

RELIGION IN CULTURE, STUDIES IN SOCIAL CONTEXT AND CONSTRUCTION

After World Religions
Reconstructing Religious Studies



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After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies

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Book Review

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Professors of religion and religious studies may find a familiar link between this edited volume and aspects of their personal academic journey, especially if they are on the tenure track. Both represent texts that involve self-reflection and can embody intellectual wrestling. Most significant for this review: the former also offers tools for rethinking the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) that can challenge pedagogical strategies considered the norm of today and tomorrow. *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies* represents a methodologically rigorous way to create a classroom that cements the study of religion as an integral component of both undergraduate and graduate study.

The twelve chapters in the volume - spread across three sections - are individually and collectively thought-provoking and intriguing essays. While I acquired the text for potential course adoption in my liberal arts undergraduate methods course, my engagement with the international cast of scholars (from the UK, Australia, Canada, Finland, and the U.S.) confirmed the importance of this work for professors of what might still be considered “world religions” as we strive to help our students “make sense of *our* world” (186).

One of the more teachable moments was delivered by Teemu Taira. In “Doing things with ‘religion,’” Taira sets out to “instigate an exploration of how something came to be understood and classified as ‘religion’ and why,” as it simultaneously questions the inclusion and exclusion of traditions such as Confucianism, Shintoism, and Scientology (84). For example, the formation of Confucianism as a religion is connected with Western scholarship. Yet it “was regarded as a religion in China in 1949,” until the Communists took power in China when they “established the current system in which only Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam are considered as religions” (86, 85).

Michel Desjardins provides another significant moment of illumination with “The Desjardins Diet for World Religions Paradigm Loss.” In a post-presidential-election season during which many Americans are threatening to emigrate to Canada, it seemed apropos to gain new insight from a classroom on our shared northern borders. It was easy to be hooked by the chapter’s focus on food and religion as the sole doorway to an introduction to religion seminar. Not only does Desjardins employ his own qualitative research, but he also challenges readers to reimagine food - and, thereby, create “more nuanced views of religion” - “as a rich site for examining human nature” (124, 123).

Additionally, useful resources are either embedded within the chapters (such as difficult to locate work on Sikhism) or as part of the references with which each ends. The “Afterward” by Russell McCutcheon, a stalwart in the field, concludes the work with a compelling goal: “If what we’re teaching these diverse students in our World Religions courses is not just the names and dates that these students are probably focused on, but, instead, subtly demonstrating to them how scholarship happens,” then we are more likely to teach skills “that are useful in unanticipated settings.” Who among us doesn’t yearn to accomplish that!

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