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Those of us who have taught the Study of Religion for any length of time are accustomed to the World Religions Paradigms (WRP). We have tended to assume that there exists a number of discrete “world religions”, of which five in particular are worthy of study—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, to which some might add a sixth, namely Sikhism. These tend to be taught as text-based or intellectual systems and, although at times different versions of a tradition are acknowledged (such as Sunni and Shiite Islam), the tendency has been to homogenize, reify, and oversimplify.

Christopher Cotter and David Robertson’s anthology is a timely challenge to such assumptions. It is arranged into three parts: subversive pedagogies, alternative pedagogies, and innovative pedagogies, together with a foreword by James L. Cox, an editors’ introduction, and an afterword by Russell T. McCutcheon. Cox uses the example of the fairly widespread attempt to expound Hinduism in terms of the Upanishadic doctrine of the *atman-brahman* identity, the recognition of which is the key to liberation. Such exposition leaves out popular devotional Hindu spirituality, and would be unrecognized by the vast majority of devotees in India. As Cotter and Robertson contend, such models of religion are frequently based on colonialist, and liberal Protestant Christian, ways of understanding religion, and the various contributors to the volume discuss how such approaches might be corrected.

The “subversive pedagogies” begin with Steven Sutcliffe’s use of the so-called New Age Movement as his material, “teaching against the grain” by demonstrating the difficulty of fitting “new age stuff” into organized categories. By contrast, Steven W. Ramey suggests continuing to use traditional texts, but inviting students to critique them. In the “alternative pedagogies” section, Craig Martin examines the way in which traditional religious categories are used ideologically. Teemu Taira reinforces this with his “discursive approach”, which illustrates how the use of the word “religion” and related vocabulary influences social structures, involving power and domination, while Paul-François Tremlett employs a Marxist model for critiquing traditional approaches to religion. Suzanne Owen examines the concept of “the sacred”—once regarded as the essence of religion—exploring the
differences between adjectival and substantive uses of the word, arguing that objects and places can be made sacred, rather than possess an inherent quality of “the holy” or “the sacred”.

In the third section (“innovative pedagogies”) Dominic Corrywright provides an interesting exercise involving students suggesting classificatory systems for religious groups, while Michel Desjardins describes his course on food and religion, showing how practitioners do not always conform to their textbook stereotypes. David W. McConeghy uses media portrayals of religion, employing the film God in America as a basis for student discussion. Carole Cusack suggests using archaeological discoveries, such as monuments, as the starting point for exploring religion. Whatever approach one chooses to introduce students to religious themes, the chapter by Tara Baldrick-Morrone, Michael Graziano and Brad Stoddard entitled “Not a task for amateurs” aptly points out that introductory courses are often assigned to graduate instructors or temporary lecturers, when in fact it calls for considerable skill and experience.

One of the functions of a book review is to stimulate debate, and in this spirit I would offer the following comments. After World Religions is much to be welcomed as a timely and provocative volume, highlighting the problems that scholars and teachers are called upon to address in the study of religion, and one of its important merits lies in its pedagogical suggestions, over and above the discussion of theoretical issues. Much of their critique of the WRP is pertinent, and deserves serious reflection in our curriculum planning and pedagogy.

One of the book’s problems, however, is that it raises multiple issues, without explicitly distinguishing them. Is the WRP still appropriate? What do we mean by a “world religion”? Is the term “religion” a useful one? Should we teach “lived religions” rather than their theologies or “official” expressions? Should we distinguish between “major” and “minor” religions? Do we reify religions? Which religions or spiritualities should we teach, and do we arbitrarily privilege some above others? Is the subject matter religion sui generis like “the holy” or “the sacred” and if not, what else might it be?

While some deconstruction is undoubtedly needed, due care needs to be exercised, so as to avoid total demolition. When many of us have protested against the closure of Religious Studies departments, we are certainly not doing ourselves any favours if we undermine the concept of “religion” itself. Indeed, a substantial amount of the book’s discussion presupposes traditional categories. Sutcliffe points out that the term is used in interfaith circles, research exercises, and academic departmental names, and one might add census data and legal frameworks. This surely indicates, not merely, as Sutcliffe suggests, that it serves ideological purposes, but rather that it has a use in language. Equally, themes such as food, archaeological monuments, and concepts of Jesus can hardly be discussed without reference to traditionally defined religions. Whether something is or is not a religion is sometimes a question on which we can be asked to adjudicate for legal purposes. We are helping no one, including ourselves, if we claim that religion is not a meaningful category.

The anthology concludes with an Afterword by Russell T. McCutcheon, who attempts to define religion with astronomers’ attempts to define the concept of a planet, and recent controversy about whether Pluto is or is not such an entity, and compares attempts to distinguish between planets, dwarf planets, asteroids and other bodies with our own attempts to distinguish between local, national, folk, popular, embodied, and many other types of religions. His conclusion that we construct our own categories rather than describe eternally and objectively existing ones has some justification, but then again astronomers do not abandon contested categories such as planet and asteroid, let alone astronomy. Science
itself is a contested concept, with blurred edges, but I have not heard any suggestion that the term should be abandoned. Certainly we need deconstruction, but not demolition.

Can reconstruction follow deconstruction? One pedagogical challenge is for scholars of religion not to teach from outmoded textbooks that are no longer fit for purpose, but to devise more acceptable approaches. Might someone, for example, write a book on Buddhism that does not begin with the Buddha’s attaining nirvana through meditation, the formation of the Sangha, its philosophical teachings, and its “spread” through the “northern and southern routes”? Might it be possible to focus on lay Buddhists (the majority), and explore the diverse religious and cultural traditions that absorbed ideas attributed to Buddhists? Any such paradigm shift involves going beyond these much needed methodological discussions, and using methodological tools for the purpose of understanding religious practice.