
Teaching with the *Guide to the Study of Religion**

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This paper and the one by Anne Whitcombe that follows are reflections on the classroom use of the *Guide to the Study of Religion*, edited by Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London/New York: Cassell, 2000). Braun and McCutcheon explicitly intended their book “for students from undergraduate to professional levels” (5-6), so in the Fall 2000 term I girded my loins and assigned it as the sole textbook in the third-year seminar course required of all Honours and Majors students in the Department of Religion and Culture at Wilfrid Laurier University. Anne was one of 15 students enrolled in that course.

Guide to the Study of Religion is a superb collection that merits close attention not only by researchers but also by teachers. College and university teachers need to think seriously about how best to use academic compilations of this nature in the classroom—also, I might add, how to create them in ways that most effectively serve students. Our two papers are meant to reflect the value we see in this particular book, the importance we place on raising pedagogical matters in a public forum, and the recognition that both students and teachers have complementary vantage points. We are grateful to the editor of *ARC* for making room in this journal for adding pedagogy to the rest of scholarship.

* *Editor's Note:* Michel Desjardins is the editor of the AAR Syllabi Project (www.wlu.ca/~wwwaat/home.html).

I begin my paper by teasing out the distinctive components of the *Guide*. Then I turn to its use in our particular classroom: how did I structure the course around this book, and as a result what teaching challenges presented themselves throughout the term? A concluding section offers some reflections and a suggestion directed at those who might consider writing and publishing compilations of this nature.

The *Guide to the Study of Religion*

One way to appreciate the *Guide to the Study of Religion* is to compare it to a sister text published two years earlier: *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998). Both books introduce readers to the field through articles on key terms prepared by a wide range of scholars. Not surprisingly, given their contemporaneity, readers will find some overlap in the selection of terms (i.e., gender, modernity/modernism, rationality, religion, experience, culture, performance/ritual) and contributors (G. Benavides, S. Gill, B. Lincoln, T. Masuzawa, J. Z. Smith). Moreover, J. Z. Smith arises in both as the leading modern spokesperson for the academic study of religion—in his own classificatory articles, in the introductory pieces penned by the editors, and via the articles by S. Gill that explicitly highlight and fine-tune Smith's theory. It is fair to say that those who read both books are likely to emerge with a sense that the academic study of religion today is alive and fluid. That sense is reflected by the editors' selections of traditional and more current terms, from "myth" and "sacrifice" to "performance" and "colonialism," and the positioning of those terms on a historical timeline.

The differences between the books are also noteworthy, particularly when it comes to observing who speaks where about what. The 24 contributors to *Critical Terms* (23 articles) all teach in American institutions, all but five hold senior academic positions, and together they represent a mix of theologians and religious studies scholars, as well as humanists and social scientists from other fields. The publishing house, The University of Chicago Press, has long distinguished itself as one of the leading promoters of religious and mythological studies. Contributors to the *Guide*, on the other hand, come from institutions in America

(19), Canada (8), Scandinavia (2), Africa (1) and Japan (1), almost half of them hold junior positions, and only two can be considered theologians. The editors are both Canadians, and the publishing house, Cassell, is British. Clearly, the *Guide* models a type of inclusivity and boldness about which it also speaks theoretically.

Critical Terms more clearly mirrors the breadth of the field. "Religious studies" here includes scholars whose work assumes the existence of God and those whose work does not, as well as scholars whose research is generated out of different methodological homes, from historical-critical to postmodern. In the words of its editor:

The following essays all reflect the multidisciplinary and multicultural character of contemporary religious studies ... Each author has first analyzed the theoretical importance of a specific term and then examined this term in a particular religious tradition. In working through this volume, readers will discover that methods, cultures, and terms cross and crisscross in constantly changing ways. As lines of affiliation and association unravel and rewind, a shared analytic vocabulary that enables interpreters to discern commonalities without erasing differences will emerge. (18)

The *Guide*, for its part, is both descriptive and *prescriptive*. It describes what scholars of religion have done and continue to do, and it suggests what they ought to do in the future. This book focuses on scholars of religion rather than "religion" or "religious individuals," and insists (R. Stark's contribution being a notable exception) that the category "religion" is "essentially empty, of use only as a marking device" (8). It speaks instead about the "complex social operations by which, and the conditions under which, people discursively bring the gods to life" (11). Moreover, the *Guide* argues that the academic study of religion properly speaking requires the retrieval of "something on the ground, something on the hard surface of social life in time and space, something that counts as data according to the generally shared, scientific evidentiary principles of the modern academy" (9). Quoting J. Z. Smith, Braun states:

Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study ... The object of the scholar's study is not the gods but the complex social operations by which, and the conditions under which, people discursively bring the gods to life ... The religion scholar is thus a social theorist. (10-12)

He then adds:

it is not the gods that make people revere and fear them, but, on the contrary ... people make their gods whom they then revere and fear. To readers who have a popularly mediated knowledge of religion along lines described above, this may sound horrifyingly counter-intuitive, but this is nonetheless the core premise of studying religion in an anthropological key. (13)

A type of gnostic attitude, then, permeates this *Guide*, especially when it is set over against the more comfortable "orthodoxy" of *Critical Terms*: the *Guide* concerns itself with the classic second-century gnostic Christian questions of "where we come from, who we are, and where we are going," while arguing that the dominant ideology in the field is distancing us from our true purpose and home. So it sets out to guide readers to the "proper" way to study of religion. Its chapters tell us as much, if not more, about what the editors and their contributors think is wrong with the field than they do about what they think is right. In Braun's words, this is a book with an "attitude" (7).

Using the *Guide* in the Classroom

How, then, does one use a book like this in an undergraduate classroom? Let me begin by outlining how I designed this particular course with a view to encouraging students to encounter the *Guide*. Then I will comment on the specific learning challenges that emerged for us.

The class met twice a week during a 12-week semester, and 18 of those sessions focused on a particular chapter of the book. Fifteen of those classes were each facilitated by a student who took responsibility for outlining the chapter's main points and engaging us in discussion. A week later I expected from that student a written report which extended their analysis and discussed their pedagogical experience. This elaboration included consulting some of their chapter's "suggested

readings,” and contacting the author via email to solicit feedback. Throughout the term each student in addition was expected to prepare brief chapter summaries of five of the 15 readings. I arranged a class visit by one of the authors (W. E. Arnal, “Definition”), a second by a colleague (C. Duncan) whose area of expertise overlapped with a chapter contribution (“Colonialism”), and planned a third class visit by another contributor, another colleague of mine (R. Grimes), that unfortunately had to be cancelled at the last moment due to illness. In addition, I arranged for three video teleconference sessions: one with an author of a chapter (R. Warne, “Gender”), two with the co-editors (R. McCutcheon and W. Braun, also responsible respectively for chapters on “Myth” and “Religion”).

I designed the course in this manner for several reasons. Among other things, I expected that a book like this—a multi-authored book filled with enough technical terms and insider references to be daunting even to experienced scholars—needed more opportunities than usual to excite students about the material. So I planned for each person to take personal responsibility for at least one class, then added to that requirement those class visits by scholars, email exchanges with authors, and video teleconferences. I also wanted to model the book’s focus on individual scholars of religion by having the students themselves engage as many scholars, as directly as possible—appreciating, for instance, that situation often influences rhetoric, and that interacting with the person behind the words creatively multiplies the hermeneutical questions. In addition, I hoped that requiring five written chapter summaries from each student, to be submitted at the beginning of the class dealing with the chapter in question, would help generate informed discussion.

What were the results? “Putting a face to the scholar” worked well, partly because of the quality of the people whom the students met, and partly because of the new technology: video teleconferencing is certainly the next best thing to having a scholar visit the class, and in some respects the allure of the new technology, coupled with a safe distance from the scholar, created equally exciting learning experiences for us. The email exchanges worked well for some students, but not so well for others; that is to be expected, and depends on the degree of

preparation by each student and the generosity of each scholar in question. The class facilitations were done with care, and occasionally with great ingenuity (e.g., one student in talking about “play”—a very serious chapter—had us all colouring pictures, and reflecting on that experience in the context of the course). But the daunting nature of most of the chapters usually resulted in presenters not being sure of themselves, and left other students uneasy about asking questions. Nevertheless, most students who were forced to read a chapter more than once to prepare a written summary or a class facilitation came to appreciate the text in ways that would have otherwise escaped them. That experience led to a realization that close reading has its rewards; at times it also led to pride at having successfully grappled with a complex piece of writing.

Other learning experiences also presented themselves to us. They suggested to me that the *Guide* offers rich opportunities for each instructor and group of students to personalize the learning, and that it also presents pitfalls that clearly need to be identified. In what follows, let me touch on four of these pedagogical challenges.

The first challenge that remained with us throughout the term concerned the nature of the language. Not only are the articles written in traditional academic prose, but many reflect the playful, at times arcane, use of words that has entered the academy over the last thirty years. To state it in another manner: authors in this collection are primarily writing to one another, making implicit and explicit allusions to various discussions and scholars, using words in ways that are meant to reflect their own embeddedness within particular conversations. The more one knows about modern literary and philosophical discussions, the more one gains from reading these articles; the less one knows, the more opaque the discussions become.

This phenomenon of insider language is not new. Indeed, the *Guide* is no different than most other academic works when it comes to its academic rhetoric. It is probably fair to say that many of us have apprenticed in the following manner: entering academic discussions at first like we were entering foreign worlds, absorbing terminology and allusions, encountering mystical-type terms that only years later incarnated in various guises, in the process imagining ourselves rather than

the writers as deficient. Those of us who survived eventually made some sense of it all. One particular pedagogical challenge in using a book like the *Guide*, therefore, is how to make an academically-oriented, multi-authored collection work for an entire class, when nobody in that class (including the instructor, in most cases) is an “ideal reader,” and when most students are not interested in apprenticing themselves to this sort of academic guild. I might add that instructors (present company included) sometimes forget that they usually represent the one person in that third-year class of theirs years ago who kept inquiring about these issues, and that their current classes are peopled with students who *all* need to be stimulated and captivated.

The type of language we encountered in each article constantly elicited reactions, and no small degree of frustration among students. When we had trouble understanding a text, I took the position from the beginning that the “fault” did not automatically lie with the students’ lack of education and diligence, but could also reflect the scholar’s inability to communicate clearly. To be sure, I noted the students’ resistance to using a dictionary, and to reading a text more than once. But I had to acknowledge with them that learning the meaning of “ontological” was different than searching far and wide for a definition of “epigonic scholars” (Masuzawa, 219).

Language, though, can teach in a variety of ways, and sites that generate frustration can be godsend. A book like this, meant to provoke, comprising articles written by a wide range of scholars, offers fertile ground for teaching. Our class often encountered normal terminology that was pregnant with possibilities. For instance, Fitzgerald’s “the Judeo-Christian traditions” (125) was helpful to us in teasing out changes in scholarship (30 years ago we would have used the singular “tradition”; 50 years ago there likely would not have been a “Judeo-”) and ongoing ethnocentric presuppositions (e.g., “Would Jews consider themselves members of a Judeo-Christian tradition?” “What about the Muslims and Baha’i?”).

Sometimes it was foreign terminology that generated discussion. Ryba’s article, for instance, laden with etymologies and archaic German words (e.g., *Ahndung*, for premonition), helped us as a class to appreciate how scholars in our field often still use foreign language ref-

erences as magical-type formulae and as markers of professionalism — and how the German roots run deep, and continue to mark doctoral school requirements. To belong to the guild has almost always meant passing a German language examination. From there we naturally moved to discussions about the roots of religious studies, including the significance to the field of “origins” broadly speaking, and the ongoing dominance of textually-based studies of religion. The implications of Ryba’s article on “manifestation” turned out to mean more to us than the content itself.

Given our struggles with the denseness of the rhetoric, when I use this book again I will suggest that students rewrite a section of an article. I say this partly because I soon realized that I was walking a fine line between empowering students (“See, it’s not your fault that you couldn’t understand this paragraph...”) and having students lose respect for the texts (“Why should we take this stuff seriously when these scholars can’t make their point simply and clearly?”). I would encourage students to rewrite a section in clearer prose while doing justice to a theoretical issue, in the process hoping to bring home several pedagogical points—for instance, that a topic always needs to be approached anew by readers and students (“experts” do not mediate “truth” to students), and that it is easier to critique something from a safe vantage point than to recreate it ourselves.

A second challenge I encountered was how to complement the pessimism that runs through the book. The editorial decision to take a clear position on the nature of the academic study of religion, and to ask contributors to review the history of a particular term and suggest future directions, repeatedly highlighted the failings of particular scholars in the field, at times questioning the legitimacy of the field itself. This situation accentuates the typical scholarly practice of building theories on the debris of what has come before (“my theory is superior to all those other theories...”). Throughout, the *Guide* does not allow the careful reader to escape the implications of the two basic questions it poses at the beginning (6): “what is religion?” (answer: we don’t know, and in fact [Fitzgerald, 138] we are not talking about anything in particular while pretending that we are); and “how is it successfully investigated within the shared aims of the family of human

and social sciences in the modern university?" (answer: it has almost never successfully been investigated and we're not quite sure where it's going). Gill's closing article ("Play") for me brilliantly encapsulates the complex, contortionist dance in which we participate as scholars of religion in this postmodern world. But there is precious little idealism in Gill's article, however much truth it contains for senior scholars (this article's rhetoric, it must be said, makes it exceedingly difficult for students to grasp). For students wondering whether to make this field their own, particularly students not enamoured with the one-upmanship that often passes for scholarship, that negativity and aggressiveness can close more doors than they open.

"Religious studies" actually comes off rather poorly in several of these articles. Smith, for instance ("Classification"), devotes the bulk of his article to arguing that in several other academic fields scholars have paid a great deal of attention to classification, but in religious studies they have merely dabbled. For his part, Grimes, after devoting loving attention to Victor Turner's theory, undercuts it with Bynum's critique (that Turner's "liminality" applies best to elite men in a society, and reflects fantasizing by male scholars), then offers no resolution. And Arnal's piece, standing second in the book, concludes that there is no such thing as "religion"—that the very term "may be an *obstacle* to cross-cultural (including cross-temporal) understanding" (32). These critiques are sound, but their force is strongest for those of us who have laboured in the field for years, can see both the forest and the trees, and have also come to appreciate the positive contributions of many other scholars. Students exposed to this negative point of view can be left with little respect for the work that has gone on in the field, and little desire to join the study that seems to be going everywhere and nowhere at once.

A teacher using this book in a classroom, it seems to me, has the responsibility to do for students what Gill attempts to do for scholars: show how one can dance and play within an academic world that is now perceived as being far more complex and less pure than previous generations thought. I came to this realization only part way through the course, and did not address it adequately. I would now pay far more attention in the classroom to important research in the field,

working to create even more links between scholars (past and present) and students, and to represent what is exciting for me about religious studies. I love this field of study, and this particular classroom experience made me realize that I rarely express that love directly in class.

A third, related challenge I faced was how to reinforce one of the book's main strengths: increasing clarity about issues of method and theory. One does not just "study Judaism," for instance; one studies "Judaism" from a particular perspective, with certain assumptions. Another way of putting it is: What we know depends on how we know. The *Guide* effectively shows how questions of method have changed over the years, and also how they are often ignored by scholars in the field. And it suggests that studying religion as a socially-constructed reality will go a long way towards clarifying method. I came to realize (again, part way through the course) that what needs to happen in the classroom in order to complement these observations is more hands-on practice. Students and the instructor need to work closely together to tease out different types of methods, and experiment with their implications.

In a different incarnation of this course I will suggest that students select another religion course they are taking, or had taken, and identify the professor's method: how was the material (lectures, discussions, textbooks) presented and constructed, what were the implications, how could it have been constructed differently? The results will likely be sketchy, but they should allow us to begin with the students' own worlds, then make connections with scholars and theories that are relevant to what they have found. In other words, talking about theory, or about scholars who do not pay enough attention to issues of method and theory, is important for undergraduate students; applying those insights to their own learning experiences might help to bring it home.

A fourth challenge for us emerged as a result of the editors' request that contributors ground their terms historically. The class soon gradually came to realize, not only that the historical survey section of each article took on different value for each contributor, but that the history of our field was perceived by the contributors to be grounded in a very small group of scholars. Certain names recur with some frequency.

These scholars are never examined in detail, given the limitations of the book, but they are often perceived as part of the religious studies family—particularly Hegel, Kant, Hume, Durkheim, Marx, Freud, and Geertz, with J. Z. Smith adding the dominant modern voice to that chorus. There is an assumption that readers are familiar with these names. For students with little or no such prior exposure, the experience is like being thrown into a conversation held in a foreign language. The challenge is this: how does one construct opportunities for students to learn more, and to learn actively, about these scholars, and about modern critiques of their writings? And how does one do so without offering mini-lectures to supplement the sentence- or paragraph-long descriptions that currently appear in the book?

The next time, at the beginning of the course I will ask each student to research one theorist whose name keeps appearing in the book, then present that theorist to others. It would be valuable, for instance, for a student to come away from the course with a clear idea of Hume's contribution to the study of religion and its subsequent importance to the field, and particularly with experience at finding answers to those questions. It would also be important to question the primacy given to these scholars (why these ones in particular? what does their primacy say about the field?). Another option, to be sure, would be to use this book as a follow-up to a traditional method and theory course, in which some of these theorists would have been introduced.

Concluding Reflections

The classroom use of the *Guide* has taught me a great deal about teaching. Some of it was humbling. As Parker J. Palmer states in his inspirational book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), the knowledge that we as teachers have gained from years of teaching goes hand in hand with a "sense of being a rank amateur at the start of each new class" (63). The next time I use this book I will repeat some things, but do others differently, as I've indicated above. Most importantly, I will set up the classroom to complement the book by countering what Palmer calls the objectivist myth, i.e. "that truth flows from the top down, from experts

who are qualified to know truth (including some who claim that truth is an illusion) to amateurs who are qualified only to receive truth” (101). Still, I remain more convinced now than I was before that the *Guide to the Study of Religion* offers us a superb classroom resource for thinking seriously about the field—and for thinking seriously about teaching, with our students.

I also have a recommendation to offer for editors and publishers: manuscripts intended for the classroom should undergo extensive review by their target audience. I realize from personal experience that both the academic and publishing worlds put pressure to bear, for good reasons, on bringing a manuscript to completion as quickly as possible—and that editing a manuscript raises problems that can only be fully appreciated by those who have done it. But I am convinced that my group of students, given the opportunity to comment on this book in manuscript form, would have been able to make the collection more suitable for classroom use. The greatest stumbling block to the use of this book in undergraduate classrooms is the esoteric nature of the language; the second is the questions it considers important, and those it avoids. Students, I’m convinced, would have had much of value to say about readability and suitability. Even in our course—attended by students with eclectic backgrounds, with multiple demands on their time, often carrying a full load of courses with part- or full-time jobs, and who therefore did not always read as diligently as they might have in other circumstances—I was repeatedly struck by the perceptive nature of people’s editorial comments. I have had the same experience with other books in previous years. We now consider students to be partners in the university learning process; the time has come to consider them also to be partners in the publication process.