.23

In increasing desperation, Bruffee gathered a group of New York area faculty also faced with the challenge of teaching Freshman English in the unprecedented classroom environment of the 1970s. His conversations with these colleagues led him to re-conceive fundamentally his model of college learning. Shifting from more traditional models of socialization, "finishing," or "refinement," Bruffee came to understand the classroom as a site of reacculturation.24 The freshmen, he noted,

 talked, wrote, and behaved in a manner that was perfectly correct and acceptable within the community they were currently members of. . . . Our job as teachers was not in the first instance to "correct" them. . . . Our job as teachers was to find ways to begin and to sustain a much more difficult, painful, and problematical process. . . . [I]t was to find out how, in some way and in some measure, to reacculturate the students who had been placed in our charge.25

That is to say, the professor reacculturates students into the world of academic learning, of the disciplines, of higher education, of critical conversation. The communities the students brought to their college experience were limited, as all

24 James Bretzke clarifies the correct usage of the term "acculturation" (“Cultural Particularity and the Globalisation of Ethics in Light of Enculturazione,” Pacifica 9 [February 1996]: 79). Enculturation (or sometimes enculturazione) refers to the initial insertion of an individual into his or her native culture. Acculturation refers to the cultural change or adaptation that occurs when individuals from two different cultures meet. Bretzke would thus say that Bruffee is discussing enculturation.
25 Bruffee, Collaborative Learning. 5 (italics in original).
communities are. They in turn limited the possibilities and the opportunities of the students:

Their worlds were closed by walls of words. To be acculturated26 to those perfectly valid and coherent but entirely local communities alone had severely limited their freedom. It had prepared them for social, political, and economic relations of only the narrowest sort. It had closed them out of relations with other communities, including the broader, highly diverse, integrated American (or for that matter, international) community at large represented in a perhaps minor, but (from their point of view) not insignificant way by a job at the telephone company [which required demonstrated facility in standard English]. One result of this exclusively local acculturation appeared to be that many of our students could not discover their own buried potential and could not achieve the more economically viable and vocationally satisfying lives they aspired to.27

So, while teachers need to understand and engage the particular worlds from which their students come, their aim as teachers is to help students enter broader worlds of conversation, understanding, and opportunity, to enable them to discover their potential as learners and to develop the skills needed to achieve their life goals. What a liberal education offers, Bruffee argues, is "having acquired something of the linguistic flexibility needed to negotiate the boundaries of diverse knowledge communities."28

Bruffee and his colleagues turned to the writings of Paulo Freire and the feminists, who were using educational strategies to raise consciousness and empower persons to be effective in broader spheres of action. Freire and others helped them to envision a pedagogy of reacculturation. Bruffee writes,

We learned first that reacculturation is at best extremely difficult to accomplish... What does seem just possible to accomplish is for people to reacculturate themselves by working together. That is, there is a way to sever, weaken, or renegotiate our ties to one or more of the communities we belong to and at the same time gain membership in another community. We can do that if, and it seems in most cases only if, we work collaboratively. What we have to do, it appears, is to organize or join a temporary support or transition group on the way to our goal, as we undergo the trials of changing allegiance from one community to another.29

Upon reflection, Bruffee and his colleagues realized this is precisely how they had handled the challenge of fundamentally rethinking the teaching of Freshman English. By extension, this should work for their students.

26 Bretzke would say "enculturated" ("Cultural Particularity and the Globalisation of Ethics," 79).
27 Bruffee, Collaborative Learning, 6-7 (bracketed material inserted).
28 Ibid., 158.
29 Ibid., 7-8.

Bruffee proposes that the teacher reconstitute the class into small collaborative learning groups of, optimally, four students each. The teacher assigns the groups collaborative tasks of reading, conversation, and writing. Students would gradually learn to vest authority and trust in this group, and through the group in the class as a whole, and from that class (through the unobtrusive modeling and facilitation of the teacher) in the learning community into which they are being introduced. The small groups (and the larger class) engage in conversations at the boundaries between the communities from which the students came and the community of knowledge into which they are being invited.

The students in the collaborative group come from different learning communities: in fact, each student participates in several communities based on home, church, school, and clubs, to name a few. Bruffee writes,

This increased awareness of community boundaries is key to students' development in collaborative learning... They find, invent, or borrow transitional terms with which to mediate differences at the boundaries among the several nested groups they are members of. As they do so—indeed, in order to do so—they tend to soften these differences and penetrate those boundaries... By helping one another feel more comfortable in crossing these boundaries, they initiate one another into the larger discourse communities they are joining. But they do not so much abandon the knowledge communities they were raised in as learn how to negotiate new relationships with those familiar old communities they were raised in, while at the same time negotiating their way into new communities a college education invites them to join.30

The task of the collaborative group is translation: first, the creation of transitional or border languages to assist the students in moving from their prior languages of knowledge to the language of the "larger" learning community, and then practicing and gaining facility in the language and mores of this new community until each learner has internalized it for his own use. For the collaboration of these transitional communities to be educationally effective, Bruffee notes, students must learn to vest confidence and authority not solely or even primarily in the teacher, but in their peers and ultimately in themselves. They have to develop confidence in the collaborative process, in the power of conversation.

Bruffee affirms and builds on Richard Rorty's understanding of knowledge as socially justified belief. Rorty argued for a shift from knowledge in relation to objects (epistemology) to knowledge in relationship to understanding confirmed in conversation or argument with peers (hermeneutics). Knowledge, for Rorty, was primarily a matter of conversation and social practice.31 He wrote,

If... we think of "rational certainty" as a matter of victory in argument rather than of relation to an object known, we shall look toward our inter-

30 Ibid., 47.
locutors rather than to our faculties for the explanation of the phenomenon. If we think of our certainty about the Pythagorean Theorem as our confidence, based on experience with arguments on such matters, that nobody will find an objection to the premises from which we infer it, then we shall not seek to explain it by relation of reason to triangularity. Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons.32

The language of a knowledge community constitutes the techniques and discursive practices by which it justifies its beliefs. Thus, learning the language of the broader knowledge community gives learners access to the justification of its beliefs.33

The radical implication of Rorty’s position, which Bruffee endorses, is that knowledge is socially constructed, not something already in the world to be discovered; it is nonfoundational. Rorty distinguishes collaborative learning tasks from “foundational” learning tasks, tasks such as jigsaw puzzles, with a predetermined right answer reached by following a predetermined method. Tasks appropriate to collaborative learning are, by contrast, “nonfoundational, constructional, tool-making tasks.” There is no single right answer, but a variety of responses that will be constructed by the collaborative work of the students.34

The shift to nonfoundational, socially constructed knowledge requires us all to learn a new language, new habits of thinking.

Teaching for reenculturation, then, requires that the teacher trust the collaborative learning process. Although teachers are trained in and represent the learning community of their disciplines, their authority as teachers lies more in their role as translators who can help mediate between the several languages of knowledge communities brought by the students and the language of the community of knowledge the students are invited to enter. The authority of professors as scholars in their disciplines lies in their mastery of the discipline’s central discourse, but their authority as teachers lies in their skill at the boundaries between their disciplines and the many worlds from which their students come. Bruffee writes,

Mere chemists have to be able to talk comprehensibly as chemists with other chemists and, on occasion, perhaps, to a physicist, astronomer, biologist, or lawyer. Teachers of college and university chemistry also have to be able to talk comprehensibly as chemists with all the Trekkies, romance novel readers, canoers, computer hackers, fast-food restaurant assistant managers, and football players who aspire to become chemists or at least learn something about chemistry.35

Bruffee, then, urges teachers to be translators and facilitators, willing to work at the boundaries between learning communities and to help the students to collabor-orate to create transitional languages in order to enter the larger learning community. He urges them to design collaborative learning tasks and then to interfere as little as possible with the small groups, letting the social construction of knowledge follow its course.

His approach to teaching entails the encouragement and facilitation of conversation, first actual and then internalized within the students, which will result in their learning a new way of thinking and speaking—not merely the “jargon” and “vocabulary” of a discipline but the fluency of its language and its forms of justification of belief.

Bruffee’s articulation of the process of collaborative learning is extraordinarily helpful in the classroom. Long before I read his book, I was searching for ways to help timid or passive undergraduates engage Chinese texts and religious ideas in classes of forty to fifty students. I learned to assign students to write a brief interpretation of a passage informally in preparation for class, and I then have them discuss their papers in groups of three or four for at least thirty minutes before turning to plenary discussion. The written assignment assured that shy students had articulated their ideas, committing them to paper before appearing in class. The small group discussions taught students that there were a range of interpretations and that they could learn from one another, honing their ideas and sharpening their language through conversation. This conversation among the students enabled them to develop language by means of which they could interpret the texts. These collaborative exercises not only sharpened each student’s understanding of the text, but it also helped them voice their ideas or their questions. It helped them transcend their paralysis before a text that seemed to them too strange to be understood.

CONCLUSION

The educational theorists in this chapter all responded to the implications of the increasingly diverse classrooms of the late twentieth century. Although they focused on different issues, their work collectively highlights six critical aspects of learning in a diverse world: (1) building on the diversity of learners’ experiences; (2) empowering learners by developing voice and agency; (3) entering other worlds through art and narrative so that learners broaden their horizons and cross boundaries; (4) engaging understanding and interpretation, not merely the mastery of information; (5) developing linguistic flexibility through conversation—speaking, listening, and constructing new knowledge; (6) establishing community and relationships to act effectively in the world.

As noted in the preface, these educational theories do not represent the full spectrum of educational ideas. They are, however, approaches that can be particularly helpful in articulating the process of Christians learning another religion. We next turn to the field of comparative religions, in which the issues involved in understanding religious difference have been debated and addressed.
Learning Religions

The field of the study of religions, usually called comparative religions or religious studies, takes as its subject matter the diverse religious traditions of mankind. Although cultural exchange has drawn human beings into contact with other religions for millennia, the formal study of other religions is relatively recent. In Europe Max Müller announced the imminent creation of a new field, or more precisely a new "science," in a lecture in 1870:

A Science of Religion, based on an impartial and truly scientific comparison of all, or at all events, of the most important, religions of mankind, is now only a question of time . . . It becomes therefore the duty of those who have devoted their life to the study of the principal religions of the world in their original documents, and who value religion and reverence it in whatever form it may present itself, to take possession of this new territory in the name of true science.¹

Although the nascent field was shaped by the values, assumptions, biases, and agendas of its Victorian, liberal Christian founders, it brought into academic and public discourse the issues of religious otherness. As the field has evolved over the last 130-odd years, scholars have continued to develop methods for understanding religious difference.

This chapter addresses four themes in the study of religions that are of particular relevance to this book: (1) religious context and particularity; (2) the importance of difference; (3) the intersubjective as the aspect of religions accessible to study; and (4) power and human relationships in the study of religions. Throughout the chapter I will move rather seamlessly from the scholar's study of religions to the student's learning of religions. Granted, scholars must be concerned with research methods and hold themselves to rigorous standards of linguistic, textual, and cultural competence, but they are still learning religions. The principles for


scholars and learners are fundamentally the same, at least on the nontechnical level discussed in this chapter. The last section of the chapter will draw out general principles for learning other religions and relate them to the principles of teaching and learning discussed in the previous chapter.

BEYOND "SCIENCE":
RELIGIOUS CONTEXT AND PARTICULARITY

In the decade leading up to Max Müller's lecture, the study of religions was fundamentally changed when the concept of evolution burst onto the European intellectual scene. Science and evolution challenged the Christian churches' acceptance of divine revelation in its literal biblical form. Science and evolution were seen as threats to the foundation of Christian faith and civilization because they challenged biblical views of creation and human history.

European intellectuals sought to reconcile the ideas of science and evolution with views of the superiority of European civilization and religion. Darwin's evolutionary theories were rather crudely applied by sociologists and anthropologists to place human societies along an evolutionary scale from primitive, childlike societies to civilized, mature societies such as those in Europe. Early theorists of totemism and magic sought the "origins" of religion in "primitive" or "childlike" forms that eventually matured or flourished into theistic and finally monotheistic religions. The religious beliefs and practices of various cultures were painted with a very broad brush, placing them along the scholars' evolutionary scale. Some theorists assumed that the "form" or "stage" of religion reflected the stage of cultural development.

In liberal Christian circles of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christian views were largely reconciled to evolutionary thinking by a shift in the understanding of revelation. Instead of viewing revelation as fixed in the Bible, God was understood as revealing God's self in history, not only in biblical times but continuously. Such a view allowed for an evolution of Christian thinking and for the accommodation of historical and cultural change. It also allowed for a more sympathetic view of other religions.

The early shapers of the study of religions all hailed from this liberal Christian camp. While they shared a commitment to the rigorous study of religion based on extensive knowledge of religious texts, they also saw themselves as theologians first and foremost. They shared the belief of Nathan Soderblom that "every scientific study of religion, provided that it is carried out with competence and directed toward a worthy object, must—with or against the will of the scholar, consciously or unconsciously—serve the cause of religion."² These liberal Christians saw no ultimate conflict between the thoroughgoing and sympa-

thetic study of other religions and their own Christian faith, for they believed that the scientific application of reason would ultimately vindicate Christianity.\(^3\)

Thus, the early practice of the "science" of religion posited broad evolutionary principles undergirded by assumptions of the superiority of Western civilization and Christianity. The "scientific" scholar broadly analyzed particular religions, using categories based on Western and Christian culture, as instances of the development of religion (singular) in human civilization. In other words, they constructed a "story of religion" that reinforced their Christian and cultural assumptions. They abstracted religions into essences or objects of study to gain so-called objective knowledge through "scientific methods."\(^4\) This view of "science" has been exposed and critiqued in contemporary philosophy of science.

In the past fifty years, scholars of religions have turned away from the search for grand patterns in the development of religion, recognizing both that they mask hidden agendas of cultural and religious superiority and that they fail to do justice to particular religions in their historical and cultural contexts. In part this was the result of a growing knowledge of particular religions; increasing numbers of scholars, both Western and non-Western, studied the texts, histories, and practices of various religious traditions and historical contexts. Increasing knowledge of religious and cultural particularities undermined the credibility of broad patterns across religions.

Some scholars specialized in area studies, studying one particular religious context, learning its language, culture, and history in depth, with no attention to the broader history of religions or the general issues of understanding religious difference. Others, however, sought to ground the comparative study of religions in historical contexts, insisting that its purpose was not the generation of general laws or patterns of religion but rather the interpretation of human meaning.

Jonathan Z. Smith is one of the most influential voices for the comparative study of religions. On the one hand, he is a trenchant critic of almost all current practices of comparison, charging that they are more "magical" than scholarly:

[A]s practiced by scholarship, comparison has been chiefly the affair of the recollection of similarity. The chief explanation for the significance of comparison has been contiguity. The procedure is homeopathic. The theory is built on contagion. The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.\(^5\)

Such comparisons are really loose patterns of association emanating from the mind of the scholar.

On the other hand, Smith identifies two principles necessary for sound comparisons. Comparisons must attend first to the historical location and particularity of religions, adequately describing how the various elements of a religion find meaning in their particular context. Second, students of religion need a sophisticated and complex view of the systems or complexes that form a religion. Comparisons that lift a single element out of the historical and systemic context may compare something, but it is not religion. Religion is embedded in the many systems and complexes of a cultural context. Comparative studies of religion have tended to honor one of these principles, Smith claims, but seldom both at the same time. "We have yet to develop a responsible alternative: the integration of a complex notion of pattern and system with an equally complex notion of history."\(^6\)

Jonathan Z. Smith's position seems to suggest that valid comparisons would have to put contextualized, grounded religious meanings (and the beliefs and practices on which they are based) into a mutually critical "conversation." By extension, to understand another religion is to attend to its otherness, to learn what it means to persons in that particular context, and how that meaning is shaped by the context. Wilfred Cantwell Smith makes a related point when he argues that scholarship of religion has turned from merely uncovering material or data to plumbing its human significance:

Not the tribal dance, so much as what happens to the African dancing; not the caste system, so much as what kind of person the Hindu becomes within it, or without it; not the events at Sinai, so much as what role the recouting of those events has played in Jewish life over various centuries since.\(^7\)

Both Smiths, Jonathan Z. and Wilfred Cantwell, understand religion as grounded in the particular historical contexts. Jonathan Z. tends to stress the large picture, the "systems and complexes" that form religion in a particular context, while Wilfred Cantwell tends to stress the role of religion in human lives. The latter writes, "The faith of Buddhists does not lie in the data of the Buddhist tradition; it lies ... in what tradition means to people; in what the universe means to them, in light of that tradition."\(^8\) Together the two Smiths represent well the move among scholars of religion to stress that religion is always grounded in and shaped by a particular context.

Historically grounded religions naturally change and evolve as contexts change; they are not fixed or static. Moreover, they are internally diverse, as there are multiple "contexts" or perspectives within any religion. This is dramatically true of "world" religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity, which have adapted to and been influenced by a variety of cultural and historical contexts.

---

\(^3\) My discussion of the history of the field of comparative religions to this point is deeply indebted to Sharpe's account in *Comparative Religion*.


\(^6\) Ibid., 29.


\(^8\) Ibid., 47.
But all religions, however geographically limited, are internally diverse because their members are older and younger, male and female, rich and poor, powerful and ordinary, pious or casual about religion. One cannot understand Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or Shinto as a whole; each of these contains diverse voices, perspectives, practices, and experiences.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith helpfully distinguishes between the vast “cumulative tradition” of, say, Buddhism and the fragment of it represented by any particular person, text, or group we might study:

We have here an historical involvement, a complex: formed by a continuing interaction of personal faith, on the one hand, and, on the other, of certain things which I call dynamically a “cumulative tradition,” meaning by “tradition” quite literally that array of observables that is handed on. . . . That segment of the cumulative tradition that is available and germane to any particular Buddhist person or group constitutes the Buddhist context of their life.9

This point is important at several levels and provides an apt way of summarizing the implications of historical particularity in the study of religions.

First, the cumulative tradition of a religion is too vast and internally diverse (historically, culturally, socially) to be neatly summarized. It contains many voices, perspectives, moments, and disagreements in the historical development of a tradition. Thus, succinct summaries of any religion are misleading and mask the richness and diversity of the religion. Second, any particular group, person, or text represents only a particular piece of the vast cumulative tradition. It does not speak for the religion as a whole. On the other hand, the very location of the group, person, or text, once acknowledged and understood, shapes the meanings of religious life and belief in that context. In other words, the localizedness of a religious voice provides a genuine perspective on the religion, but it is never the only perspective on the religion. Third, because of the particularity and localizedness of voices, understanding another religion will require engagement with the multiple voices and perspectives of the religion. We can never engage with all of the voices, but engagement with multiple voices provides a fuller and more nuanced understanding of a religion in its internal diversity.

BEYOND EMPATHY: THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENCE

Early scholars of the new field worried about how to extend adequate sympathy in their study of other religions. John Nicol Farquhar wrote,

An unsympathetic student of the Gospels inevitably misinterprets them; and the same is true of an unsympathetic student of the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, or the Puranas. The attitude of the great scholars of the West to Hindu literature ought to be the ideal of every Missionary. I do not mean that he will necessarily praise what they praise and condemn what they condemn; let him adopt their attitude of mind, their patience, their eagerness to understand even that which is furthest away from their own concepts, and the penetrating sympathy which enables them to look at an ancient text with the eyes of those who first read it.10

Farquhar aspires to the ideal of empathy: adopting the attitude of mind, patience, and eagerness of the other to “look at an ancient text with the eyes of those who first read it.” He sought, as some might say today, to “walk a thousand miles in their mocassins.”

However, well intentioned, the ideal of empathy is problematic, for it severely underestimates the challenge of understanding across lines of difference. Empathy, looking with the eyes of another, is impossible. The point is articulated well by anthropologist Clifford Geertz. The ethnographer (or scholar of religions) “does not, and in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive ‘with’—or ‘by means of,’ or ‘through’ . . . or whatever the word should be.”11 He reports on his own experience. “In each case, I have tried to get at [cross-cultural understanding] not by imagining myself someone else, a rice peasant or a tribal sheik, and then seeing what I thought, but by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another.”12

In place of sympathy or empathy, seeing myself as the other—and thus still looking through my own cultural and experiential lenses—it is important to attend to the particular words, images, and behaviors through which the other represents himself. How is meaning expressed, lived out, understood, and articulated in the context I am seeking to understand? Attending to the particular words, images, and behaviors important in the other context helps me to acknowledge the particularity, the difference, of the religion I am trying to understand.

In the last chapter, we quoted Maxine Greene’s statement that imagination makes empathy possible.

It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called “other” over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through the strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capacities,

9 Ibid., 24-25.
12 Ibid., 58.
imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternate realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions.13

Greene’s concept of empathy is carefully nuanced. If one attends only to the first two sentences of this quotation, she seems to be advocating the “empathy” or “sympathy” expressed by Farquhar. However, Greene qualifies her position in two important ways: learners have to receive clues from others, and their imaginative grasp will always be partial. It is important to attend to the clues (the particular language, behaviors, symbols) that the other provides so as to attempt to understand the distinctive difference of the other. Further, it is important to recognize that we can only understand “in some manner,” to a certain degree.

Jonathan Z. Smith, as we saw, criticized many scholars of religions for focusing solely on similarities, lifting out of context threads or themes that seemed familiar to them in some other religion and forgetting the differences. Clifford Geertz would agree with Smith on that point, and he has significantly influenced scholars of religion in his call for “thick description” of religious beliefs and practices as they are embedded in their social contexts. But description in itself is not enough. One can understand the other religion only by engaging the distinctive language, practices, and behaviors to see how people make meaning of them in their particular context. This is, Geertz notes, a matter of interpretation or hermeneutics. He writes,

I am not engaged in a deductive enterprise in which a whole structure of thought and practice is seen to flow, according to some implicit logic or other, from a few general ideas, sometimes called postulates, but in a hermeneutic one—one in which such ideas are used as a more or less handy way into understanding the social institutions and cultural formulations that surround them and give them meaning.14

As the scholar attends to the distinctive language, patterns, and behavior in the context, she gradually sees or hears how these characteristics are given meaning in that context. The distinctive language or behaviors become the “handles” around which understanding begins to emerge. The difference or foreignness of the language or behavior underscores the challenge of understanding, the gap between the learner’s prior experience and this religious other. Attending to the differences, the gap, illustrates what needs to be learned; it challenges the learner to grapple with new words, behaviors, and meanings until some degree of understanding begins to emerge. A learner’s tentative and initial understanding of a religion must be subject to correction by the specific texts, terms, and distinctive perspectives of the religion. That requires attention to and respect for difference.

---

14 Geertz, Local Knowledge, 186-87.

---

BEYOND THE RELIGIOUS MIND: WHAT ASPECTS OF RELIGION CAN BE STUDIED?

Some scholars of religion have focused their attention on subjective states of the religious person. As one scholar wrote, “Let us never forget that there exists no other reality than the faith of the believer.”15 Two influential scholars sought to articulate the distinctive feelings or consciousness of the religious person. Rudolf Otto argued that religious experience lay in the awe experienced in the face of the numinous, the mysterium tremendum, which was wholly other. His book The Idea of the Holy attained nearly canonical status for early-twentieth-century students of religion.16 Mircea Eliade was also enormously influential for his vast scholarship on the religious person, or homo religiosus, who experiences hierophanies, irruptions of the sacred into the world of the profane.17 Although Eliade has been criticized on a number of grounds, his vast corpus has a wide readership among students of religion intent upon understanding the religious mind. In part this reflects the interest among students of religion in religious experience, a set of feelings, or a particular form of consciousness.

The problem with such approaches is that learners do not have access to feelings or forms of consciousness of others. They cannot directly engage their faith, their experience, their awe, their hierophanies. They can only engage what people say or write about such experiences or witness their behavior during such experiences. Thus, Gavin Flood argues that religion can be studied only by means of “intersubjective performance in which consciousness is not central.”18 By intersubjective performance, Flood means such items as ritual structure and performed narratives, those aspects of religious life that are central to its cultural expression and are communicated among persons. While some argue that such cultural expressions are the only appropriate data of the human and social sciences, Flood argues for a dialogical and interpretive approach to the study of religious meaning. He cites Mikhail Bakhtin in arguing that our only access to the consciousness of others is dialogical. Bakhtin wrote, “The consciousness of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things—one can only relate to them dialogically. To think about them means to talk with them.”19 Flood sees research and study as a conversation with texts and persons.

---

17 Although his corpus is vast, the idea of homo religiosus was famously introduced in his classic The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1959).
18 Flood, Beyond Phenomenology, 107-8.
19 Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 68, cited in Flood, Beyond Phenomenology, 111.
The criticism of the study of religious consciousness serves to remind students of religion about the limits of their sources for the understanding of religions. We have access only to cultural expressions of religion: statements, writings, practices, artifacts, and symbols. We do not have access to internal states of mind, nor to the sacred or other ultimate realities that these religions claim. We learn what religious persons believe, say, and do, and how they express the significance of religion in their lives.

BEYOND THE POSTS: POWER AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

The movement of peoples across the globe and the changing demography of higher education in the United States had a significant impact on the study of religions. On a very practical level, faculty who taught world’s religions suddenly found that representatives of those religions were present in the classroom; they were not simply teaching Christians and Jews about religions elsewhere in the world. The learning community of the classroom was itself religiously diverse. Over time, the broader representation in higher education in the United States and abroad produced new directions in scholarship—scholarship representing voices and points of view previously underrepresented in the academy. This representative scholarship raised new issues for the study of religions, challenging traditional assumptions and practices.

One set of challenges came from a group of scholars often identified as post-colonialists. As former colonies achieved independence, they produced their own scholars, who were sharply critical of Euroamerican scholarship examining their cultures. They criticized anthropologists, who, like scholars of religions, study the values, beliefs, and practices of many cultures. The analytical eye of anthropology, they noted, was not turned upon mainstream European and North American cultures; anthropology studied only “the other,” those considered inferior to “us.” Moreover, anthropologists in the field treated those they studied as “objects” rather than as collaborators, extracting information and then producing explanations “nonsensical” in the eyes of their informants. Although anthropologists entered communities and lived in them temporarily to conduct fieldwork, their scholarship did not treat the people with whom they lived and worked as partners, and their work did not reflect the voices of their informants.

The same charges were easily extended to the study of religions. Studies of


Christianity were conducted under the rubric of history and theology, sometimes of sociology, but “comparative religion” tended to be reserved for “other” religions. And yet, many noted, the categories used by comparativists almost all reflected Christian (and, even more, Protestant) understandings of “religion.” Many comparativists still limited their study to religious texts, and their interpretations of those texts, while philologically rigorous, were often cast in the interpretive categories of “Western” understandings of religion. Had comparative religionists been engaged in constructing “others” as less mature versions of themselves?

Edward Said’s Orientalism raised serious issues about the study of Near Eastern and Asian religions by Europeans and North Americans. In this volume, he traces and analyzes a British and French (and later American) tradition of scholars studying “the Orient” and its traditions. Said argues that the development of scholarship on religions was closely tied to the imperial designs and intentions of European powers and later the United States. Indeed, Said argues that all scholarship is embedded in time and culture and that scholars need to be more attentive to the ways in which their scholarship is shaped by and contributes to the social, political, and economic context in which it is produced.

Said lists four main characteristics of orientalism: (1) positing an absolute and systematic difference between West (superior) and East (inferior); (2) favoring abstractions about the Orient based on classical texts rather than evidence drawn from the contemporary Orient; (3) assuming that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself, thus requiring Western scholarship to interpret and re-present it; (4) working on the assumption that the Orient is either something to be feared (the Yellow Peril) or controlled (by occupation or research).

Postcolonialism and orientalism seek to disclose the hidden power assumptions in research on and study of others by those in the West. These scholars suggest that knowledge has been used as a form of mastery, either to control subjugated peoples (as in the colonial era) or to define “us” as culturally superior to them, thus shoring up our sense of privilege. It is also a form of mastery because the Western orientalist scholar presumes to speak for the other, who remains voiceless and disenfranchised, and the Western student believes that the Western scholar’s interpretation gives one a coherent grasp of (hold on) the other. The colonialist and orientalist scholars rely on ancient texts in their libraries believed to capture the early (and thus “true”) teachings of the religion; they do not offer their armchair reconstructions for correction by the living adherents of the religions. While some of the postcolonial and orientalist charges can be exaggerated or overblown, they nonetheless highlight serious issues that the field has sought to address.

A second challenge comes from a vast literature collectively termed “postmodernism.” The meaning and even appropriateness of the term are the subject of heated and ongoing debates, and I do not wish to wade into that minefield.

Here I need only lift up a few of the issues that have significant implications (and challenges) for the study of religions.

Postmodernism is suspicious of grand narratives and universals (essences, patterns, metaphysical foundations), favoring instead particularity and difference. Postmodernists see in the postulation of universals a claim to power and domination, an attempt to ignore, erase, or efface the difference of exceptions or nondominant voices. This suspicion of universals and grand narratives mitigates against the postulation of universal patterns or general laws in comparative religion and tends to support those who argue for the differences among religions, emphasizing their irreducible distinctiveness. Taken to its extreme, postmodernism would deny the possibility of understanding other religions.

The celebration of difference and the particular also challenges any notion of a unitary religious tradition. Postmodernists would stress the tensions, debates, and differences within "a tradition" both across history and at any given moment. Thus "Buddhism," "Hinduism," and "Islam" are disclosed as essentializations of what are, in fact, contended and diverse traditions with a plethora of views and practices. Feminist studies and social history have also challenged conventional definitions of tradition. Are we to rely on authoritative texts and views of religious authorities, or will we better understand religion through popular devotional practices, folktales and popular literature, the arts, or local variations of beliefs and practices?

Postmodernism requires a critical reading of texts—both actual texts and "cultural" texts such as practices—looking for the fissures, the gaps, what is not said, and always asking questions about power and voice. By whom was the text produced and for what purpose? What was left out? Who was silenced in order to produce the text? And what interests do the omitted or silenced materials represent? Students of religion are challenged not to take religions at face value but to observe shrewdly how different interests are represented or suppressed at every turn.

Postcolonialism, taken to an extreme, can intimidate Western scholars or students from engaging other religions. Postmodernism, taken to an extreme, can make such studies difficult, if not impossible. The picture can be bleakly painted:

The substantial and often well-founded charges brought against the comparative method are many: intellectual imperialism, universalism, theological foundationalism, and anti-contextualism. In particular, the work of Mircea Eliade, the late doyen of history of religions, is held to be unremarkable, based as it is on a vision of a universal, transcendent "sacred" refracted in the ritual and mythic behavior of a cross-cultural archetype called Homo religiosus.24

However, scholars of religion, while acknowledging the merit of some of the charges against past practices, have sought to redefine their principles and practices so as to navigate a channel between the errors of nineteenth-century "scientific" study, on the one hand, and the errors exposed by postcolonialism and postmodernism, on the other.

The new approaches include the principles we have already discussed: attention to historical particularity and to difference, and adopting a dialogical and interpretive approach through engaging conversationally with the voices or situated narratives of religions. However, "beyond the post" scholars also attend to issues of power. First, the situatedness of the scholar or learner, on the one hand, and of the voices of religion on the other. What shapes or constrain the assumptions, views, and actions of both parties? What motivations allow them to engage in mutual conversation? Second, scholars of religion do not presume to speak for the religions they study. They listen to many voices of adherents and have their views corrected. They propose no grand narratives, universal laws, or hard and fast conclusions. Their knowledge is always provisional, nonfinal, merely an interpretation.25 Third, they respect difference as a way of respecting the voices and perspectives of others. Those perspectives are not reducible to any broad unity that would erase distinctive perspectives. Fourth, they seek to work collaboratively and dialogically with representatives of other religions. "For scholars of religion this means taking seriously the fact that there are people on both sides, all sides, of the process of understanding."26 Finally, they recognize an ethical dimension in the study of religions, both in the breaking down of stereotypes of the "other" and in engaging the moral issues that face other communities, not speaking for them but standing with them.27

The purpose of the "beyond the post" study of religions is "not to reach closure in service of a particular theory, nor to achieve moral judgment or to gain intellectual control over the 'other,' but to empower mutual dialogue and the quest for understanding... not to create more generic patterns of the sacred in support of grand theories but to enlarge our understanding of religion in all of its variety and, in the process, to gain renewed insight into ourselves and others."28

---

25 Ibid., 4.
28 Ibid., 17-18.
Learning Religions

Learning Religions and Learning Theory

The discussion in this chapter has extended the principles of learning theory discussed in the last chapter into the field of learning religions; the various issues and principles raised dovetail and inform each other.

The diverse ways of learning discussed by Howard Gardner and Mary Field Belenky's team resonate with the diverse voices and perspectives that must be recognized and engaged in another religion. Not only do learners bring their diverse voices, experiences, and human particularities, but they encounter diverse voices, experiences, and particularities in those whom they engage from other religions.

The empowerment of voice and agency advocated by Freire and hooks resonates with the respect for the voices, subjectivities, and agencies of persons from other religions advocated by contemporary scholars of religion. As learners are being encouraged to develop their voices and new patterns of effective behavior, they are also respecting the voices and the agency of those whom they engage in the learning process.

Greene's ideas of broadening horizons and entering other worlds through imagination by means of conversation, art, and narrative resonate with the dialogical approach to the study of religion through mutual critical conversation with persons or narratives articulated by Flood and others. Only through such conversation and engagement of narratives can the gap of difference be gradually and partially bridged.

Bruffee's notion of learning through collaborative conversation helps articulate how the dialogical process articulated by Flood and others might play out in the classroom.

If we seek to interweave the principles discussed in this chapter with those that concluded the previous chapter, we might have something like the following.

Learning religions in a diverse world entails:

1. Building on the diversity of learners' experiences while respecting the internal diversity and multiple perspectives of religions studied
2. Empowering learners by developing voice and agency while also teaching them to respect the voices and agencies of those whom they engage in study
3. Entering other worlds through art, text, or narrative so that learners engage difference and particularity while acknowledging their own and others' social locations
4. Engaging understanding and interpretation of the distinctive ways in which religions represent themselves, and not merely the mastery of ungrounded information

Religions have too often been presented as a few key teachings or practices, or one moment or instance in the religion's history. Often the period of the "founder" has been presented as though it defined the entire religion. Teachers and learners are challenged to engage multiple voices and contexts. On a very different level, teachers today often find in their classrooms representatives of the religions they are teaching. For example, Buddhist students may have learned their Buddhism from family practices and a few festivals, rather than from the canonical texts and philosophical ideas the teacher has studied. Thus the teacher and the class are directly confronted with two very different fragmentary perspectives on the cumulative tradition of Buddhism.

As students first encounter another religion they may be tempted to focus solely on similarity to lift up and hang onto ideas, terms, practices, or symbols that seem familiar—just like x. This is a perfectly understandable reaction, but it represents the sort of "magical" comparison criticized by Jonathan Z. Smith. While some students may pull back from the strangeness of the other religion, others may rush to imagine themselves as Buddhists. Geertz alerts us to have all students engage the distinctive terms, symbols, institutions, and practices of the other religion—the ways in which the religion represents itself. Students often resist the strange terms and symbols, but it is precisely in wrestling with the strangeness that understanding will begin to emerge; they need to engage the language of the other community before they can develop what Bruffee would call their transitional languages and linguistic flexibility in negotiating broader communities. Flood also considers this negotiation and suggests that understanding is developed in mutually critical conversation with voices, texts, or narratives of the other religion so that students can engage and gradually narrow the gap between their world and the world of the other religion.

Clarity about what aspects of religion can actually be studied also has substantial ramifications for the classroom. Many students are fascinated by the sacred (or Brahman, or the Dao), by enlightenment, mystical states, or religious experience. Such topics are, of course, central to the study of other religions, but teachers and learners need always to keep in mind that they can only access what people say, write, make, or do about or in response to the sacred or religious experience.

Finally, the response to the "posts" has had its impacts on the teaching and learning of religions. It has inspired teachers to invite more spokespersons from the religions into the classroom or to include visits to religious sites as part of learning. It has encouraged the use of novels, books, and films by adherents of traditions to ensure that many voices of the tradition are engaged in depth. It has encouraged attention to women's voices and contemporary voices rather than simply to the classics of traditions. It has made teachers less comfortable with offering comprehensive frameworks and schema for interpreting religions, although learners often still ask for such frameworks. It has encouraged teachers to attend to issues of power and justice in both the history of religions and in their contemporary relationships.
5. Developing linguistic flexibility through a mutually critical conversation that engages the languages of all participants, including those of the religions studied.

6. Establishing mutually respectful relationships, learning to stand with others.

Though a bit cumbersome, these six principles will be important in learning other religions. However, before we can articulate the threads of the learning process we need to explore aspects of theological learning: What is at stake for Christians learning other religions?