

LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR STUDYING WORLD RELIGIONS

Rev. Dr. Tim Dissmeyer

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**There is a huge difference between
throwing darts at global problems
and sincerely working for real peace,
between complaining about
what isn't working
and dedicating oneself
to working with others
to making relationships work that should work,
that must work well to establish healthy
networks and foundations
for fresh and authentic peace
throughout humankind.**

Humanity in the twenty-first Century is facing one of the most fascinating learning opportunities it has ever faced: that of studying the many different religious traditions around the globe in comparison with each other using postmodern tools of analysis. As more lay persons and scholars examine the role these traditions are playing altogether and individually in contemporary social issues there is greater accountability being expected for the reasons for the general lack of religious literacy and for how much violence and misunderstanding is perpetrated by religious forces in today's world. To see this occurring today one need only review the recent wave of publications by popular atheists and their arguments for how religion is guilty of causing human suffering and injustice. This paper addresses the way this general accountability is being promoted today. It attempts to equip anyone studying religious traditions with skills and tools for responsible learning. Why is this so urgent? To make it possible that more students can and will ask how religions can become a force for comprehensive and intentional change, how faith relationships across our global society can generate greater honoring of historic traditions and at the same time collaborate towards a more compassionate and peaceful future for all humanity.

We see the rapid growth of such religious studies in the greater number of published and recorded resources, the variety of classes, senior citizens courses and internet web sites as well as the number of community interfaith efforts and the availability of speakers for such study are growing rapidly. Religious courses studies at community colleges and the growing

interest in spirituality among college students, the expanding religion sections of local bookstores, the reference to religious issues on the evening news and in newspapers and news magazines all provide a growing challenge to us to try to understand what is going on. We see examples of this challenge in Sunni versus Shia conflicts within Islam in Iraq, in the force of evangelical Christianity in our electoral process, perhaps in the life style of our Hindu neighbors down the street, surely in social studies our children are given in middle school and the fascination in our spiritual readings of Sufi and Jewish mystics. As a result our choices are increasing as to what we will dedicate time and effort so that our views of our own and others' traditions are informed and our behavior (from the voting booth to the local restaurant) is respectful.

Of course we may always freely choose to be uninformed and disrespectful, to be narrow-minded and prejudiced, to be uncaring and indifferent. We may pretend for a while that being informed is unnecessary, that socially things don't need changing from what we prefer to see as "the way things always have been and cannot ever be changed." Or on the other hand we may decide that cynicism and hard-heartedness offer us sufficient escape from acting responsibly to work for improvement of things. Such a view locks into "Nothing ever changes", or "Things are getting worse and terrible, woe is us" hopelessness. I propose that such views are not helpful or accurate in being responsible for creating a better world for ourselves and our children. Such views take no responsibility for resolving the tragic and reoccurring religious violence we see today. They corner us into ethical dead ends which leave us embittered and self-justified victims within a hell of our own making.

Or we can freely take a renewed look at real learning possibilities and practical local actions that normal and ordinary citizens can make to make this a better world for ourselves and our posterity.

This essay supports anyone who is serious about expanding their knowledge of religion's today. It provides a series of strategies for how one can examine alone and in group and classroom settings the nature of religious traditions. It suggests how one might prepare to live more fully, more responsibly and more peacefully in the increasingly diverse and difficult social environment in the globe today.

As you sincerely study world religions, there are two levels of engaging in the learning process. The first level is the grounding level, the crucial activity of just objectively observing, reading, watching video material, listening to music, perhaps participating in a ritual or celebration, engaging

in a conversation with an adherent of the tradition. Without this you have nothing or very little to work with, but with which you can begin to accurately expand your understanding. This is the level where you gather what many call the facts and basics of the religious tradition you're studying. Is this tradition indigenous to the region where it is chiefly found, or is there one or more founders? Did this tradition experience hardship in its early period, such as opposition or persecution? Where is a specific tradition found? How many adherents are there? Are there factions within this tradition? If so, how did they occur? This process should be on-going as your understanding grows.

The second level is the deeper level at which the student of one or more religious traditions reflects on how they are doing as they grasp specific details and then goes on to interpret their information with the goal being to support responsible actions to create a more just and peaceful society. Are they "connecting the dots", can they make sense of the data they are collecting, are there gaps in their understanding, do they relate their knowledge to events in current news? The following suggestions are not sequential nor isolated. Any of them can be used in any order. They amount to study tools for creating one's own interreligious toolbox of skills for living in today's complex and challenging world of many religions and diverse religious options. If students use any or all or none of these suggestions, the clear fact remains: there is no real or significant learning without real and significant change occurring in the student. To truly learn is to be transformed, to grow, to deepen one's understanding, to improve on the quality of one's relationships. I invite you to consider each and all of these learning strategies and ways to engage in and monitor the changes that are already underway both within individual learners and among the learner's existing relationships within the changes already underway across the globe and in every society.

1. Record your insights. Capture in your own words the wisdom you gain as you study religious traditions. Write down and keep track of the breakthrough's, the "aha!'s, the general enlightenment one feels as study progresses. For example: "the Hindu concept of Karma sounds like our "what goes around come around." Such writing can be in short phrases, clauses, terms, or in lengthy explanations of concepts and behavior. In any case I strongly suggest you assign the day's date when you write, whether the entry is brief or lengthy. This will allow you to evaluate your progress over time.

2. Journal deep questions, not just concepts or religious terms you don't yet understand. For example, "Are the Jewish concept of sin and the Christian

concept of sin identical?” Or, “do Christians and Muslim’s worship the same God?” These questions can be a part of the Insight Record from the above step #1, or be journaled separately, but in either case they should be similarly dated to permit later evaluation of your progress. The questions raised should free one’s learning to raise further and especially deeper questions, which in turn may bring to mind and heart even more questions. Among all of these questions, there may and there may not be ready answers. Some answers may in fact merely state that there are no answers, or that the questions asked serve powerfully to identify that there are some questions to which only mystery and wonder reply.

3. Consider unlearning stereotypes and prejudices. Our culture is teeming with popular stereotypes about Islam (it is always violent), about Catholicism (the Pope is a dictator who dictates both the behavior and opinions of all Catholics), about almost every religion which is not of the traditional nineteenth Century Protestant variety. We should as in any authentic learning process be willing to adjust, revise and possibly re-create our prior learnings when they are proven to be unfounded, inaccurate or irresponsible. The result is to correct as thoroughly as possible any misrepresentations, the misperceptions and the misconceptions which arise as these traditions are handed down through the culture.

4. Consider re-learning beliefs and tenets, behaviors and stories which you once knew but have either forgotten or misplaced in your memory. This can be a special opportunity to deepen your own spiritual tradition. But make this attempt from your current position in life and with your added experience. Remember that the entire process of studying other religious traditions brings with it the potential significant benefit of leading the student back to their childhood or original tradition from a more mature and informed and realistic perspective. Perhaps a fresh appreciation for once familiar beliefs and rote exercises can arise. Patience and humility in the learning process are always helpful. One desirable result can be that one’s own religious faith is actually deepened and focused as never before. In fact enhancing one’s own faith can be a very real result of any serious study of he world’s other traditions. So as one honors other religious expressions one’s own religion is honored as well: clearly how one treats others is the personal key to how others relate to you and your tradition.

There is one precaution here: many students of religion have succumbed to the temptation to dishonor their original or “mother” tradition. Having grown up within a faith, many develop a fierce urge to rebel, to severely judge the “warts” and “rug burns” one has learned and experienced throughout one’s early faith journey. The result becomes an entrenched attitude that is popularly described as “the grass is greener on the other side

of the fence.” The problem then becomes one of being blinded by this attitude so thoroughly that it becomes impossible to notice any warts on the new side of the fence. This adage is corrected by the common wisdom that no matter which side of the fence you end up on, the grass still needs mowing. An additional problem can be that this student of religion continually converts from green field to another field, to still another field, thereby becoming almost a professional life-long green grass hunter and fence jumper, never staying long enough in any one field or within any one faith tradition to experience deeply its genuine wisdom. I am not arguing here that all conversions are inauthentic or spiritually unhealthy. I am calling for deeper reflection and consideration of the psychological and social and spiritual dynamics at work in such an important decision.

5. Beware of the temptation to shortcut the process, to short-change a tradition, to accept just one source or one description of the beliefs of any tradition, to be satisfied with a cheap understanding, a shallow definition. Be open to corroborating one journalist’s views, one author’s explanation, one speaker’s historical description, one of your own personal examples with additional views and descriptions. I don’t recommend being completely overwhelmed by the glut of information, nor being forever “on the fence” and non-committal. It just helps to keep a wider perspective, to be able to see the trees and particular facts of the forest within a wider purview.

6. Telescope your perspective, so that you are able at times to zoom out and discern the bigger picture issues and historical pressures to ask the larger questions. One example would be to notice that Buddhism changes a great deal by the time it reaches Japan in the sixth Century C.E., raising the question: “is Zen Buddhism still the same Buddhism that was begun by the Buddha in India in the 6th Century B.C.E.?” Then there will also be times to zoom in close to examine more intimate and practical details as much as possible. This makes it possible to inquire about more personal issues, such as: “how do Orthodox Christians use icons as part of their spiritual discipline?”

7. Keep the richness and depth of human life in the forefront of your studying other religions. Listen for the life-song, the underlying rhythms and harmonies as well as the discords in human society. I use the following diagram to remind myself that religion is a “many-splendored thing”, to borrow a line from the musical song in “The King and I”. So I have found helpful the following triangle to challenge my thoughts about the deep role of religion in human history.

BEING

Encounter with Ultimate reality

3 basic components of religion

KNOWING Understanding that
Ultimate reality in
Beliefs, Tenets
Creeds, Teachings

Living Out that
Understanding in
Behavior, Rituals,
Life style

DOING

The import of such a three-part analysis is to make it possible to reflect on whether any one of these three dimensions is pre-eminent over the other two. There are some scholars of religion who argue that the encounter with the mysterious and infinite OTHER should by all means be seen as the foundation for any religious beliefs and behaviors, that assuming this will enable more creative studies of all religious traditions. There are other scholars who prioritize beliefs and intellectual statements, and define religion as a set of beliefs. There may be some who prioritize behavior and life style in their definition of religion. Whichever approach one chooses, the overall diagram at least argues that all three dimensions are essential in any comprehensive study of what religion is and how it occurs within society.

8. As is true in other aspects of life and study, only with commitment of time and effort will there be any significant learning. Any genuine learning process demands dedication and priority well beyond casual or short-term dallying. "Doing" the serious study of world religions will naturally involve personal resources and lively connections to a whole variety of experiences in one's day-to-day life. Of course every student is free to dally, free to be a tourist among native residents, free to remain on the surface of the subject being studied, to "dig in" only and just to the extent that one's intentions lead the process. What works for one will differ from what works for others. I highly recommend that when you are touring through or into a religion that you make note that this is what you are doing, so you can self-consciously differentiate when you are dallying and when you are seriously

studying. You may thereby know what you are doing, know whether you are being careless or careful in your endeavor. So you may consciously know the depth or extent to which you are researching a tradition and know especially why you are dallying or seriously studying a religious tradition so that you can realistically gauge the results.

9. Transfer your learnings to others. Share your spiritual journey of what you are learning with others. Try to transmit what you are learning in bits and pieces or in general perspectives to others, especially to friends and family, i.e. “Guess what I am learning about Taoism?”. For example by trying to grasp for yourself the role of the Creation Story for the Jewish and Christian traditions and then over lunch to pull into your conversation some of the insights you are gaining about human dignity and freedom as you tell or teach others you may surely expose yourself to their reflections but in the process can deepen your own personal understanding.

10. Keep the dialogue going. By this I mean both the dialogue between yourself and another religious tradition and your gut-level dialogue with the real issues of your daily life. There is a natural human tendency to close dialogue because it is the hard work of listening deeply and expressing oneself honestly and because it requires being open to change. All of this can threaten the self that refuses to patiently listen to things that one would prefer not to hear. It can threaten the habits of not trusting others or one’s own habitual nature or the challenging impact of the mysterious and infinite Other upon our lives. So closing off the dialogue, shutting others or THE OTHER out may appear the easy way out of problems or challenges. The student can also severely restrict the dialogue to control its impact and reduce any threat or to sustain the illusion that one is in full control of all conversation and its influences. So keeping the dialogue open and going brings up the need to be really hospitable to the neighbor, to be very honest about oneself and to sincerely trust the dialogue process and the infinite Mystery that is always present and freely at work within and through the circumstances and relationships in effect.

Essence

The following three strategies are diagramed with the following mnemonic triangle:

Experience

Example

11. Look for the core or essence or heart of each tradition you study. Each

one embodies a central world view through which it sees the world and upon which it bases its various experiences, beliefs and activities. One could say that Buddhism's core or heart is letting go of the need to not suffer, or to fix suffering. The heart of Christianity according to Marcus Borg is about serving one's neighbors as an expression of serving God. The heart of Confucianism is about the importance of family. This heart dimension answers these questions: "what makes this religious tradition tick?" and "what keeps it together under pressure and development over time?" What essence or "engine" drives this tradition, energizes its adherents to do what they do?

12. How do adherents of each specific religion experience life on a daily basis? How do they feel as they either begin a day or finish a day? Are they relating to others deeply or isolated and apart? Are they able to enjoy life, celebrate its gifts, see humor in human foibles, travel lightly through heavy moments, have fun and play at times, pause and take time out to reflect and meditate, recover from devastating tragedy, and can they notice the serendipities and be thankful for unplanned and unexpected blessings?

Celebration

Humor

Play

13. How do adherents offer themselves as living examples of their faith? Are they walking their faith and not just talking about it? How do they pass on their faith values to the young? How is their tradition handed on to new their converts? When crises come how do they sort out options as to how to live through and survive these crises? In the life style laboratory of life how are their values practiced and how are these values stretched to meet new and unforeseen challenges? Identify the historic and living heroes and saints that espouse each tradition and how do these individuals become singular paragons of their faith?

14. Be open to the two opposite values of sameness and difference. There may be countless similarities and common themes. There may also be deep and irreconcilable differences. In comparing how one tradition bears similar or distinct characteristics do not lose the ability to contrast how the traditions have unique and very different aspects as well. Avoid over-comparing where they are distinct and avoid over-contrasting where they are separate. Let them be as they are. In many cases one tradition is strongly influenced by others near it in geography and time, or in particular ways

borrowed from a parent tradition as Buddhism did as it sprung away from Hinduism. Where syncretism and schism complicate matters, let whatever resultant complexity and similarity be present for what they actually are. This strategy specifically addresses the popular question today, “Do the religions of Christianity and Islam worship the same God?” The answer in its complex detail can be expressed in its “yes and no” reply by using two overlapping yet not identical circles to honor the unique differences and still recognize common and partial factors.

Yes Partially NO

15. Look closely at what each faith tradition says about the origin and role of evil in human experience. What does evil look like, and what corrections are available? Specifically what does a particular faith say about injustice and oppression, about the “classic” social evils of racism, sexism, ageism, classism and materialism? How does religion relate to child labor, substance and behavioral addictions, sex slave trafficking, tribalism and nationalism, ethnocentric and religious violence, crime and persecution, about individual vice and incivility, what the monotheistic religions call personal and social sin? What are healthy religious responses that reinforce human virtue and religious righteousness, that provide practical repentance and balance towards healing the individual and society?

16. How is human language employed to talk about real issues in personal and social experience? Are terms and expressions used to affirm people or to denigrate people, to respect people or to criticize people, to identify potential for responsible involvement or to close people and their awareness off from what they can and should be doing, rendering them “helpless” victims of larger social or deeper personal forces? While human language systems may not be completely plastic and malleable, it is historically a very significant part of our exercising creativity and responsibility, imagination and freedom. Human language is simply a basic universal tool for using our consciousness to care for ourselves and to fashion our societies to provide for our needs and hopes for tomorrow. Throughout history it is obvious that small and large social groups, entire tribes and nations, as well as families and individuals have exercised their elemental right to name their reality using terms and labels that allow human activity to make sense. The purposes of such naming of reality may or may not produce peace, but they are used and will continue to be used, providing students of religion with a vantage point for examining closely how we may use them to build authentic human society.

17. What social institutions are in place, and upon what authority systems are these institutions established? Do these institutions protect everyone equally or single out one class to have power over everyone else? Do they distribute care and basic resources so everyone may benefit, or preserve special power interests to monopolize resources in the hands of the greedy and ambitious few at the top? Do they genuinely preserve what is helpful in the history of a tradition or do they rigidly recycle those oppressive and destructive elements which history has judged to be obvious mistakes?

18. Be able to be self-critical about one's tradition, its assets and liabilities, its gifts and what I call its "ungifts." White-washing any tradition hinders serious study and honest respect. Maintain a perspective that evaluates both the hills and the valleys, the wounds and warts as well as the glories and achievements through which one's faith tradition has come through the years. Be sure to ask open-mindedly where is your tradition now within the global condition. Inquire together with other spokespersons of your faith what factors will keep it strong, will allow it to recover from its excesses and evils, will keep it (or render it) creative, vibrant and spiritually healthy. This self-critical skill will steer students of religion between the Scylla and Charybdis between "we're perfect and we're all bad", between self-destruction and self-absorption. Neither self-destruction nor self-absorption assist authentic study.

19. Develop practical peace-making skills which express real compassion and emphasize reconciliation. Genuine learning must be empathic, allowing the learner to either in reality or in concept to begin to "walk a mile in the other's mocassins." Identify first-person accounts of life lived as one person of a particular faith. Examine the historic or contemporary heroes, saints, leaders and exemplars who have made a lasting mark on how their tradition can make real contributions to global and local peace. Every tradition will have an ethical dimension revealing a system of values and priorities. What are those values and how are they lived, taught, preserved or modified? Are individuals and groups within the tradition helped by it to make realistic decisions, valuable contributions, leave a positive legacy? Are they encouraged to join in interfaith dialogue to promote meaningful conversation between and among religious spokespersons today?

20. Train yourself in interreligious skills of social etiquette. How might you as an outsider behave in a wedding or funeral, a formal worship service or a public venue where the prayers arising out of another faith are spoken? How do adherents greet one another, treat one another, handle crises treat outsiders and guests?

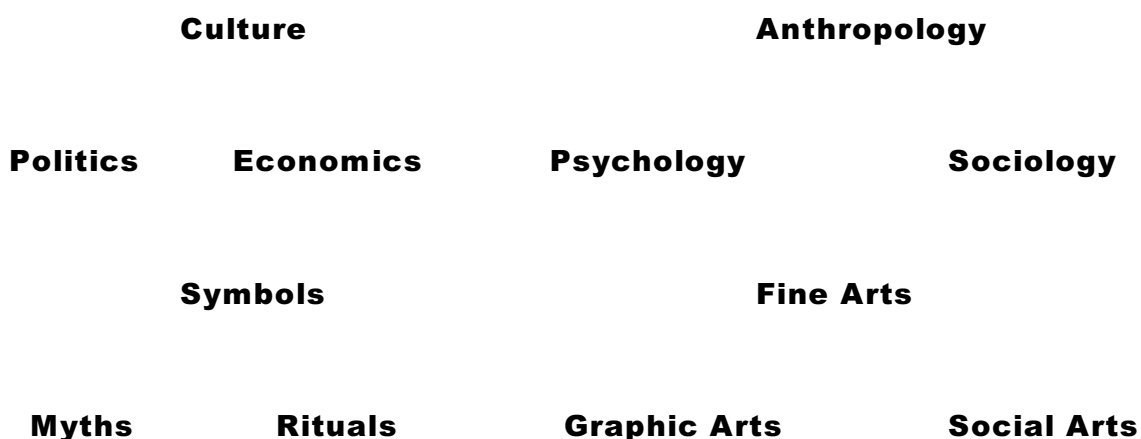
21. Examine how overriding global movements reflect new dimensions of brain science, exhibit a tendency towards violence, fundamentalism, pluralism, mysticism, syncretism and schism, and above all post-modernism.

22. Develop skills for reading and appreciating any written and authoritative scriptures that are found within a religious tradition. Include with this skills for interpreting and applying any scriptural insights and teachings that the written materials contain.

23. Fashion for yourself analytic skills for understanding current news events, including TV and newspaper sources, and for measuring the accuracy with which a religious tradition is truthfully represented or distorted.

24. Apply a psychological mirror to yourself as you learn about your own or another tradition. So as you look into Shintoism for example, reflect and journal about what you are learning about yourself as you study. Shintoism can mirror back to your own self-reflection your own thoughts about where and when you encounter what is holy and infinite in your daily life.

25. Develop a holistic and developmental approach to studying your own and others' traditions. No tradition is frozen or unbending or impervious to pressures in the surrounding culture. So observe and research the different phases the tradition has had, including the origin, the impact of neighboring religions, the rejection or assimilation of outside beliefs, the broader social context, the alternative research approaches for studying the effects of religion on peoples' lives, th historical ages when the tradition waxed or waned, grew or declined, expanded or withdrew. The following three-dimensional tools may keep such a holistic perspective in mind:



Pluralism

Exclusivism

Inclusivism

26. Keep in touch with the creative writers and researchers in the field. Today in my mind that would include Diana Eck, Karen Armstrong, Huston Smith and Ninian Smart.

27. Keep a vigilant eye open in search of what your next steps might be to keep these skills sharp and well-used . This will preserve your sanity, your sense of adventure and equip you to explore how to interact with almost anyone of another tradition whom you might encounter casually or perhaps be in a more significant relationship.