
Teaching *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Five Minutes*

Seth Schermerhorn

Hamilton College
jscherme@hamilton.edu

Hello. I'm Seth Schermerhorn and I'm currently associate professor and program director of American Studies at Hamilton College. Hamilton College is an elite, private, liberal arts college in traditional Oneida territory in what is today central New York. The College only recently "discovered" Native American and Indigenous Studies. While its Religious Studies Department has perhaps been dwindling in recent years, Hamilton identified so-called "Native and Indigenous Studies" as a strategic initiative in 2022 and allocated substantial institutional resources to build this curriculum, including the creation of two fellowships of two to three years at the College. The College has already hired the first fellow in 2023 and plans to hire the second fellow in 2024.

With this institutional background, in Fall 2023 I taught *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Five Minutes* in a course that I taught for the first time called Indigenous Lifeways. The course is hosted by Hamilton College's American Studies program, which I direct and intend to transform into a new Native American and Indigenous Studies program at the College. There were twenty-six students enrolled in the course. While the class was a 100-level introductory course, enrollees included first-year students through seniors, the vast majority of whom are majoring or plan to major in other concentrations. Most students did not self-identify as 'Indigenous', though several students claimed descent from Indigenous Peoples, usually citing family stories, and some were enrolled members of federally recognized tribes.

In Indigenous Lifeways, *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Five Minutes* was the core and sole text, supplemented with coverage of relevant current events and several documentaries, including the 2017 film *Awake: A Dream from Standing Rock*. I usually assigned three to five chapters from the book per class, which met twice a week. Using the book's title as an estimate, I promoted the course by telling students that they would

be able to complete their homework for each class meeting in as little as fifteen minutes. Consequently, I was far more confident that all of my students were completing their assigned readings before class, particularly since I used to expect my students to complete at least two to three hours of homework for each hour in the classroom. However, over the past eleven years at Hamilton, several students have confessed to me that they spend no more than fifteen minutes doing homework for my classes. And this could very well be an inflated estimate. So, as the saying goes, 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em'. *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Five Minutes* has been the perfect tool for this situation. With eighty-four short chapters of two to three pages each written by dozens of diverse authors on a wide array of subjects across the subfield, the volume is ideal as a springboard for discussion. We never ran out of things to discuss, even when we were only discussing six to nine pages for a 75-minute class.

The editors, Molly H. Bassett and Natalie Avalos, have done us all a huge favor by forcing so many scholars to be so concise. We don't naturally tend to do this, so I hope that the pain of such concision earns a significantly larger audience for our collective work. Moreover, the book powerfully engages students with endlessly divided attention and increasingly limited attention spans. As such, I see the book as the best on-ramp that we have for students who might further cultivate their interest in this subfield. Therefore, not only do I highly recommend adopting the text in your courses, but I encourage everyone to build intro-level courses like mine that feature the book as the core text.

Because the book lends itself to adoption in introductory classes, I am currently developing a pedagogical tool to help teachers and students critically engage with the text by sharing the questions that I have developed to foster discussions on each of the chapters and to encourage students to engage in critical thinking. I am working with a student from the course who is also a web developer and computer science major to create a website that functions as an interactive art exhibit that will lead future students through the assigned text, asking challenging questions of the text throughout. For example, chapters on topics like 'Is repatriation a religious issue for Native Americans?' or 'What does the term "indigenous" mean?' will be further interrogated on the website, which will feature a smoothly animated 3D scene of a bookshelf that users can click through. To accomplish this, the student will use his experience with Blender3D to create digital art models combined with Javascript programming to turn those 3D models into a website. In turn, the website should be useful to both students and teachers who are interested in critically engaging *Indigenous Religious Traditions in Five Minutes*.