In my Introduction to Religion course, I expose students to six different world religions in the space of 12 weeks. As the students and I look at each religion, I attempt to present it both systematically and sympathetically. Systematically in that they learn not just a list of facts, but rather how different aspects of a religion fit together to make a whole. Sympathetically in that the students are learn to respect and take seriously different religions, the way they would like others to treat their own religion. Since Christianity is treated with the same respect and sympathy as other religions, it has always mystified me that some students think that Christianity is "put down."

The problem to which these students refer, I have finally realized, lies not with the question of sympathetic presentation, but with the notion of systematic presentation. Few Christian adults ever receive, let alone study, a systematic presentation of Christianity. The only attempt at systematic presentation that most people receive comes at catechism or confirmation training, usually around ages 11-13. Few churches attempt to provide any sort of systematic presentation of their religion for people who have reached an adult level of intellectual maturity.

This is not to say that churches do not teach adults about their own religion. Far from it, churches teach all the time, most regularly in weekly sermons and adult Sunday school.

Moral issues are regular topics of teaching and discussion. These topics can range from hot-button issues like abortion to the more mundane questions of how to treat your co-worker or your next-door neighbor. They can deal with current events like the Columbine shootings or with more pleasant matters of dating and marriage.

The study and teaching of sacred texts also happens regularly in church settings. Sermons usually cite scriptural passages, and Sunday school and private Bible study further the goal of understanding the meaning of passage from the holy writings.

Theological matters are often topics of sermons and other forms of teaching in churches. The topics chosen for discussion are often linked to church calendars or to current events and issues.

But none of these aims of Christian education is systematic; they instead deal with distinct moral topics, isolated Biblical passages, and various doctrines. They do not add up to a picture of the whole; they remain only parts. It is rare that Christian adults are taught to view their religion as a whole, to understand it in its entirety, and to comprehend how the parts relate to the whole.