

How to Teach Religion(s) in the Classroom

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1. HOW TO TEACH RELIGION(S) IN THE CLASSROOM

1.1. What is religion?

The teaching of religion is dependent on the understanding of religion, and the understanding of religion is rooted in the acknowledgement of the fact that religion can never be perceived as just one thing.

Religions manifest themselves in many different ways: in books, buildings, art, food, clothing, deeds, narratives etc. First and foremost, though, religion (and religions) are created by people. Many and very different people.

Religion – to the degree that one can talk about it in the singular - is a diverse and ambiguous phenomenon, and it does not easily lend itself to a formula, despite many years of attempts. Religion is what it is made to be – by religious and non-religious people, politicians, and scholars.

Should a definition, along the lines of the approach of the academic study of religion, be attempted it could run like this: Religion is a cultural subsystem that is different from other cultural systems by containing a reference to a postulated superhuman power whose existence can neither be falsified nor verified.

More or less obvious problems with definitions (with this one, also) must, however, always be paid attention to. These problems include possible influences from specific religious and theological notions about religion, e.g. theistic or even monotheistic notions, or notions that pose religion as something negatively vis-à-vis something called 'spirituality', or, positively, vis-à-vis something denounced as 'sect'. You can read more about e.g. the Protestant prototype under 2: Discussion of Main Stereotypes on the Concept of Religion 'in Itself'.

More information can also be found here:

- [The big questions about religion](#)

1.2. Insider and outsider

In the recommended study-of-religions based classroom approach to religion, it is important to be aware of the distinction between the point of view of the insider (*emic*), meaning the religious persons or the worshippers, and the point of view of the outsider (*etic* point), the scholar or researcher.

Such a distinction is important because the study of religion demands that all religions and religious phenomena can be analysed and compared neutrally and impartially.

Many scholars attempt to carefully re-describe and understand how insiders express themselves and perceive the aspects of their worlds. However, scholars must also, ideally, go further and analyse, interpret or explain religion in other terms and in other ways than the insider wants to or is able to do. Research on religion must analyse and explain religion in terms of more general theories of man and society, and also in the light of the knowledge of other religions and religious phenomena.

More information on:

- [History of religion and approaches](#)

1.3. The scientific study of religion

The scientific (or academic) study of religion portrays religion as a dynamic, historical, and group as well as an individual phenomenon. It seeks to subject religion and religious aspects to an *analytical, critical, pluralistic* and *comparative* examination. This is important to emphasize in a classroom situation.

‘Analytical’ and ‘critical’ in the abovementioned paragraph indicates that the religions and the notion of religion is studied, interpreted and explained in a historical and cultural context, and that religious statements, texts, institutions etc. are not taken at face value but subjected to the same examination as any other statement, text or institution would be.

‘Pluralistic’ and ‘comparative’ means that the scientific study of religion, in principle, studies all religions. It is not assumed that one religion is true, nor are the studies based upon one religion’s understanding of itself, or its idea of what true religion is. All religions should be treated equally, both qualitatively and methodically.

Constituting parts of religions such as rituals, myths, religious authorities, religious texts and concepts of life and death are studied comparatively. Comparisons are not used primarily to recognize the similarities but just as much to spot the differences due to e.g. the different historical and cultural contexts.

One of the first scholars of religion, the philologist and orientalist Max Müller (1823-1900) is famous for the words: ‘He who knows one, knows none’ – meaning that you are always limited by the categories and point of view that exist in your own culture, and that you ought to know and study more than just one religion in order to understand any of them at all.

More information on:

- [Introduction to the study of religions – a guideline for teachers](#)

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