

## *Book Reviews*



Christopher R. Cotter and David G. Robertson (eds.), *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*. London: Routledge, 2016. 204 pp.  
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*After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies* is concerned with the question of how to teach an introductory course in religious studies without utilizing the *world religions paradigm* (WRP), a highly praiseworthy task, given the almost unquestioned presence of the paradigm as classificatory schema in teaching programs in religious studies, despite its problematic presuppositions and implications. In the introduction, Christopher Cotter and David Robertson, referring to the relevant research, briefly sketch the development of the WRP, including its relation to both the development of the category of religion itself and the impact of scientific, theological, and colonialist motivations in the early “Science of Religion.” Following that, they proceed to a review of the critique of the WRP in the study of religions, focusing on the construction of “religion” after a Protestant Christian model, the WRP’s entanglement with power relations, and its encouragement of “an uncritical *sui generis* model of ‘religion’” (p. 7), dividing religions into “isms” with essence and agency. Cotter and Robertson conclude that “the continued uncritical use of the WRP fosters a breeding ground for relativistic navel-gazing which has no place in the contemporary research university” (p. 10). Having “gained the hegemonic status of ahistorical, universal ‘common sense’” (p. 10), the WRP remains resiliently entrenched in religious studies programs, regardless of having been subjected to sustained and rigorous critique.

After discussing a few “flawed attempts” (p. 13) to avoid the WRP, the editors claim that the WRP, despite its inherent problems, nevertheless has pedagogical value. Some of the chapters in the book outline how “strategically or subversively employing the WRP” (p. 13) can be a rewarding pedagogical technique, when it is not taken as constitutive of reality including “key points” and *sui generis* “facts” but critically discussed as an agenda — and power-laden

concept. The eleven chapters of the book discuss alternative models of teaching a world religions course, avoiding uncritical essentialisms as the WRP itself. They are categorized as “subversive,” “alternative,” and “innovative” pedagogies, critiquing the WRP from within, providing alternative models of studying “religion,” or building on an internalization of the critique, respectively.

In the part on “Subversive Pedagogies: Data and Methods” the WRP is broken up, for example, by teaching about “New Age stuff” in the introductory course (Steven Sutcliffe), showing that category formation “rather than any particular ‘tradition’ is key to the study of religion as a disciplinary field,” even though this is a “tricky balancing act in a market driven by entities and substances” (p. 33). Another example is teaching the WRP as data (Steven Ramey), a constructed discourse that is being critiqued while studied, in order to avoid teaching something that needs to be untaught later. This can easily be done with a world religions textbook, a source that provides both a version of the WRP to be studied and an example of the paradigm to be critiqued, with a focus on the interests that different presentations of materials serve. Thus, the issue of perspective and representation is highlighted, rather than giving the students the impression that they are learning “the truth about a reality outside of the discourse” (p. 57). Of course, this also needs to be reflected in assessment practices.

In the part on “Alternative Pedagogies: Power and Politics,” Craig Martin starts his chapter on religion as ideology with the important issue of student frustration if a world religions course does not meet their expectations when the very subject matter is deconstructed while they expected to be taught the spiritual essentials of the world’s religions. Martin meets these expectations halfway by organizing his courses by a theoretical question while choosing data from the so-called world religions, focusing, for example, on how social reproduction takes place or gender is constructed and contested. His alternative introduction to Christianity, called “the evolution of Jesus,” is a very impressive example, analyzing different interpretations of Jesus in various contexts, including canonical and non-canonical 1st- and 2nd-century texts as well as focusing on “how Jesus is (re)imagined after the rise of the capitalist mode of production” (p. 67). Teemu Taira’s chapter applies a discursive approach to religion to world religions modules, aiming at enabling the students to “think critically about what kinds of classificatory tools and socially negotiated constructs ‘religion’ and ‘world religions’ have been and still are globally” (p. 75).

The chapters in the part on “Innovative Pedagogies: Methods and Media” challenge the WRP-based representation of religions with a focus on, for example, food, the media, or archaeological evidence. Carole Cusack argues