REPRESENTING CASTE IN THE CLASSROOM:
PERILS, PITFALLS AND POTENTIAL INSIGHT

ELIZA F. KENT

The editors of the June 2000 issue of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion formulated a dilemma facing many of us who teach about Hinduism with the question: Who speaks for Hinduism? We could easily extend this question to the other religions represented in the papers here—who speaks for Jainism? Who speaks for Islam? Who speaks for Buddhism?—or to any religious tradition taught in North American schools. Among the issues raised in that special volume was whether non-Hindus have the right to speak for Hinduism, by which I understand, have the right to represent Hinduism in their scholarship and teaching with authority and the understanding that their representations are valid and should be taken seriously. Four years after the publication of that issue, and six years after the American Academy of Religion conference panel that gave rise to it, I cannot think of many non-Hindus, such as myself, who have stopped speaking for Hinduism. Yet, in response to the serious, thought-provoking objections raised by Hindus against critical representations of Hinduism generated by non-Hindus, many scholars of religion are no doubt more self-conscious when teaching and writing about Hinduism. It is by no means a bad thing, in my view, to be reminded of the limited, partial nature of any one individual’s perspective. But even though we know that we can’t adopt the perfectly objective “view from nowhere” to use Donna Haraway’s apt phrase, we still have to choose the place from which to speak.

One choice that teachers have to make in representing religious worldviews is whether to adopt an emic perspective in relation to the topic or tradition at hand, or an etic perspective. Should one attempt to represent an issue or topic from within the hermeneutical circle of the tradition, empathizing as much as possible with adherents? Or should one adopt a perspective from outside the tradition, not taking on the assumptions of those for whom this view of the world is natural, given and taken for granted? It seems to me this is a choice faced by all of us who teach religion, whether we belong to or identify with the communities who subscribe to the religions we teach or not. If we favor an emic perspective, then which view (or views) from inside should
we pick? Religious traditions are not monolithic. Dominant and subordinate fractions within a tradition will see it in very different ways. Similarly, there are a great many etic perspectives as well. Which critical lens should we adopt when we look at a tradition "from outside"—sociological, feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic? In the following pages I examine the limitations and possibilities of adopting outsider versus insider views in relation to the phenomenon of caste, one of the most difficult "hot button" issues to teach about when introducing students to Indian religion and civilization.

In religious studies, perhaps the most passionate advocate of adopting an emic perspective has been Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who argued that the standard for measuring the accuracy of statements about religion should be the experience and testimony of adherents. In a 1959 article articulating his ground-breaking methodological approach, Smith wrote, "no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers" (Smith 1959, 42). Smith concedes that there are important exceptions to this principle for assessing scholarship. For one thing, he explicitly stated, "the insider can only speak authoritatively about the present." Historians may be able to provide greater insight into the meanings of religious myths and practices of the past. Moreover, he is clear that to abide by this methodological principle is not to assert that everything that adherents say about a religion is true—they can deceive themselves as well as anybody. Most importantly, when Smith argues about the validity of statements about religion he is careful to specify that he means not the external dimensions of religion (the history of institutions, the details of practices, and so forth) but the internal dimension, which he identifies as “faith.” Faith is embodied in what symbols, rituals, and myths mean to those who cherish them. In representing a person's faith, in this sense, one must be led by the believer herself. As he wrote, "an outsider cannot in the nature of the case go beyond the believer; for their piety is their faith, and if they cannot recognize his portrayal, then it is not their faith that he is portraying" (Smith 1959, 42). While some may argue that privileging the "inner meaning" that religious believers find in religious symbols, myths and rituals obfuscates the importance of the social and practical dimensions of religion, this approach certainly provides a corrective to claims by scholars to understand a religion better than adherents do.

In proposing this measure of adequacy of statements about religion, I don’t think Smith is saying that one must formulate statements that all believers would agree to. Such statements would surely be so bland