



*William R. Lindsey is associate professor and director of graduate studies in the department of religious studies at the University of Kansas. The department offers both bachelor's and master's degrees. Lindsey is the author of *Fertility and Pleasure: Ritual and Sexual Values in Tokugawa Japan* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2006).*

*Over the last several semesters, his teaching duties have come to include a gateway course to the graduate study of religion required of all first-semester MA students, a large survey course introducing undergraduates to South and East Asian religious traditions (a university service course), split-level courses on religion in Japan and Korea, and occasional undergraduate and graduate seminars.*

## **Multiplicity as an Alternative to Singularity**

This essay describes my and my colleagues' experiences in thinking through and acting to create an alternative to a capstone-style course within the specific context of a small religious studies department offering a stand-alone MA program. In short, rather than a single capstone course tasked to a single faculty member into which all MA students must enroll, my colleagues and I have decided to move away from singularity and toward multiplicity — multiple courses are taught by many faculty members stressing several methodological and theoretical approaches specific to each faculty member's training and interest in the study of religion. Although these steps separate us from a pedagogical consensus tied to the notion of singularity and the capstone as measured through the frequency of such phrases as "single course" and "single opportunity" in the literature, we want to try multiplicity as the best fit for our department.

Our original capstone offered that vaunted "single opportunity" for students to engage numerous methodological perspectives and theoretical models to expand skill sets and apply them critically through the production of research papers. This engagement, however, was of a rapid-fire sort, challenging students to a new, selectively limited genealogy of methodological literature almost weekly. Their tenuous grasp on these fleeting perspectives showed in their research projects. Our exploratory model seeks to diffuse this opportunity by employing a number of "critical issues seminars" (currently three) that each student must complete. Each seminar, as taught by a faculty member in accordance with his or her training and research interest, shares three characteristics. First, it is front-loaded in its opening sessions with readings that methodologically define and drive the seminar, introducing students to a specific and lengthy genealogy of scholarly literature significant to the study of religion (e.g., ritual theory, textual hermeneutics, visual culture, the body, critical feminist theory). Second, it is fortified with "case studies" or readings particular to the research area specialization of the

instructor in which various issues and theoretical models proposed and critiqued in the earlier genealogical literature may be tested and challenged within the specific cultural, historical, and/or literary context of the seminar. Third, it is meant to encourage students, now steeped deeply in a particular genealogy of scholarship and with multiple theoretical models at hand, to apply this knowledge to their own research foci by writing original papers.

We have offered three such seminars so far using this exploratory model — ritual (specifically rites of passage), biblical hermeneutics, and religious orthodoxy/heterodoxy in Chinese history. As the instructor in the ritual course, I dedicated the first sessions to introducing the students to classic and contemporary ritual theorists. From there, the focus of the sessions moved to case studies describing and analyzing rites of passage in East Asian cultures. In both the first and second sets of sessions, students were required in advance of each class to produce weekly journal entries that they shared with colleagues. Journal entries were meant to create better in-class discussions by prompting all students to take responsibility for the readings week after week. Sharing entries in the classroom also produced a self-policing situation among the students that created an environment for higher achievement (and for some, I am sure, to save face among their peers). Finally, students wrote papers of approximately twenty-five pages and gave public presentations to their colleagues. I encouraged students to use the paper to focus on their own research interests rather than requiring they write on East Asian phenomena of the sort we read about in the second set of sessions. By introducing students to culturally and historically specific materials (the second characteristic), these seminars added a breadth of religious traditions and cultural areas to the students' knowledge base. Through the first and especially third characteristics, however, they primarily functioned in the spirit of a capstone. They provided students with opportunities for sustained mentorships with faculty to master select methodological approaches and theoretical models, to make them applicable to their own research, and by so doing, to establish their own identities as scholars of religion.

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