Comparative Sacred Texts and Interactive Interpretation: Another Alternative to the "World Religions" Class

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Abstract. *In this article we argue for an introductory course in the study of religion that proceeds through interactive interpretation as a responsible form of comparison. Interactive interpretation proceeds provisionally, and encourages students to formulate new questions of the materials instead of making final categories about the materials. We use examples from a typical classroom to show how we work with three pedagogical principles: (1) critical reading; (2) pluralism within religious traditions as well as between religious traditions; and (3) the use of the working hypothesis as a tool in analyzing religious texts. We also make an argument for textual reading as a form of living intellectual practice, which can work alongside of, and not in opposition to, other approaches to the study of religion, such as ethnographic or historical approaches.*

What is Hinduism? What is Judaism? What is Christianity? What is Islam? What is Buddhism? Our students ask these questions frequently, and many of us respond with a sense that every tradition contains a variety of definitions within it, varieties that shift and change over time. Those who work in the contemporary classroom now very rarely respond to these students' questions with a set definition, or a set of essentialized categories called "the world religions." As a result of legitimate and hard-hitting critiques, most of us have moved away from world religions definitions, in which each religion is a thickly walled container into which we pour knowledge, a set of doctrines, beliefs, and practices unique to itself.

So what of the world religions class? Is there any way to address the thorny questions of representation that have emerged in recent decades? Different kinds of world religions classes have emerged in response to these questions. Some choose to introduce a single tradition, highly contextualized and intensely focused on history and practice, with major focus on the interplay of ethnic, cultural, and racial identities. Others choose comparison between two traditions, an expansion of the first alternative by adding a second tradition. This approach presents comparison that is focused, limited, responsible, and generally recognizable to scholars of both traditions. Still others choose a third alternative – an introduction to a geographical area during a particular historical period. This approach often features religious and political debates both within and among the traditions. A fourth alternative, and one that has endured for several decades now, is a thematic course, such as "pilgrimage" or "ritual," with intense scrutiny of these practices within particular religious traditions – usually, but not always, placed within the same time period. And the list could go on, with variations on the themes described above, and other themes not addressed in these four possibilities.

Is there any room, then, for an introduction to more than two religious traditions – traditions that we used to call broadly "world religions"? Is it possible to present

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anything more than generalized descriptions of traditions to students? Can first-year students engage in comparative activities while still learning the data about the various religious traditions? Based on our more than ten years of classroom experience, we suggest that the answer is "yes." We will discuss the ways this might be possible through the lens of a single course, Comparative Sacred Texts, taught at Emory from 1994 to the present in various forms, and always involving at least four traditions.[1]

Design of the Course

The design of the course is straightforward. We begin with a broad discussion of the study of religion, the nature of comparison, and the nature of provisional topics in the responsible study of religion, about which we will say more below. We also regularly reinforce the idea that each specific topic introduced in the class, like "creation" or "the end of the world," takes very different forms and plays different roles in different traditions. Many students begin the class thinking that a topic like "creation" will have specific parameters. However, through constant readings and rereadings of the texts at hand, students will understand those parameters very differently indeed. For example, in the case of Hindu texts, students find that the primary issue may not be "creation" in and of itself, but rather with "ritual" as a way of putting order and substance into the universe.

We also lead the students into "comparison as interactive interpretation," where one text is used to spark new questions, with no definitive answers in sight. We begin with what we consider "tradition friendly" interpretations of each tradition, namely, interpretations that students who participate in one or another of these traditions recognize as a good interpretation of what the text and the practices associated with it means to them or to their family. As "friendly" interpretations of different traditions emerge in a sequence, students regularly begin to make comparisons on their own. In this context, some students begin to conclude that all religions are really the same even though they may look different, while other students conclude that even when religious traditions appear to be the same they are always different. We challenge this movement into sameness or difference through "interactive interpretation." The issue becomes, "What new questions and understanding emerge about each tradition when the texts are interpreted interactively?"

We also assume from the start that if these ideas are taught carefully, first-year students, or even upperclassmen new to the study of religion, can comprehend both the material we are teaching as well as the critique of comparative work that is inherent in our project. In fact, the real introduction of the comparative procedures occurs, in our experience, as the units unfold. As mentioned above, we introduce the students briefly to these issues at the beginning, but most of their understanding of comparison happens while the students are actually doing the units. The students' understanding of interactive interpretation only occurs in their working through the steps of the units. Indeed, our experience has been that students are excited, intrigued, and engaged by the more self-reflective methods of comparison that come into focus for them as they themselves progress through each unit.

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[1] This course was inaugurated in the spring of 1994 by Professors John Fenton and Gordon D. Newby. Professor Robbins joined the team in the fall of 1994. Professor Patton teamed with Newby and Robbins after Professor Fenton's death in 1996. The course was taught by the three authors from 1997–2000, then by Professors Newby and Robbins from 2001–2007 in a variety of forms. At times the course focused solely on the monotheistic traditions, at other times it included five traditions, and most frequently, it offered four religion traditions. We made heavy use of teaching assistants, both as guest lecturers and associate instructors.

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The syllabus is designed around the topics. We specifically designate them as "topics," not as "categories." It is important to note the reasons for this choice. First, unlike a category, which suggests a static container for concepts and definitions, a topic indicates some possibilities for change over time. Our view is that topics are rich frames of belief, argument, practice, commitment, ritual, and so on. Through our interactive interpretation of texts in these traditions over the years, certain topics have emerged as especially productive for understanding the approach to religious life that is characteristic of each tradition.[2]

Each topic comprises a section of the course. Texts from each tradition are grouped underneath these topics. Major topics that have emerged include "sacrifice," "creation," "end of the world," "texts in everyday practice," "texts in prayer, meditation, and community gatherings," and "texts and gender." We regularly work through three or four basic passages dealing with these topics in each tradition. Students are encouraged to broaden their understanding of texts in a unit by using texts from a previous unit in relation to topics in a later unit. In this way, the students regularly bring texts we discussed in a previous context into a new context. In the process, they sometimes also find other related texts they bring into the analysis and interpretation.

Each section progresses internally through the same traditions, and in the same order. While we vary the order occasionally, we tend to follow the pattern of Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam; or more expansively, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam; or for a more in-depth treatment of the monotheistic traditions, Temple Judaism, Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism (post-temple Judaism), and Islam. We are careful to describe historical changes over time within each legacy of thought and practice, such as the transition from Temple Judaism to Rabbinic Judaism, Vedic practices to classical Hindu practices, and so on within each of the traditions. We have experimented with various combinations in the years we have taught the course. We work comparatively across religious traditions in each section, spending two days on each religious tradition in each unit. This means that each unit contains eight to ten class days. Because we return to each tradition as we move from section to section, students simultaneously accumulate knowledge about each tradition and build the textual repertoire from within the traditions themselves.

We begin each unit with a set of study questions that students are required to answer on the classroom website. These questions are meant to be asked of each tradition. Part of the challenge is for each student to learn how the questions apply to a particular tradition. We divide the questions into a "Descriptive Task" and a "Comparative Task." For example, in the section on sacrifice, we ask the following questions for the Descriptive Task:

(a) Describe the beginning of sacrifice. Describe the process (middle) of sacrifice. Describe where sacrifice ends.
(b) Describe the nature of exchange in sacrifice. That is, describe what is lost or destroyed during sacrifice and what is gained, created, or revealed during sacrifice.
(c) Describe what sacrifice is according to this sacred text.
(d) Describe how this tradition "spiritualizes" or "internalizes" sacrifice.

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[2] *It should be noted that the topics we have chosen have worked particularly well for the instructors of this course and make a productive progression toward teaching the students "about" the various traditions, introducing them to comparative interactive reading and preparing them for advanced work in the study of religions.*

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The Comparative Task is somewhat simple and straightforward in its rhetoric, and quite demanding in its execution:

Compare (a), (b), (c), (d) of the Descriptive Task with a previous tradition or traditions. These tasks are repeated as we move through each tradition, always keeping in mind the larger question of how "sacrifice" appears to function in each tradition.

In other words, the course features the range of meanings and functions of topics in relation to practices and beliefs in each tradition. An important part of the learning process is to become aware that a particular topic may have a very different range of meanings and functions, not only in different traditions but also within each religious tradition itself. For example, when we teach sacrifice, it becomes clear that most traditions have different approaches to this concept in contemporary practice than they did at the times the texts were composed. In addition, different branches of a tradition often differ in their particular focus and practice of sacrifice. We emphasize that each tradition has variety within itself, and that regularly this variety is related to multiple practices and emphases within that tradition in various contexts of its history and cultural formations.

We require at least three site visits at different points in the semester, and we have discovered that these visits regularly bring the students to a new level of understanding what we are trying to teach them in the classroom. Each student is expected to visit sites representing traditions not his or her own. Atlanta is rich in recent immigrant communities as well as older more established ones. Religious diversity is one of its great attributes. Thus, we are able to provide students with a list of four or more sites in each of the traditions we are teaching. For each site visit, we ask the students to look particularly at the use of sacred texts in various ritual contexts and to address particular questions about their use in those contexts.

The principle behind the site visits is that texts are living objects within living traditions. We have a brief discussion with students about the "protocol" for visiting different religious sites, and there are guidelines for them to read beforehand. Each student is asked to write a report of his or her visit. Guidelines for these reports ask students to describe the sacred text the religious community used in the setting and give a physical description of the text if one is visibly present. We also ask them to describe the content of the specific texts read or recited during the service and to cite the specific location of the passages if they are able to get this information. They are asked to describe the setting in which people used the text, the different things people did with the text, and most importantly *who* was allowed to do things with the text. We ask students to consider whether there were hierarchies among those who used it, or special "job categories" for using it, based on age, education, gender, office, and so on. We emphasize that students should find an informed person at the site whom they can ask questions about the various things they have seen and heard. We ask students to make a final assessment of how central the sacred text was, in both oral and written form, to the activity of the group in the setting. Finally, we ask students to compare what they saw and heard with what they have seen and heard in a similar context in another religious tradition, whether it is their own tradition or one they simply have observed as an outsider.

By designing site visits this way, we try to help the students understand how texts and practices are deeply intertwined. We know teachers who assert the irrelevance of texts in certain religious practices, or who treat texts as if they were "dead" and practice as if it were "living." For us, all forms of religious practice are "living," including

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textual practices. In their site visits, students learn that people are relating to, interpreting, asserting the authority of, and rebelling against religious texts on a daily basis. They are also doing many other things, and here, too, we try to get them to see the ways in which other forms of religious practice exist alongside textual practice.

In addition to their weekly writing assignments, students take an exam at the end of each section or topic (called "units") of the class. They also take a final exam that challenges them to integrate various skills and topics that have been emphasized throughout the semester. Because of the heavy writing and reflection involved, this class has come to be known as an extremely rigorous course, but one that will help them master the basics of any given religious tradition.

Two Days in the Life of the Class

Given this background, it might be helpful to readers to describe a "typical day" in the classroom. We chose two examples, both involving the idea of sacrifice in different religious traditions and changing attitudes toward it over time. Our first example is the first and second day of the sacrifice section in the Jewish tradition. Our second example is the first and second day of the sacrifice section in the Hindu tradition.

In the first class session of a unit, we usually spend some significant time getting students in a "sacrificial" frame of mind. We ask: How is sacrifice central to building a community of people? Why would people find sacrifice an effective way to be in the world? How does sacrifice communicate practices of offering portions of life and giving gifts? How does sacrifice communicate the idea of giving something up, and what can be some of the goals of giving something up? How does sacrifice communicate ritual performance as a way of life?

For the first day of the sacrifice unit in Hebrew traditions, students will have read selections from the *Harper Collins* or *Oxford Annotated Study Bible,* including Leviticus, chapter 4–5, describing the purification and reparation offerings for both intentional and unintentional sins; Numbers 9, describing the observance of Passover at Sinai; and Deuteronomy 16, describing the different festivals in ancient Israel, such as the festival of unleavened bread, the festival of weeks, and the festival of booths. They will also have read Exodus, chapter 19–20, 24, and 32–34, describing the consecration of the people by Moses, the Ten Commandments, the blood of the covenant, the offerings for the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the episode of the golden calf, and the renewal of the covenant. We use these texts to establish several basic ideas: the role of rituals to set things apart as holy; the idea of purity and pollution; the role of blood in making people holy; the role of a priest in mediating the relationship between God and humans; the role of Moses in transmitting the rules of daily life as well as the rules of sacrifice; the centrality of sacrificial offering as symbolic of the covenant between God and the Israelites; and the ancient understanding of festivals as part of the larger worldview involving sacrifice.

On the second day, we look at Isaiah 1:10–17. (If we have time, we also discuss the early and late medieval arguments about the nature of sacrifice in the absence of the temple, for example, *Pirkei Avoth* and *Talmud Berachoth* 26b.) We explore with the students the ways in which the text of Isaiah argues that Jerusalem is the city in which God chose to dwell. Therefore, it follows that God does not tolerate moral laxness within those sacred precincts. Thus, Isaiah preaches that the ritual acts of burnt offerings of rams (1:11) and appointed festivals (1:14) make God weary; indeed, they are an abomination to him (1:13). The only possible effective cleansing is not ritual, but moral:

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"learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:17).

In this section, we ask, given our understanding of sacrifice as a worldview, what kinds of criticisms could be made from within a tradition? What does Isaiah emphasize, and why? We ask students to pick out phrases and lines in the text that express what Isaiah is trying to communicate. We also focus on the idea of internal critique within a tradition, and the ways in which what we call a "tradition" in the singular is always inherently plural. We also make sure to emphasize that while Isaiah might be critical of the moral practices of those living in Jerusalem, this does not mean that the Jewish tradition from then on understood sacrifice as inherently wrong. Rather, Jewish history, like all religious histories, veers back and forth in its debates about these practices.

Since there regularly are many Jewish students in the class, we encourage them to speak about their own traditions' views about texts where sacrifice is discussed, such as in their contemporary prayer books. We invite students to contribute to the discussion by asking the class what knowledge they have of contemporary Jewish rituals, and going from there. We have found the Passover Haggadah to function exceptionally well in this unit. To take another example of engaging students who are familiar with Judaism, we have also incorporated contemporary Jewish Reform arguments about the exclusion of specific sacrificial rituals from the Reform liturgy and daily practice. We use these internal arguments in Judaism to broaden and deepen the understanding of sacrifice. In this context, it becomes clear that what the Reform tradition understands as sacrifice is a dynamic reconfiguration of Leviticus through the lens of Isaiah, that there are contemporary Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox responses to this reconfiguration, and so on.

In our second example, we turn to the first day and second day in the Hindu unit on sacrifice. We begin with reading texts about Vedic sacrifice, such as the Invocation of Agni, the Hymn to the Funeral Fire, the hymn about the horse sacrifice, and the hymn about the dismemberment of the cosmic man. We move on to the texts of ritual philosophy, called the Brahmanas, which discuss the stories explaining the efficacy of sacrifice. We focus particularly on the origins of correct sacrificial performance, such as stories about the creation of fire (called "the eater") in early Indian sacrificial texts, and stories about the origins of death and the fire altar. In our discussion of early Indian attitudes toward sacrifice, we focus on sacrifice's power to create and maintain the world. We emphasize that, in early Indian traditions, sacrifice is fundamentally creative and is present at the beginning of the formation of the universe. We also remind students, as we read through the texts, on the distribution of the body parts of the cosmic man, and how later texts pick up on this theme. Finally, we show the ways the early Indian texts depict the failure of sacrifice, and why sacrifice must be attempted again and again in order to "get it right."

The second day, we turn to the *Bhagavad Gita* (3:1–20; 4:1–30), a text several centuries later than the early Indian sacrificial writings, now considered one of the central texts of contemporary Hindu thought and practice. The *Gita* argues that sacrifice is empty if it is performed with an excessive regard for the results of sacrifice. Moreover, in reading the text together we learn how, for the *Gita*, there are two possible ways of being in the world: the path of action, which includes sacrifice, and the path of enunciation, which would move away from such action toward a life of meditation and yoga. But even in the *Gita*, sacrifice is not fully replaced. Rather, it is reformed so that those who sacrifice focus more on the action itself than on the outcome. Here, too, we emphasize the issue of

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critique within the tradition itself, and point out the variety of voices arguing about the value and meaning of sacrifice within a tradition.

The inclusion of students familiar with Hindu thought and practice is especially important during this second day. Because Hinduism is less well-known in the United States, it is important to emphasize that sacrifice as it was elaborately performed in ancient India is not common for "everyday" Hindu life in contemporary India or in the United States. However, the idea of offering, even offering into a fire, is still very much part of Hindu practice. In other parts of the class, we focus on *puja*, the honoring of deities in a temple, as one of the mainstays of Hindu practice. We bring in Hindu students who might be familiar with the *Gita*, and explore ways the passages teach the wisdom of everyday life even when they are talking about sacrifice. At the end of this unit, we compare Isaiah's critique and the *Gita*'s critique of sacrifice. In the spirit of the class described above, we encourage students to ask new questions of the texts. Thus, Isaiah focuses on God rejecting the sacrifice as a moral "wake-up call" to those who are not paying attention. So too, based on their reading of Isaiah, students might ask, "How might there be a wake-up call in the *Gita*? What is the *Gita*'s understanding of a moral path?" Conversely, the *Gita* focuses on the possibility of multiple paths, one of which includes sacrifice. So too, based on our reading of the *Gita*, we might ask of Isaiah, "How might multiple paths be discussed in the text?"

Thus, by the end of the two units, students have begun to learn the following points: (1) the multivalent nature of attitudes toward sacrifice in each tradition, (2) the internal critiques of sacrifice within each tradition, and (3) ways in which interactive interpretation can prompt students toward new questions in each case. We also stress that we cannot fully represent the entirety of attitudes toward sacrifice in any of these traditions. We give students supplemental readings to show more in-depth possibilities.

While we have chosen the examples of Hindu and Jewish texts about sacrifice to illustrate the dynamics of a particular class, it is important to note here that students have the same kinds of insights when they are interpreting Christian and Islamic texts. As should be clear from the description of the class, comparative readings can and do occur in all kinds of combinations of traditions and across the many different topics introduced through the semester. We have noticed that students tend to be drawn to comparisons that are particularly relevant to their experiences. For example, Christian students with Jewish classmates tend to be fascinated by the close readings of those two traditions together. Hindu students with family in India tend to be compelled by the Hindu-Muslim comparative readings, and so on. However, students are also compelled to go outside their comfort zone of comparison. For example, Christian-Muslim interactive interpretations tend to be very useful as we as American citizens continue to grapple with the effects of the attacks of September eleven.

The Principles behind the Pedagogy

As should be clear from our descriptions above, our class is informed by several commitments. Perhaps our most important conviction is that recent ideas about responsible comparison in the study of religion can and should be translated into introductory-level teaching. What is more, we emphasize basic skills that we think have atrophied in the university curriculum in the study of religions: (1) critical reading; (2) an awareness that variety exists *within* every tradition, rather than only between traditions; and (3) experiences with categories and topics as powerful but provisional working hypotheses.

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Learning to Read

Let us turn to the most basic of the principles we outlined above – that of responsible reading. As each text is introduced, we teach the skill of close reading, which we understand as a transferable skill that moves across many different college and classroom contexts. To take an example from our descriptions above, students learn the specifics of the imagery from Isaiah in order to describe, from their own reading, how the prophet is criticizing sacrificial performance. Because they have read the earlier sacrificial texts from Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus, they can learn to recognize the references that Isaiah might be making.

We emphasize this skill of reading, and the companion skill of expressing the results of close reading in writing, because it has become clear to us, as well as to most university professors, that the ability to read critically has dramatically decreased in the past few decades. In our collective experience, we have found that critical reading is frequently directly at odds with the practice of identity politics, where students read to confirm what they already know. Students rarely read to learn something new, or to *dis*-confirm a basic and passionately held view about the world.

Our idea of critical reading is commonplace, and will not surprise any of the readers of this journal: it involves the ability to think logically, using evidence, inference, and attention to historical context as cognitive tools. If a religion class can help students with these basic and universal skills, then we will have accomplished a great deal. The topic of religion forces a student to be specific and clear in his or her reading practices; it also forces a student to deal with a number of different levels of reading in a single text.

Our approach to reading also involves understanding the significance of the larger issue of intra as well as intertextual citations. In this emphasis, we follow the approach of Vernon K. Robbins, in *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (1996). Robbins emphasizes a holistic hermeneutic in which no interpretation of a text is ever complete, but should involve as many different layers as possible. These layers include the "inner texture," such as repetition, argumentations, speech patterns, and so on; "inter texture," such as the use of language from other texts and language of daily speech; "social and cultural texture," such as the support of social reform or opposition to difference or exclusion within the text; "ideological texture," such as specific alliances and conflicts within the text concerning other social groups in the text; and "sacred texture," language that addresses the relation of the human to the divine.[3] It should be clear that our general emphasis in the class is more on the first two approaches of "inner texture" and "inter texture," but we do touch on all five approaches in our background lectures and class discussions. (Students do not actually read selections from *Exploring the Texture of Texts* during the semester. Rather, this book informs the instructors of the course concerning major ways it is possible to read a text.)

The Importance of Debates Internal to Each Tradition

Our choice of texts for the class emphasizes internal debate among members of each tradition. Thus, for example, in some versions of the syllabus, we have in the sacrifice

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[3] See especially pages 3–4 for an overview of this approach. We have also had the opportunity to write in a more research-oriented vein with this comparative sacred texts approach. See, for instance, Vernon K. Robbins and Gordon D. Newby, "A Prolegomenon to the Relation of the Qur'an and the Bible" (2003, 23–42) and Laurie L. Patton, "Fire, the Kali Yuga, and Textual Reading" (2000, 805–806.)

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section three examples of texts from what are now called Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. The texts within each tradition are substantively different from one other, and many of them criticize the earlier texts from within the same tradition. As stated in the descriptions above, in the Jewish section on sacrifice, we show both the extensive sacrificial worldview in Biblical texts, as well as the prophetic texts' hard-hitting critique of the emptiness of such performance if done without a moral core. In the Hindu section on sacrifice, we include Vedic sacrificial texts, where both the world-creating ideology and the practice of sacrifice are described, as well as the *Bhagavad Gita*, where sacrifice is explicitly criticized in so far as it constitutes obstructive clinging to the external fruits of action. When the students examine Islamic sacrifice within the *Hajj* ceremony, their reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*'s critique of sacrifice gives them a new perspective on The Qur'an's statement that only devotion and not flesh and blood reach Allah (Q. 22:37). Likewise, students' examination of Christian sacrifice creates an additional range of highly multivalent interactive issues and dimensions. The Gospel accounts of Jesus's death and its cosmic effects in the context of Passover in Jerusalem raise poignant issues concerning the sacrifice of the horse in the Vedic literature and the killing, eating, and distribution of the camel or other animal in the Hajj. In addition, Jesus's statements in the Last Supper accounts, and the spiritualization of the eating of Jesus's flesh and drinking of his blood in the Gospel of John, raise substantively new interactive questions about the spiritualization of flesh and blood in the Hajj ceremony and the *Bhagavad Gita*'s focus on the internal, spiritual nature of sacrifice.

One of the more important principles we iterate throughout this process is that each tradition will inevitably argue with itself, as well as with other traditions, at different moments in history. We suggest throughout the class, in both introductory and textual material, that any religious assertion is a response to another assertion, which immediately brings us to textual contexts that occur within a tradition.

Most often in the course we have stated that the religious assertions in the texts are responses to phenomena in the world in which people live. In this way, texts are first and foremost "arguments" about the nature of the world and life in it. What naturally happens is that different people and groups in each tradition present different arguments about those phenomena and how to live in the midst of them.

The Role of Provisionality, or Topics as Working Hypotheses

The use of supplemental readings in these cases should not be underestimated. Indeed, there is a theoretical significance to our providing further readings. We ask explicitly: are these texts we are studying enough to be fully representative of sacrifice in the Jewish and Hindu traditions? And we answer explicitly: of course not. Rather, we continuously remind the students that these texts are invitations to further study, portals to a much larger world. Moreover, we show that many of the indigenous terms are not fully translatable by simple English words, and that the best we can do is develop a set of family resemblances for the purpose of furthering inquiry. We prefer to call each comparative move a provisional move, or even a "working hypothesis."

In this, we follow the work of Benson Saler and William Paden,[4] who argue for a particularist and highly controlled kind of comparative work. In this class, students do

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[4] *See, among many other recent works, Benson Saler, "Comparison: Some Suggestions for Improving the Inevitable" (2001, 267–276) and William Paden, "Comparison in the Study of Religion" (2004, 77–92).*

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not actually read the writings of Saler and Paden. Rather, their work informs ways in which the instructors approach interpretation in the course. As Paden puts it, while most agree that it is deeply problematic to work with a singular concept of "religion" that is to be explained by the constraints of a singular cultural framework, the comparative perspective can still function as a kind of testable hypothesis that constantly moves back and forth between the commonly shared and the culturally specific. In Paden's words, "the comparative perspective here moves back and forth between the continuity of common functions and the contrastable differentials of historical specificity and context" (2001, 76–89).

To take the Jewish and Hindu examples above, the students understand that they can move back and forth across traditions by asking how sacrifice is both advocated and criticized in each case. In this way, students learn that well-formulated questions regularly are more important than definitive conclusions in the study of religion. For example, how can the arguments about sacrifice in the Hindu case help me ask better questions of the Jewish arguments. We emphasize that it is important to continuously renew questions rather than to rush to definitive conclusions. In the class sessions, we help students find ways to renew their questions about sacrifice in either tradition, rather than to move quickly to assertions that one tradition does things one way, while another does it another way. The progress of our comparisons in the class, then, is never a single one-way journey toward sameness, but rather a dynamic movement back and forth between sameness and difference. This is what we call "interactive interpretation." In addition to being theoretically more sophisticated, we have found that this kind of movement is more exciting to the students.

The Role of Interactive Interpretation

As was clear from our examples of typical class days, above, as we move from one tradition to another in the progress of the class, we also move toward the exercise of interactive interpretation. Here, again, we do not have the students read theoretical work about interactive interpretation, but our own understanding and teaching of this material has been informed in particular by the ideas of Francis Clooney, whose recent works include *Theology After Vedanta* (1994) and *Seeing Through Texts* (1996). In the final chapters of both books, he argues for placing two texts from two different traditions (in his case, Hinduism and Christianity) alongside each other and letting each text raise questions about how one might read the other text. The process constantly moves back and forth, so that each text becomes the interpretive frame of the other, and no single tradition can claim the dominant hermeneutic. Bart B. Bruehler, who taught as an assistant in our class, presents an interpretation of a chapter from the *Bhagavad Gita* and the New Testament letter of Ephesians that exhibits on a scholarly level how interactive interpretation has worked in the class.[5]

To illustrate the context of our class even further, we continue to follow the example of sacrifice here. We explore Hindu traditions right after Jewish ones. We build on what we know of Jewish traditions of and arguments about sacrifice when we turn to Hindu

[5] *Bart B. Bruehler, "Karma Yoga and Christian Ethics: Reading Bhagavad Gita 3 in Light of Ephesians 4–6," (2006). For the opposite approach, a Hindu reading of the New Testament texts, see Acharya, Manca and Namjoshi, editors,* A Dialogue: Hindu-Christian Cosmology and Religion *(1999). While these works focus on Hinduism and Christianity, the bibliography of this kind of comparative juxtaposition in other traditions is expanding rapidly.*

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ones. We begin by stating that the point of the comparison is not to build up a "category" of sacrifice, but rather to open it up, question it, and make it provisional. What are the connotations of each word, both in Hebrew and in Sanskrit, as well as in Indian vernacular languages? Can we even say they are the same thing? What new hypothesis might we develop about the process we call "sacrifice" in English by juxtaposing the two texts? For example, in reading Hindu texts students learn that sacrifice proceeds by a process of trial and error, and must be "got right" before it can be an appropriate offering to the gods. Moreover, sacrifice occurs at the beginning of creation, and is often the instrument of creation. How does this character of Hindu texts create new questions for us to go back and reread the Hebrew text of Leviticus 1–7?

Students often comment that after reading Hindu texts, they begin to ask about the relationship between sacrifice and creation in Biblical traditions – two themes that are not usually juxtaposed in introductory courses. Moreover, they see more clearly that creation itself is also not a fully completed process in the Biblical narratives. They internalize this basic fact more permanently than they would if they had not read the Hindu texts. The same intellectual process occurs for all of the topics of the class, and the interactive interpretations can become very complex indeed. We have had very exciting "interactive interpretations" between Hindu texts about yoga and Islamic texts about "inner *jihad*"; and among Jewish Psalms asking God for a clean heart, the Christian Sermon on the Mount, and chapters 2 and 5 of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The list of possibilities is both invigorating and endless.

Challenges and Queries

The Interactive Approach in a Plural Educational Environment

We have presented many of these ideas about the class, and about teaching comparative sacred texts overall, in a variety of local, regional, and national contexts. A question that people frequently ask us is whether the students can handle all of this material in an introductory class. Our experience has been that such an approach is actually quite compatible with the diverse demography that Emory has intentionally tried to build. Not only are our students open to these ideas, but these ideas are actually more appropriate to a classroom that has more diversity than ever before. Our regular classroom has comprised anywhere from thirty-five to seventy students. Of the students who self-identify, we regularly have about five to ten Muslims, ten to fifteen Jews, five to ten Hindus, three to five Buddhists, and ten to twenty Christians, and five to ten students with a secular background or no particular religious background. Such a makeup means that students are already living in an environment where no single tradition truly dominates. Negotiation of plural identities within oneself and with others is the name of the game: in other classes, in the drama club, and on the sports field. Breaking open larger essential categories about religion is a recognizable intellectual process to students, because they come with a sense of religion that is already plural. It is also a recognizable process to students because they are very much invested in breaking down stereotypes about their own traditions in the face of the views of others. Breaking open a comparative category is one more step in that process.

Indeed, the course works best in an environment where students come to the class with an expectation of living in and negotiating through a religiously plural environment. Most students at Emory have these kinds of pluralistic experiences and expectations, but we understand that this may not be the case for all teaching environments. In

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that case, we would recommend reducing the number of traditions taught, and spending more time on the basic issues in the study of religion. Because our syllabus has focused on as few as three and as many as five traditions, we have experience with a range of comparative possibilities.

We realize that many different kinds of classroom environments exist – some more diverse than our own, and some less. We think that the basic structure of the course can be modified to address different kinds of classroom demographies.

The Problem of Technology

We are also aware that in our course we use a great deal of technology. During our international presentations, we have discussed the fact that many universities in less wealthy countries may not be able to access the web regularly for a joint reading experience with the entire class. Many may not be able to afford the numerous books from which these texts come. In that case, we recommend that a small reader be assembled comprising most of the selections of texts, probably including fewer traditions for comparison in order to cut down on photocopying expenses. In the early days of the class, we regularly prepared a reader of just this kind for students.

The Problem of Selectivity

In addition, some have queried whether we are teaching from the "abstract" to the "particular," and perhaps allowing our own principles of selectivity to guide the readings. Our response to this concern is that as long as one is clear and straightforward about one's principles of selectivity, comparative work can be an invitation to students for further research. Readjustment of the selection of texts or the addition of new texts has been an exciting part of the process of "interactive interpretation" among the instructors of the class. By assuming that any category of analysis is provisional, we also assume that significantly different selections of texts can provide wonderfully different experiences. Also, in certain circumstances, reference to texts that have been left out of the syllabus, with a few brief remarks about what their inclusion might add to the discussion, can be very instructive. For example, while we are teaching the *Gita's* critique of sacrifice, it is natural to mention that there were many who disagreed with this critique and who developed alternative theories and manuals for sacrificial procedure in ancient India as a result. We have found that, if presented clearly, such explanations of our own principles of selectivity give students an exciting sense of the richness of the field.

Concluding Thoughts

One final query we have made to ourselves and our colleagues: are we not simply reifying the age-old idea that religion is comprised of texts and not practices? We have found the contrary to be true. By focusing on texts in a new way, we have been able to link texts to practices in new and exciting ways. Moreover, we use "text" itself as a provisional category that can be overturned and challenged as soon as it ceases to be a helpful description of what the student has encountered – whether in a site visit or reading in the library. In many of our conversations and lectures, we develop the idea of textual practice rather than a reified "text" in its own right. In addition, our colleagues in the college are now developing new ideas about how to teach the class; one new version is being developed which focuses almost exclusively on ethnographic ways of teaching comparative sacred texts. This is an exciting development indeed, because we have sparked a genuine pedagogical conversation.

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Finally, one of our major assumptions overall about recent theoretical critiques of comparison is that if it cannot be taught at an introductory level, then it is not effective critique. We feel an obligation to translate into classroom practice what has been said at the more advanced level in journals and other venues. If scholars of religion cannot do that, they have failed in their theorizing. But if scholars of religion *can* do that, then they have perhaps succeeded after all in developing genuinely new approaches with which to train students.

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