

How to Teach This Book  
*The Hindu Traditions: A Concise Introduction*

Mark W. Muesse

Hinduism's immense diversity and long history, its plethora of texts and images, its profound and occasionally confounding theologies and philosophies, and its sometimes strange rituals and practices make this religion a great challenge for the teaching professor. What I have tried to do in *The Hindu Traditions: A Concise Introduction* is to make that task a little less daunting by presenting the vast array of phenomena that goes by the name "Hinduism" in a format that is accessible to students and easily adaptable for classroom use. As a primer on Hinduism, I imagine that this text would work well in two kinds of courses. First, it would be an excellent overview in courses in which Hinduism is only one among several subjects. Such courses include the history of India, introduction to Asian Studies, or a course on world, Asian, or Indian religions. Second, this book could be used as the foundational text for a course devoted exclusively to Hinduism. In what follows, I explore ways this book might help to present the Hindu traditions in these academic venues.

In a course such as the history of India, world religions, Asian religions, or religions of India, only a fraction of the semester can be given to the study of Hinduism. In these courses perhaps no more than four weeks—and maybe even less—will be dedicated to the Hindu traditions. For these courses, the book can be conveniently divided to fit the allotted timeframe. With an allocation of four weeks, a three-day-a-week class can cover one chapter each day. The size of each chapter is such that its major points can be discussed within an hour. Special features in the book—the précis at the beginning, the list of key terms, and the questions for review—will help instructors determine which aspects of the chapter are most salient.

## Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions*, How to teach this book

For courses devoted solely to the study of Hinduism, the text can be used to furnish the foundation of the entire semester by offering weekly topics and a logical sequence for their study. Since the number of chapters corresponds roughly to the number of weeks in a typical semester, one chapter can be covered each week, allowing ample time for tests and other activities that may help augment the subject matter of the book. When allocated in this way, a day (or two, depending on the number of class meetings per week) can be devoted to discussion of the chapter and the remaining day or days can be used to discuss primary sources from the Hindu traditions. On other parts of this web site, you will find specific recommendations for literary and film sources to supplement the text.

Whether Hinduism is only one subject among many or the sole subject of the course, *The Hindu Traditions* offers an array of special features that will assist in your pedagogy. Each chapter begins with a précis to highlight the most important points of the chapter. Use this guide to ensure that your coverage of the material includes these major points. The end of each chapter contains a list of key words and questions for review and reflection. The key words list help reinforce the major points of the chapter by enumerating the technical terms associated with them. I find that simply having students identify and define key words on tests is a good way to help them comprehend the salient aspects of Hinduism. The review questions can be used to prompt classroom discussions or to formulate daily quizzes. They can also be adapted to furnish essay questions on exams. (For more material that may be used on examinations, see “Assignments and Tests” on this web site.) The reflection questions are intended to invite students to ponder the larger significance of what they have studied and consider its relevance to their own lives. These questions are especially useful when the course focuses exclusively on Hinduism and allows time for greater reflection on methodology and comparative analysis.

## Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions*, How to teach this book

Each chapter in the book contains a variety of textboxes that serve different functions. Some of them provide detailed information about a subject that is only mentioned briefly in the text. Some provide selections from primary sources within the Hindu traditions. Some connect Hindu beliefs and practices with non-Hindu perspectives. Although they provide an array of material, the textboxes are intended for a single purpose: to enrich the foundational narrative of the book. For the instructor, they may also be taken as suggestive of other ways to enhance the way you teach Hinduism.

Throughout each chapter is a generous collection of maps, charts, and images. Make good use of these features, especially the images. Most of the Hindu traditions are visually intense, and seeing is a vital element in most Hindus' relationship with the divine. You might even spend class time discussing the importance of learning to read images as contrasted with texts. Urge your students to linger over the images and take note of what they observe. Some of the most interesting discussions I have facilitated have been based on the study of Hindu images. It is easy enough to find images on the internet and use PowerPoint to project them in the classroom. Ask students to describe what they see, reflect on its significance, and offer their reactions. Alternatively, works like Stephen Huyler's fine book, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), provides a trove of colorful and fascinating photographs and can also serve this purpose. Films, too, are useful for conveying the visual and aural dimensions of Hinduism. I have included references to some helpful films in the book itself and have compiled a list of video resources in the article entitled Resources, elsewhere on this web site.

Since Hinduism (like all religions) is far more than simply a textual tradition, I find it essential to incorporate many different kinds of pedagogical experiences to help students grasp Hinduism's many dimensions. If there is Hindu temple nearby, a field trip will be of great

## Muesse, *The Hindu Traditions*, How to teach this book

benefit in helping students connect literary sources with lived experience. Even a trip to a local Indian restaurant may facilitate a deeper understanding of Hindu life. Invite your students to eat without utensils using their right hands, in the traditional manner. As a long-time practitioner of meditation, I always include a class session to teach the rudiments of the discipline. If you lack experience with meditation, you might consider inviting a local teacher of hatha yoga for a brief workshop. On occasion, I have also found local dancers in the classical Indian tradition (Bharatanatyam) who have been willing to perform and discuss the connections between dance and Hinduism. Finally, Hindu students may also prove to be valuable resources in the classroom. Although it is the rare Hindu student who has a comprehensive knowledge of the religion, most Hindu students have had considerable experience participating in home and temple pujas. Making a special effort to include their perspectives in classroom discussions will assist in bringing abstract ideas to life.

One of the things I most enjoy about teaching Hinduism is the great variety of topics and issues it includes and the many possible pedagogical methods it can involve. One has the opportunity to read and interpret challenging texts, view and discuss intriguing images and artwork, and discuss profound theologies and philosophies. One can teach meditation and yoga, watch entertaining and thoughtful films, and take exciting field trips. I hope that you will find *The Hindu Traditions* to be a reliable guide through this amazing array of material and an inspiration for discovering compelling ways to teach it.