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Our Method



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"NYC Pro-Muslim Rally marching On Sept. 11, 2010," Viktor Nagornyy, from Flickr Creative Commons.



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"Nomad People in Changtang, Ladakh," by Dietmar Temps at Flickr Creative Commons.

Overview

Religions have functioned throughout human history to inspire and justify the full range of agency from the heinous to the heroic. Their influences remain potent at the dawn of the 21st century in spite of modern predictions that religious influences would steadily decline in concert with the rise of secular democracies and advances in science. Understanding these complex religious influences is a critical dimension of understanding modern human affairs across the full spectrum of endeavors in local, national, and global arenas. The Religious Literacy Project provides educational opportunities and resources for *how to recognize, understand, and analyze* religious influences in contemporary life through the overarching theme of conflict and peace and the specific (often intersecting) sub-themes of gender and sexuality, public health, and environmental sustainability. For a variety of reasons dating back to the Enlightenment (including Christian influenced theories of secularization that were reproduced through colonialism) there are many commonly held assumptions about religion in general and religious traditions in particular that represent fundamental misunderstandings. Scholars of religion are well aware of these assumptions and have articulated some basic facts about religions themselves and the study of religion that serve as useful foundations for inquiry.¹

Differentiations

Differentiating Between Devotional Expression and the Study of Religion

First and foremost, scholars highlight the difference between the *devotional expression* of particular religious beliefs as normative and the nonsectarian *study of religion* that presumes the religious legitimacy of diverse normative claims. The importance of this distinction is that it recognizes the validity of normative theological assertions without equating them with universal truths about the tradition itself.

Unfortunately, this distinction is often ignored in public discourse about religion. For example, there is a great deal of contemporary debate about the roles for women in Islam. In truth, there are a variety of theological interpretations of the tradition that lead to different, sometimes antithetical practices and assertions. Equally

¹ See [The American Academy of Religion Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States](#), Atlanta: AAR, 2010. (PDF)

common is that differing communities will have similar practices but with diverse theological justifications.

It is appropriate for members of a particular community to assert the orthodoxy (or orthopraxy) of their theological interpretations of the tradition, but it is important to recognize the difference between a theological assertion of normativity and the factual truth that multiple legitimate perspectives exist. The latter represents the nonsectarian study of religion. This is the approach promoted here and the one most appropriate to advance the public understanding of religion.

There are three other central assertions about religions themselves that religious studies scholars have outlined and that flow from the recognition of the distinction between devotional expression and the nonsectarian study of religion outlined above:

1. religions are internally diverse as opposed to uniform;
2. religions evolve and change over time as opposed to being ahistorical and static;
3. religious influences are embedded in all dimensions of culture as opposed to the assumption that religions function in discrete, isolated, “private” contexts.

Internal Diversity

Religions are internally diverse: this assertion is a truism but requires explanation due to the common ways that religious traditions and practices are frequently portrayed as uniform. Aside from the obvious formal differences within traditions represented by differing sects or expressions (e.g., Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant for Christianity; Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, for Hinduism, etc.) there are differences within sects or expressions because religious communities function in different social/political contexts. One example is the debate mentioned above regarding the roles of women in Islam. The following assertions are also commonly repeated: “Buddhists are nonviolent”, “Christians oppose abortion”, “Religion and science are incompatible”, etc. All of these comments represent particular theological assertions as opposed to factual claims representing the tradition itself.



"Cham Muslim Woman (Vietnam)," Adam Jones (2009), from [Flickr Creative Commons](#).

Religions Evolve and Change

This is another truism but again requires explanation due to the common practice of representing religious traditions without social or historical context and solely (or primarily) through ritual expression and/or abstract beliefs. Religions exist in time and space and are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted by believers. For example, the Confucian concept of the “mandate from heaven” evolved within dynasties, geopolitical regions, and historical eras and continues to evolve today. Another example is that the practice of slavery has been both justified and vilified by all three monotheistic traditions in differing social and historical contexts. Finally, in a more specific example, the Southern Baptist convention in

the United States passed a series of resolutions in the 1970s supporting the moral legitimacy of abortion and reversed those resolutions in 2003.²

Religious Influences Are Embedded in Cultures

Religions are collections of ideas, practices, values, and stories that are all embedded in cultures and not separable from them. Just as religion cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural (including political) contexts, it is impossible to understand culture without considering its religious dimensions. In the same way that race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic class are always factors in cultural interpretation and understanding, so too is religion.



"Holding a vajra empowerment wearing 5 Dhyani Buddha Crowns, lay people, monk, nun, Sakyia Lamdre, Highest Yoga Tantra, Tharlam Monastery of Tibetan Buddhism, Boudha, Kathmandu, Nepal," Wonderlane (2007), from Flickr Creative Commons.

Whether explicit or implicit, religious influences can virtually always be found when one asks "the religion question" of any given social or historical experience. For example, political theorists have recently highlighted the ways that different interpretations of secularism have been profoundly shaped by varied normative assumptions about Christianity.³ This is just one representation of a fundamental shift in political theory that is challenging the legitimacy of the longstanding assertion that religion both *can be* and *should be* restricted to a private sphere and separated from political influence.

Modernist claims predicting the steady decline of the transnational political influence of religion that were first formalized in the 17th century have been foundational to various modern political theories for centuries. In spite of the ongoing global influences of religions in political life throughout this time period, it is only in the aftermath of 1) the Iranian Revolution in 1979; 2) the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the

subsequent rise vs. the widely predicted demise of religion; and 3) the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks that political theorists in the West began to acknowledge the highly problematic ways that religions and religious influences have been marginalized and too simplistically rendered.

This shift is a welcome one and paves the way for multi and cross-disciplinary collaborations with religious studies scholars across the full range of social science investigations in order to explore the complex and critically important roles that religions play in our contemporary world.

² For a full text compilation of all the Southern Baptist resolutions on abortion from 1971-2005, see www.johnstonsarchive.net/baptist/sbcabres.html.

³ See Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); J. Bryan Hehir, "Why Religion? Why Now?" in Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft, eds., *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs* (NY: Oxford, 2012) pp. 15-24; José Casanova, "Rethinking Public Religions" in Shah, et. Al., eds., pp. 25-35; and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "The Politics of Secularism" in Shah, et. Al., pp. 36-54.

Definition of Religious Literacy

The following definition of religious literacy articulated by Diane L. Moore has been adopted by the American Academy of Religion to help educators understand what is required for a basic understanding of religion and its roles in human experience:

Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

Critical to this definition is the importance of understanding religions and religious influences *in context* and as *inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience*. Such an understanding highlights the inadequacy of understanding religions through common means such as learning about ritual practices or exploring “what scriptures say” about topics or questions. Unfortunately, these are some of the most common approaches to learning about religion and lead to simplistic and inaccurate representations of the roles religions play in human agency and understanding.

Cultural Studies

The cultural studies approach to understanding religion that forms the analytical and methodological foundation for the Religious Literacy Project assumes the basic elements of the study of religion outlined above and frames them within a postmodern worldview with the following specific characteristics.

First, the method is multi and inter-disciplinary and recognizes how political, economic, and cultural lenses are fundamentally entwined rather than discrete. For example, economic or political dimensions of human experience cannot be accurately understood without understanding the religious and other ideological influences that shape the cultural context out of which particular political or economic actions and motivations arise. This is the methodological framework related to the third tenet of religious studies above: that religions are embedded in culture and that “culture” is inclusive of political and economic influences.

Second, the method assumes that all knowledge claims are “situated” in that they arise out of particular social/historical contexts and therefore represent particular rather than universally applicable claims. This notion of “situatedness” is drawn from historian of science Donna Haraway's assertion that “situated knowledges” are more accurate than the “god-trick” of universal or objective claims that rest on the assumption that it is possible to “see everything from nowhere.”⁴ Contrary to popular opinion, the recognition that all knowledge claims are “situated” is not a manifestation of relativism whereby all interpretations are considered

⁴ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (NY: Routledge, 1991) p. 191.

equally valid. Rather, "situated knowledges" offer the firmest ground upon which to make objective claims that are defined not by their detachment but rather by their specificity, transparency and capacity for accountability.

Regarding the study of religion, this understanding of "situatedness" offers a tool to recognize that religious claims are no different than other forms of interpretation in that they arise out of particular contexts that represent particular assumptions as opposed to absolute, universal and ahistorical truths. (For example, claims such as "Islam is a religion of peace" and "Islam promotes terrorism" are equally problematic and need to be recognized as particular theological assertions as opposed to ultimate Truths.)

Third, this notion of situatedness applies to the texts and materials being investigated, the scholarly interpreters of those materials, and all inquirers regardless of station. The method recognizes that all forms of inquiry are interpretations filtered through particular lenses. By acknowledging this fact, an essential dimension of the inquiry itself is to identify those differing lenses and make transparent that which would otherwise be hidden.



"Giant standing Buddhas of Bamiyan still cast shadows," DVIDSHUB (2012), From [Flickr Creative Commons](#).

Fourth, the method calls for an analysis of power and powerlessness related to the subject at hand. Which perspectives are politically and socially prominent and why? Which are marginalized or silenced and why? Regarding religion, why are some theological interpretations more prominent than others in relationship to specific issues in particular social/historical contexts? For example, what are the factors that led to the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan and why did their interpretation of the role of women in Islam, for example, gain social legitimacy over other competing claims within the tradition itself?

In another vein, what are the converging factors that lend social credibility and influence to some religious traditions over others and which dimensions of those traditions are interpreted as orthodox and which heretical and by whom? What were the conditions that allowed Muslims, Christians and Jews to live together in relative harmony in medieval Spain and what are the religious influences that have contributed to shaping contemporary tensions in the Middle East and more globally regarding the "war on terror" and "the Arab Spring"?

Fifth, this approach highlights what cultural anthropologists know well: that cultural norms are fluid and socially constructed even though they are often interpreted as representing uncontested absolute truths. This dynamic tension is powerfully demonstrated in social science theorist Johan Galtung's three-pronged typology of violence/peace. This framework also provides an excellent foundation for discerning and representing the

varied ideological influences of religions in human affairs.⁵ What follows is an overview of his typology and examples of how it can be useful for highlighting the significance of religious influences in human experiences across time and place.

Typologies of Violence and Peace

Often referred to as the “Father of Peace Studies”, Norwegian theorist Johan Galtung has developed a three pronged typology of violence that represents how a confluence of *malleable* factors merge in particular cultural/historical moments to shape the conditions for the promotion of violence (and, by inference, peace) to function as normative.⁶

- **Direct Violence** represents behaviors that serve to threaten life itself and/or to diminish one’s capacity to meet basic human needs. Examples include killing, maiming, bullying, sexual assault, and emotional manipulation.
- **Structural Violence** represents the systematic ways in which some groups are hindered from equal access to opportunities, goods, and services that enable the fulfillment of basic human needs. These can be formal as in legal structures that enforce marginalization (such as Apartheid in South Africa) or they could be culturally functional but without legal mandate (such as limited access to education or health care for marginalized groups).
- **Cultural Violence** represents the existence of prevailing or prominent social norms that make direct and structural violence seem “natural” or “right” or at least acceptable. For example, the belief that Africans are primitive and intellectually inferior to Caucasians gave sanction to the African slave trade. Galtung’s understanding of cultural violence helps explain how prominent beliefs can become so embedded in a given culture that they function as absolute and inevitable and are reproduced uncritically across generations.

These forms of violence are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Galtung provides a representation of these intersecting forces in the following commentary on slavery:

Africans are captured, forced across the Atlantic to work as slaves: millions are killed in the process—in Africa, on board, in the Americas. This massive direct violence over centuries seeps down and sediments as massive structural violence, with whites as the master topdogs and blacks as the slave underdogs, producing and reproducing massive cultural violence with racist ideas everywhere. After some time, direct violence is forgotten, slavery is forgotten, and only two labels show up, pale enough for college textbooks: “discrimination” for massive structural violence and “prejudice” for massive cultural violence. Sanitation of language: itself cultural violence.⁷

Galtung’s typology provides a helpful vehicle to discern the complex roles that religions play in all three forms of violence as well as in their corresponding forms of peace. The formulations of cultural violence and cultural peace are especially helpful and relevant. *In all cultural contexts, diverse and often contradictory religious influences are always present.* Some will be explicit, but many will be implicit. Some influences will promote

⁵ Though his own representation of religion is problematic in that he falls victim to making universal claims about religion based on a specific interpretation of one tradition, the typology itself is extremely useful when a more sophisticated and complex understanding of religion is employed.

⁶ Johan Galtung, “Cultural Violence” in *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 27, No. 3. (Aug.,1990), pp. 291-305.

⁷ Galtung, p. 295.

and/or represent socially normative beliefs while others will promote and/or represent marginalized convictions.

For example, in Galtung's illustration cited above, religions functioned to both support and to challenge the moral legitimacy of the transatlantic slave trade and religions continue to function to support and to thwart structural and direct forms of contemporary racism. Similarly, religions currently function in particular ways to shape and support as well as to challenge prominent economic theories and their policy manifestations. In a final example, normative cultural assumptions about gender roles and sexuality in particular social-historical contexts are always shaped as well as contested by diverse religious voices and influences. One has to simply look for these voices and influences in any context and about any issue to find the ways that religions are embedded in all aspects of human agency and experience.

Summary and Conclusion

The Religious Literacy Project represents the following methodological and analytical assumptions about religion:

1. There is a fundamental difference between the devotional expression of a religious worldview as normative and the study of religion which recognizes the factual existence of diverse devotional assertions;
2. Religions are internally diverse;
3. Religions evolve and change;
4. Religious influences are embedded in all aspects of human experience;
5. All knowledge claims (including religious ones) are socially constructed and represent particular "situated" perspectives;
6. There is nothing inevitable about either violence or peace; both are manifest in three intersecting formulations: direct, structural, and cultural and both are shaped by conscious and unconscious human agency where religious influences are always operative.

The country and religion profiles represent these assumptions as do the materials constructed for teachers. We believe that these foundations provide the best tools to understand the complex roles that religions play in human experience, and understanding them will help diminish the negative consequences of widespread religious illiteracy.



Evgeni Zotov, "Priest in Ashetan Maryam Monastery," Ethiopia, [Flickr Creative Commons](#).