

ALTERNATIVE WORLD VIEWS: AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE IN RELIGION

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The purpose of this article is to describe the introductory course in Religion offered at Temple University, Philadelphia. Despite its name, retained because of local historical associations, the university has no religious affiliations, but is wholly state-supported, and the Religion of the title is the ordinary equivalent in North America of Studies in Religion. The students who take the course are mainly in their first year at the university, i.e., about eighteen years old. This semester (spring 1979), in virtue of a special programme, one high school student from Philadelphia is enrolled in it, and presumably it would be suitable for at least the last year of high school. The course was introduced some years ago, and although it is reviewed each semester and often experimented with and modified in small ways, its general outline has remained the same.

The initial question we¹ asked ourselves was, as may be imagined: What is the goal of an introductory course in Religion? The customary aim of religious education is of course to inculcate a particular religious tradition, the teacher's, to produce a more religious person, who not only understands the beliefs of the tradition and is trained in its practices, but above all is personally committed to it and will remain faithful to it. This is indoctrination, and there may be reason to doubt its educational soundness in any school, even a religious one, since its ultimate appeal is to authority, but certainly in the academic context of a university, committed to open enquiry, the inculcation of any particular religion is inappropriate. Yet it has the virtue that it speaks directly to issues which are often urgent to people: What is and is not true in regard to the ultimate enigmas of life? What is the nature of human life, and what is our destiny? What is our place in the universe? What direction should our life take? What ultimate goal shall we set our hearts on, as an end worthy of our utmost dedication? What is of the first importance and of the highest priority, and what is of no importance or very little? What are the things we should most esteem and value, and what should we disregard and despise? What should we love, and what should we hate? Is death the end, or is there another life? The major religions offer answers to such questions.

With the development of the study of religion as an academic discipline during the last hundred years the quite different method of approaching religious phenomena emerged, known as phenomenology of religion or history of religions, which deliberately refrains from answering these questions, and emphasises instead the scientific investigation and unbiased description of religious data, seeking to understand the meaning of such things as myths and symbols, conceptions of deity, rites of passage or sacrifice within the religious context. Whereas theology presents a committed view of the religion from the inside, phenomenology offers a detached and unevaluative view from the outside. There can be no doubt that this approach is academically not only acceptable but most desirable. Was this then the form, we asked ourselves,

which our introductory course should take? A related question was whether one primary aim of an introductory course in a university should be to prepare the student for more advanced academic study of religion.

To take the latter question first, it seemed clear that the course should provide some foundation for more advanced academic study, but while many students at Temple take the introductory course in Religion, few take it as their main subject. The department has a large doctoral programme, but draws those students almost without exception from other institutions. Thus the introductory course in Religion at Temple functions for most students as one element in a liberal arts education rather than as a first step in an academic career in religious studies. We concluded that while the course should give basic training in academic methods, we would be ill-advised to design it primarily as a foundation for advanced study.

The development of the phenomenological approach was a giant step forward in religious studies. In an area so typically and so easily dominated by partisan pre-judgements, to set the question of the truth or falsity of a religion aside in order to discover the facts about it and their meaning on their own terms is essential as a first step. Until customary emotional reactions are defused, and instinctive prejudices methodically disregarded, nothing worthwhile can be achieved. Recognising this, we nevertheless found ourselves in agreement that the phenomenological method, if adopted exclusively, suffers from a serious weakness precisely in its greatest virtue, namely its avoidance of the urgent questions about human life and destiny which religions answer. Granted that it is an essential first step, it cannot be the last step. The truth question does not go away merely because we ignore it. It is just the element of engagement, of being personally affected by the outcome, that gives vitality to religion, not only in practice but also as an object of study. We concluded therefore that a method was needed which would combine the wholesome detachment, the view from the outside, which is phenomenology's great contribution, with the sense of personal relevance, the view from the inside, which gives living religion whatever compelling force it may possess.

At first sight such an ideal may seem to be somewhat utopian. Nevertheless we came to believe that it could be approximated to by way of sympathetic exposure to alternative world views. We were led to this belief partly by the structure of our department, in which the major religions are taught for the most part by their own representatives, and partly by related reflections on the ultimate purpose we were trying to achieve in our undergraduate programme, which was, in our minds, that the student should eventually make a thoughtful, informed, reasonable and free decision for himself regarding how he is to look at life and the world and how he is to live. The result of the education we were offering was not intended to be merely theoretical knowledge, but a personal and practical decision about one's life and basic beliefs. Also, we knew from experience that our students would not be content with anything less. They do not take courses in religious studies out of sheer intellectual curiosity. That such a decision should be well-informed, thoughtful and reasonable scarcely needed discussion. It was equally crucial that the choice be free, rather than guided by the teacher to conform to his own tradition, however impressive. But a truly free choice in such matters is by no means easy to achieve. For there to be any genuine choice there must be genuine alternatives. That is to say, the student must have become familiar with the main historical options. Our initial task then was to introduce the student to the principal alternative world-views,

presenting them so far as possible as live options for himself, rather than as interesting curiosities of alien cultures.

What are the principal alternative world-views? Our response to this question was guided by the view that the major religions fall into three families, of Indian, Chinese and Semitic origin. Although there are great differences within these families, there are still greater differences between them. The members of each family share a common fund of basic concepts and values, and are rather like variations, albeit highly significant ones, on the same theme. The fundamental alternatives to be presented, then, are represented by the families themselves. Any attempt to cover all the major religions in one semester is inevitably condemned to superficiality. But it is possible in one semester to cover one world-view representative of each family in satisfactory depth. On the other hand not only does each family contain a number of distinct religions, but each religion contains a variety of world-views, so that one semester is scarcely adequate to do justice to the main alternatives. We decided therefore to let the introductory course extend over two semesters, in such a way that each semester would provide an introduction to different representatives of the three families. Our customary arrangement is to treat in the first semester Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Christianity, in the second semester Indian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism especially Ch'an, Judaism, and Islam. In saying that we treat these religions I mean that we present at least one world-view representative of each, as a means of introducing the religions.

We attach considerable importance to the order in which the religions are introduced. We have found it much more conducive to a calm and objective treatment of Judaism and Christianity (we have many Jewish students) not to begin any semester with them, but to begin rather with religions relatively unfamiliar to the students, which they can approach without feeling called upon to defend or attack them. This serves to establish in the class a habit of looking at religions and world-views dispassionately, which they can subsequently carry over to their own religions.

Should the alternatives be restricted to specifically religious world-views, or should non-religious alternatives such as Marxism, existentialism or secular humanism also be included? For many people they are the real alternatives, the actual live options; the true choice is usually not so much between, say, Christianity and Islam, as between Christianity and secular humanism. It may be objected that students ought not to be deliberately exposed to anti-religions. But of course they will be exposed to them anyway, and it is surely better that they learn to subject them to the same dispassionate analysis as their religious alternatives, rather than stumble on them haphazardly and uncritically. We have therefore regularly included them, and in practice have not experienced any difficulty. I usually ask my students whether they would like to cover such material; they invariably say yes, most often with enthusiasm. In any one semester we restrict ourselves for reasons of practicality to only one non-religious alternative, either Marxism, or existentialism, or secular humanism.

A particular problem we faced from the outset was a shortage of trained teachers. The members of the staff are specialists: none of us can claim professional expertise in more than one religious tradition. In addition, many sections of the course are taught by our graduate students, beginning with their second year. After one year of graduate study they have acquired some knowledge of the major traditions, but scarcely enough to qualify as experts on

any one of them. A format was needed which would be relatively teacher-proof. The nearest we can come to this is the discussion group. We have a set of selected readings with related questions and topics for discussion to be assigned in advance. Each student is expected to come to class prepared to make a brief presentation, usually written, but sometimes oral, on the reading and question for the day: usually three are called on, to a certain extent at random. The task of the teacher then is primarily to encourage and orchestrate discussion among the students, especially to keep it on track. If the discussion is properly managed we have found that it is surprisingly self-corrective. Errors of interpretation by one student are usually quickly challenged by another. If they are not, the teacher solicits other opinions from the class until he gets the right one, taking care to acknowledge the value of the other contributions even if not satisfactory, so that students are not discouraged from expressing their ideas. Of course the teacher needs to be able to recognise an error in order to correct it. This is made easier by keeping the discussion to central topics which he can prepare with some wider reading. The graduate students who are teaching are supervised, in that responsibility for the course is assigned to a senior staff member, who holds regular meetings of the team, is available for consultation if information is needed, visits the class from time to time, and submits a report on each teaching assistant at the end of the semester. In practice however relatively little supervision has proved to be necessary. Typically the teaching assistants take their job very seriously and prepare their classes thoroughly. Also, the department conducts a teaching procticum for them to acquaint them with established techniques of teaching, especially as they apply in the field of religion. To the mingled delight and chagrin of the staff, numerous graduate students have turned out to be more effective teachers on this level than they themselves.

A special benefit of this arrangement has been the education of the teachers. That is to say, the staff members who have taught the course uniformly express gratification at the experience, and find that their work in their own field is helped, often substantially, by this somewhat forced exposure to other fields. The graduate students who teach the course generally find that it is their best learning experience in the department, and that, more than any number of courses they take as students, it equips them for their first teaching position. By the same token it gives them an added advantage in obtaining that position, since they come to a prospective employer with a wider range of knowledge, and a fund of more responsible teaching experience than many of their colleagues graduating from other departments.

It will be evident that the readings occupy a position of central importance in the course. They provide its substance. Not only must they contain all the main ideas to be studied, they should also convey the flavour and atmosphere of the religion or world-view, they must be representative of it, in some sense embody it, speak on its behalf, and impart that view from the inside which is indispensable. Above all they must lend themselves readily to discussion. If they are to speak to the student in a personally involving way they will need to be religious documents, or the equivalent, rather than academic ones. In general these features are to be found only in primary sources, scriptural material, rather than in secondary literature. Textbooks therefore are assigned for reference, but not for use in class. Some typical readings we use are: for Hinduism, the main Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavadgītā*; for Taoism, the *Lao-tzŭ* and *Chuang-tzŭ* (although the latter is not considered by religious Taoists as a

religious text, it serves a comparable function for students); for Confucianism, the Four Books; for Buddhism, one of the various collections of source texts (Burtt, Stryk, Conze); for Christianity, the New Testament. Judaism and Islam present a special problem, in that the living religions tend to pay more attention to other sources than their scriptures: Judaism is based more on the Talmud than the Bible, Islam more on the Ḥadīth than the Qur'ān. In each case selections of the sources are hard to come by. We usually settle for an uneasy compromise with the collections of A. Hertzberg or J. Neusner for Judaism, and J. Alden Williams for Islam. It goes without saying that the translations need to be clear and interesting so far as possible.

How then do we handle the truth question that such a course inevitably gives rise to? In effect we have been saying during the course: this is one way of looking at life, and this is another, and this is another — now it is up to you to make up your own mind. It is quite fatal to raise the truth question, or allow it to be raised, early in the discussion of a world-view. Students, like other people, often feel strong approval or disapproval right on their first acquaintance with a world-view, but nothing is more inimical to fair understanding. We insist that the truth question be postponed for class discussion at least until the main alternatives have been grasped sympathetically, until the end of the semester. Usually by that time the question has been defused somewhat, in that they have come to recognise that it cannot be answered simply, and needs a good deal of further thought. Our main efforts are directed to lifting the level of the discussion from expressions of personal preference to reasoned argument. The exchange usually begins on the plane of 'I like this' or 'I don't like that'. To which we must ask: why? Does the view really have the pleasant or unpleasant implications you attribute to it? Have you considered these and those contrary reasons? And especially, what do the other members of the class think about that? Our jobs as teachers, we consider, is not to decide for them what is ultimately true or false, but to help them to see more clearly and explicitly the grounds on which they have arrived at their present opinion, and the kinds of grounds on which they might arrive at a more defensible opinion. Our immediate concern is not for truth or falsity, but for sound reasons.

How successful has the course been in attracting students? It is not a requirement except for religion majors, who are few. Although we have other courses for first year students, this regularly has the largest enrollment (in some semesters Religion in America has enrolled an equal number). In recent years enrollments in all liberal arts subjects in North America have declined, especially in the humanities. Apart from that, the single factor which seems to influence enrollment most at Temple is the course's title. We have experimented with many different titles, none fully satisfactory. 'Alternative World Views' has a formidable ring for an introductory course. With regard to titles we remain in a state of *dukkha*, prepared to take refuge in any compassionate reader who has an imaginative suggestion to offer for our enlightenment.

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1. The 'we' of this article were about half a dozen staff members and students who constituted a largely informal committee to revise the department's introductory offerings. Roderick Hindery and Thomas Dean were especially active in the discussions, and Ernest Stoeffler in the subsequent implementation of the course.