

Mary Karen Solomon, Colorado Northwestern Community College



Mary Karen Solomon is Humanities/Social Science Division Chair at Colorado Northwestern Community College in Colorado's beautiful and rural high plains, teaching humanities, philosophy, literature, and English composition. Her particular interests are the religion, philosophy and literature of both Russia and China; she is a student of Zoroastrianism, Sufism, Confucianism, and Daoism, and is working on an anthology of essays and poetry concerning religion.

The mission of a community college is quite different from that of a four-year college or a university. According to President Joe May of the Colorado Community College and Occupational Educational Services, "Our mission is to help our state realize its human resource potential and enhance its robust economy. Our vision is to be the leading provider of vibrant, high performance learning, for anyone, anytime, anywhere." (CCCOES, www.cterc.ccco.es.edu /) This cannot be accomplished without opening wide the doors and services to the public, so community colleges have open enrollment, or policies very close to it: all students (or almost all) students who apply are admitted. The object is to educate all the people of the community, whether traditional-aged students or older students with non-traditional needs, to meet their educational goals. Such a goal may be obtaining a four-year degree at a university, which means teaching the student general education transfer courses, effective study habits, and the necessary academic rigor and methodology to be successful in the baccalaureate course. Another common goal is to guide the student into the correct vocation for his or her talents and abilities, and to train him successfully in its skills, in the process giving the student the best-rounded education possible for his vocation. Another frequent goal is to re-educate people: to help those who through health challenges or changing circumstances need to adapt their skills or even change careers to do so successfully, to offer guidance, support and the necessary skills and education. The community college also serves the needs of its community in a broader manner. Particularly in small, rural, and/or isolated communities (such as mine), the community college plays an important cultural role. From guest speakers and multi cultural film festivals to musical entertainers to museum, drama, or even overseas trips, the community college should offer cultural enrichment to its residents.

Because the community college is a state institution, it is required to respect the separation of state and religion: this emphasizes the importance of a sensitive and equal presentation of all religions in the Comparative Religions class. Bias and favoritism have no place in the classroom: the less familiar a religion is to the students, the more important it is that it be taught with respect and equal handedness.

Practically speaking, the above characteristics of the community college and its mission mean that when teaching religion in a community college, the instructor needs to be sensitive to the various needs and abilities of class members, present the subject in a way that will help all members to meet their various educational goals, and encourage students to keep their minds open and endeavor to understand sympathetically that which may seem very alien to their way of life.

My most basic objective in my Comparative Religion course is to help the students gain understanding of the role religion plays in thought and civilization; in this course we study world religions, or, as Huston Smith expresses it, the great wisdom traditions, which sum up a culture's unique insights, values and development. Secondly, students must gain and express knowledge of the various religions and their influences upon mankind; third, they need to better understand the forms and development of religions in both primitive and sophisticated civilizations. Of course, they do these mainly through reading, research, and writing, though both lecture and class discussion play an important part in understanding the various religions.

There are various approaches to teaching religion, but they seem to coalesce into two main camps: the historical approach and the phenomenological approach. The historical approach places each religion in its context, temporal and spatial, and traces its development throughout cultural history. The phenomenological approach treats religion as a system of values, cultural phenomena, in a sense: traditions of wisdom arising from the depths of cultures. It attempts to explain religion from within, to clarify for the student the particular wisdom, insights, and spiritual developments of these traditions. The first choice for the community college religion teacher is to select which approach will work best in his or her situation.

Various texts have various approaches: Niels C. Nielsen, Jr. in Bedford's *Religions of the World* describes his approach:

The study of the religions of the world is a subject of enormous scope and depth, covering the full range of history and reaching from the most mundane aspects of people's lives to their most sublime thoughts and aspirations. This volume...describes in clear terms the principal doctrines, issues, and motifs of each religion and shows how the traditions have responded to their social, cultural, and geographic contexts....

We believe that even though the stories and concerns of the few—emperors and other rulers—have played an important role...far more important for the history of religions have been the broad cultural changes affecting adherents' lives—events such as foreign conquests, large-scale emigration from rural to urban settings, or the spread of literacy. This new edition highlights such broad changes and shows how religions have responded to them.

Another proponent of the historical approach (whose work I admire greatly) is S. A. Nigosian, who writes of his *World Religions: A Historical Approach*,

Historians of religion study religious behavior through the sequences of events or series of transformations that characterize the evolution of various religious traditions into their current forms or up to the points at which they vanished. Historians consider religions as specific traditions that encompass fundamental beliefs, important practices, and institutionalized systems, all of which have gone through complex courses of development and transformations....Because of the profound impact of religion on the course of human civilization, we use the historical model in this text. (p.4)

In developing his account of the great world religions, Nigosian analyses the origin of religious tradition, the growth and spread of the religion, its sacred texts or literature; the central concepts and philosophical views, and the important practices and ceremonies of each religion, pointing out that one of his main goals is to help the reader understand the values that individual religions transmit to their followers. How people in different times, different cultures and under different circumstances thought, felt, and acted is inherent in these values.

My difficulty with the historical approach has two components: first of all, where does one stop? Events and their effects, religious figures and their influences, multiply endlessly until the student loses his way in a mire of historical data. Particularly in a survey course, attempting to introduce the student to all the great religions of history, this can be a problem, as there is so much to cover. Students get culture shock: one religion's complex history blurs into another's.

Secondly, it seems to me that the historical approach can defeat the course's most important objective, to help the student gain understanding of the religion's role in developing a culture's thought and values. The student can lose the forest for the trees; anxious over memorizing the names and histories of various Hindu deities and their avatars and the dates of scriptures and important events, she can lose sight of what Hinduism means. Studying eight to ten of these traditions in such a manner can leave the student exhausted and confused.

The approach that looks at religion as a system of thought and behavior, a wisdom tradition providing a culture's most innermost and particular inspirations and insights, seems to better accomplish what I want to do. An excellent example of this approach can be seen in Huston Smith's *The Illustrated World Religions* (the text that, after some trial and experimentation, I have settled on using):

Traditionally, when people wanted answers to life's ultimate questions – Where are we? Why are we here? What does it all mean? What, if anything, are we supposed to do? – they looked to their revealed texts; or to their ancestral myths if they were oral peoples....

This is not a book about religious history. This explains the dearth of names, dates, and social influences in its pages. Historical facts are kept to the minimum that are needed to situate in time and space the ideas the book deals with....This book is not a balanced account of its subject. The full story of religion is not rose-colored – often it is crude and barbaric. Wisdom and charity are intermittent, and the net result is profoundly ambiguous. A balanced account of religion would include witch-hunt and inquisitions, pogroms and persecution, the Christian Crusades and the Holy Wars of Islam. The catalogue would have no end.

Why then do I only mention these things?...This is a book about values. Probably as much bad art as good has been chiseled and painted, but no one would expect it to appear in these pages....

Having targeted my subject as the enduring religions at their best, let me say what I take that best to be. Their theological and metaphysical truths are, I am prepared to argue, inspired. Institutions – religious institutions included – are another story. Constituted as they are of uneven people (partly good, partly bad), institutions are built of vices as well as virtues...This book skims the cream from religion's churning history by confining itself to its theological claims. When we limit ourselves to these, a cleaner side of the religions emerges. They begin to look

like the world's wisdom traditions. ('Where is the knowledge that is lost in information? Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?' – T. S. Eliot)....

Religion alive confronts the individual with the most momentous option life can present. It calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake, a projected journey across the jungles, peaks and deserts of the human spirit. The call is to confront reality, to master the self. Those who dare to hear and follow that secret call soon learn the dangers and difficulties of its lonely journey.... (Prologue, *The Illustrated World's Religions*, Huston Smith)

I like this understanding of religion as inner truth and cultural accumulations of wisdom, as opposed to institutionalized systems answerable for much evil. As Joseph Campbell pointed out in *The Power of Myth*, paraphrasing Carl Jung, religion is the great defense against truly religious ideas.

Structure of the Course

The course covers the great religions of the world, still in existence. This means we study Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in that order. I begin the course with a unit on primitive religion, examining characteristics of early religion such as the numinous experience, prayer, divination, use of magic, the role of shamans and fetishes, animism, taboos, and totems. We also study the several functions of ritual: ritual as fulfilment of expectation, ritual as expression of anxiety, and ritual's association with mythology. We discuss the function of these characteristics in native religions in Africa and the Americas. On the second day, after our initial discussion, we watch "The Storytellers," from *The Power of Myth*, with Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers. They discuss in particular primitive and early religion's covenant between prey animals and the hunter, how myth, and ritual reinforce the value of the animal, the understanding that the animal gives itself to the humans, with the reservation that it be valued and not wasted. Students are always responsive to the native American tradition, probably because it is nearer to us and more familiar. They like the story of the Buffalo's Wife, which Campbell retells, about how a buffalo herd covenants with the Blackfoot tribe to allow themselves to be hunted and eaten, as long as they are hunted in the right spirit, with reverence, without waste, and with the proper attention to the dancing and rituals that will allow the herd to be constantly renewed. We contrast the "I-Thou" attitude of the Native American towards the buffalo with the colonial white "I-It" attitude, hunting the buffalo to extinction for trophies and robes, without needing or valuing the meat.

Because Craig is provincial and isolated, there are no temples, synagogues, or mosques to visit. As we continue to study the world religions, we must create our own introductory

experiences. Studying Buddhism, when covering Diamond-Way Buddhism in Tibet, we discuss the Dalai Lama's story as well as the religious differences. We watch Kundun, and research the sufferings of Tibet; I offer the option of sending letters of support and/or money to the Help Tibet Campaign, and most participate. When we study Daoism, I have homegrown yarrow sticks from my father's orchard (lots of good chi there) that we use to do an I-ching reading in class. We also burn incense and pass around hell-notes, discussing their function. When discussing Islam, I bring my Iranian chador and let the students alternate wearing it; carrying things, passing out papers, moving books across the class all become a new challenge that gives them insight into the restrictions on women.

If I could have my way with the state system, I would blend Phi 115, Comparative Religions, with Lit 201, Masterpieces of World Literature I, for one 4-credit combined course: World Religion and Literature. In Lit 201, we read *Akhenaten's Hymn to the Sun*, large portions of Genesis and the stories of Joseph and his brothers, Jonah, Cain and Abel, and Noah and the Ark from the old Testament. We also read

Gilgamesh

, which makes a fascinating comparison with the Noah stories. There are selections from those most exciting Hindu scriptural stories, the Ramayana, Bhagavid Gita, and Mahabharata. We read selections from the Chinese Book of Songs and Confucius's

Analects

. Then we read Socrates's

Apology

and

Phaedo

by Plato; we read Luke's birth story of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew's Passion of Jesus, followed by

The Confessions of St. Augustine

. We then turn to Islam, and read suras from the Qu'ran, selections from

The Biography of the Prophet

by Ibn Ishaq, two stories from

The Conference of Birds

by Farid al-din Attar, the mystic and sufi, followed by the ecstatic sufi poetry of Rumi and Sa'di.

And for a chaser, there are the delightful satires of religious figures in

The Canterbury Tales

and a final accounting of sin and virtue, Dante's

Inferno

with selections from

Purgatorio

and

Paradiso

, by Dante. We even have a highly entertaining Buddhist fable, "Monkey" (an abridgement, translated by Arthur Waley, of the four-volume

Journey to the West

, a fantastic account of the historical journey of a ninth century monk to bring the Mahayana

Buddhist scriptures to China). As a course in primary texts of world religions, it would be outstanding.

At the close of the section on Islam, (at least, those times when we have been disciplined and stuck closely enough to our syllabus that enough time remains) we close with a unit on mystical thought in Islam. I point out the similarities between the experience of Christian mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila, or St. John of the Cross, with the Hindu mystic experience, and the Islamic Sufi experience. It is amazing that such diverse traditions come together so similarly, almost as though the weather below may be varied and cloudy in religious experience, but when one transcends these differences, the mystical light above is concentrated, clear and unified...One of the best definitions of the stages of the mystic experience, common both to the experience of St. John of the Cross and to the path of Raja Yoga in Hinduism, is given by Farid al-din Attar in "Conference of the Birds."

1. *Talab*: yearning for union with God. Renunciation of worldly things.
2. *Ishq*: an overwhelming love for the goal.
3. *Marfat*: enlightenment, seeing God in every particle of creation.
4. *Istraghrak or fana*: Absorption into the beloved, involving the annihilation of the ego; dark night of the soul.
5. *Tawhid*: Unity consciousness. God is experienced as timeless, and as a permeating unity amid worldly multiplicity. "Till duality and consciousness of the world is lost, this stage is not reached, and when it is reached, He alone is left. I am obliterated." Attar.
6. *Hairat*: amazement. The seeker is struck dumb by the glorious perception of the divine.
7. *Fuqr Wa Fana*: Annihilation: a rapturous, ecstatic state; a permanent absorption into the divine, a rebirth.

The sufis themselves describe a twofold approach to God. Hujwiri (d. ca. 1071) claims, "There is a difference between one who is burned by His Majesty in the fire of love and one who is illuminated by His Beauty in the light of contemplation."

Jami distinguishes between two types of advanced Sufis, one type "to whom the Primordial Grace and Lovingkindness has granted salvation after their being submerged in complete union and in the wave of *tawhid* (unification)...." The second type "are those who are completely submerged in the ocean of Unity and have been so completely naughted in the belly of the fish "annihilation" that never a news or trace comes to the shore of separation and the direction of subsistence...and the sanctity of perfecting others is not entrusted to them" (Anne-Marie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, 7).

I enjoy closing the course by discussing the common characteristics of the mystical experience in these different religions. It is as though we have distilled the essence of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, clarified and purified from the muddy, imperfect, and very human domains of history. It gives me hope that below our layers of cultural accretion, the prejudice, weight of experience, sorrows and injustices of history, we can find a common spirit of love, unity and agreement. And to me that is what religion should be about.