

Religion Today
May 8-14, 2005
Is Religious Studies a Zoo?
Paul V.M. Flesher

As a field of study, Religious Studies aims to teach about different world religions. This can be Western religions such as Judaism or Christianity, or Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Jainism. It can teach about large religions, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, or small ones, like Zoroastrianism and Santeria.

As a professor of religious studies, I have taught most of these religions plus many others over the years. While I could not be a member of more than one of these religions, I enjoy teaching them all. I try to present each religion in an objective yet sympathetic fashion so that students can understand how the religions work and why people find membership in them attractive, comforting and "the right thing to do."

Students who come to Religious Studies courses for the first time often arrive with a quite different perspective. Many come from a strong background in one particular religion. They grew up in and were surrounded by family, friends and community members who belonged to that religion. And they led their lives and viewed the people and world around them through that religion. This description applies to many students, whether Catholic, Baptist or Methodist, whether Christian, Hindu or Moslem.

Such students also have the experience that the experts in their religion have always been members of it. So when they come to the university, they bring with them an expectation that their religion class teachers, as "experts," will also belong to the religion being taught. The teacher of Introduction to Judaism will be Jewish, they assume, and the teacher of History of Islam will be Muslim. Not to put too fine a point on it, they assume that Religious Studies is like a zoo, and that the teachers represent the religions they teach. Just as in a zoo, the signs say, "This is a bear," or "This is a moose," there is an implicit assumption that Religious Studies will display members of religions, "This is a Jew," "This is a Christian," and "This is a Hindu." This is simply not the case.

Students have a range of responses when they discover their professor does not belong to the religion being taught in the course.

First, if the course is about a religion to which the students do not belong, the response is an intellectual one. "Oh. OK. Ahh, how did you learn so much about it?" is a typical comment.

Second, if the course is about a religion to which a student belongs and the professor belongs to a different religion, the initial response is one of doubt. The teachers need to prove themselves in order to gain the student's acceptance. This is a common occurrence in Religious Studies courses and usually takes the first few weeks.

Third, it sometimes happens that a course about a student's religion is taught by a teacher who belongs to a religion that the student views with hostility. A course on American Christianity might be taught by a Mormon, a course on Paganism might be taught by a committed Christian, a course on Christianity or the New Testament might be taught by a Jew, and so on. How do students react then?

Students who have taken a Religious Studies course before usually will give the teachers a chance to prove themselves. If this is the students' first Religious Studies course, they will probably drop out before they discover that their teacher brings objectivity and fairness to the class, along with great deal of knowledge. This is disappointing. When this tendency can be overcome and the students are persuaded to give the course a chance, they often become highly interested and involved in the course.

Some faculty attempt to avoid these problems by not divulging their religious identity. I have settled into this strategy over the years. What happens is that my refusal results in extensive speculation. In the years of my teaching, students have suggested that I might belong to three different religions, several types of Christianity, and might even be an atheist. If nothing else, this shows that the "zoo" model of Religious Studies does not work. I can't be a good representative of a religion if the students cannot tell which religion that might be.