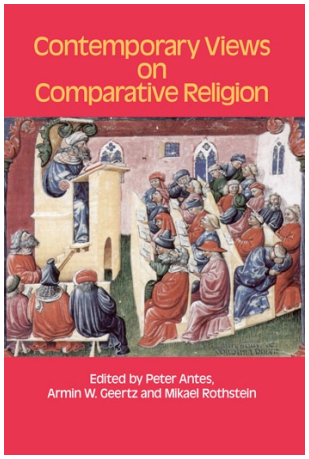

Contemporary Views on Comparative Religion

Antes, Peter; Geertz, Armin W.; Rothstein, Mikael, eds.
Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2016

Book Review

Tags: learning theories | teaching comparative religion | theories and methods

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During his time on the editorial board of *Teaching Theology and Religion* Tim Jensen brought a distinctive, and often provocative, sensibility to that group's discussions. Rooted in his own experience as a teacher in secondary schools and in universities, and based on his research into systems of "religion education" both in Denmark and throughout Europe, Jensen's position vigorously argued for a strictly secular (and scientific) study of religions throughout the educational curriculum. Even when they did not carry the day, Jensen's arguments were always "good to think with."

Although they do not focus as directly on Jensen's teaching as they do on many of Jensen's essays (the volume includes a bibliography of his writings), these essays honoring Jensen on the occasion of his sixty-fifth birthday address many of his persistent concerns. As an ensemble, the essays present a vision of the field of the study of religion that will challenge teachers in North America to articulate their own understandings of what the study of religion entails. More importantly for this context, several of the essays link their broad considerations of the study of religion directly to issues concerning teaching.

Gustavo Benavides offers an essay that stands out in linking theoretical concerns to the classroom. He argues that whatever the subject matter may have been, at the end of the term students in any course in the study of religion "will have thought, however intermittently, - about the various but nevertheless recurrent ways in which what we call 'religion' is generated and kept in place" (223). Beyond that broad learning goal he proposes – convincingly in my view – that "Ideally, anyone teaching a course that has to do with any of the aspects of what is generally known as 'religion' should be engaged in the elaboration of a theory that could accommodate – however provisionally, however tentatively – most of the topics being discussed

in any given class" (225). Benavides shows clearly how conceptions of what is – and should be – involved in the study of religion is not simply the concern of a handful of scholars specializing in "theory and methods." One's conception of the nature and purpose of the field has a direct and pervasive impact in the classroom.

Several other contributors propose interesting links between their scholarly concerns and their practice as teachers. Russell McCutcheon discusses his use of popular music videos "to illustrate the unexpected appearance of religion" (157) where it is least expected. Drawing on a thorough reading of Jensen's own work, Wanda Alberts carefully maps out not only what "Religious Studies-based Religion Education" looks like in K-12 curricula but also how it contrasts to other, more confessional, understandings of "Religious Education" and what is at stake in the competing understandings. Satoko Fujiwara provides a persuasive account of why the "world religions" paradigm has persisted in Japanese education, linking it to a particularly Japanese understanding of Max Weber.
Though this volume does not focus directly on teaching, it nonetheless provides the interested reader with both some very pointed suggestions about classroom practice and an array of essays about the state of the field that will provoke and perhaps even inspire careful rethinking about what we are teaching when we teach about religion.

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