

Teaching Hinduism for the First Time

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Although we are usually trained in highly specific areas of scholarship, religious studies professors are often called upon to teach subjects in which they have had little formal schooling. This is especially true in liberal arts and community colleges where the departments are frequently small and instructors are required to teach courses beyond their area of expertise. It is not at all unusual for a theologian or a Bible specialist to be asked to offer a course in world religions or an introduction to the study of religion. Even a comparativist of religion must sometimes teach a tradition beyond his or her specialty. If you find yourself in this situation, I hope you'll consider this assignment a welcome opportunity to expand your own knowledge about the field of religious studies. Teaching beyond your field of training, I believe, will actually improve and enrich your ability to teach subjects within your specialization.

I have written *The Hindu Traditions: A Concise Introduction* not only for students who have little familiarity with Hinduism but also for teachers who may have only a nodding acquaintance with the study of this important religion. I have endeavored to present the subject in a clear and accessible way, focusing on the principal elements of the Hindu family of traditions. I have also given special attention to those areas of these traditions that Westerners find especially challenging, topics such as polytheism, the caste system, arranged marriages, and the worship of images. I hope you will find this textbook to be especially useful if you are teaching Hinduism for the first time.

If this is your initial effort, your central goal before the course begins will be to become as well-acquainted with the religion as possible. I recommend that you not only read through

*The Hindu Traditions* but other introductory texts as well. Among the best works that may serve as primers to the subject are these:

- Stephen P. Huyler, *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999)
- Thomas J. Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*, (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing, 1971)
- Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd ed, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)
- C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992)

Each of these works is relatively brief and provides a good overview of Hinduism as a whole or a major aspect of it. Of course, in addition to these secondary texts, you'll want to read (or re-read) some of the primary sources of the Hindu traditions. I especially recommend working through the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Juan Mascaró's translation of the Upanishads is not as accurate as more recent versions, but it contains an excellent brief selection of passages and has a helpful introductory essay (*The Upanishads*, trans., Juan Mascaró, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965). Barbara Stoler Miller's and Graham Schweig's translations of the Gita are the most accessible recent renditions of this classic scripture (*Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, trans., Barbara Stoler Miller, New York: Bantam Books, 1986; *Bhagavad Gita: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song*, trans., Graham Schweig, New York: HarperCollins, 2007). These works have prominent places in *The Hindu Traditions*, and they provide excellent entrées into the study of Hinduism. If your field is theology, you'll be especially interested in the Upanishads; if your specialty is scripture, the Bhagavad Gita may have a special appeal. In both instances, the skills you bring from your own field of study should give you some confidence to tackle these texts.

When you tire of all that reading, look at some of the better films about Hinduism. The documentary “330 Million Gods” from the BBC series, *The Long Search*, is rather dated, but it is still the best 50 minute film introduction to Hinduism, in my opinion. I’ve been using it for 25 years, and I never tire of watching it. An even older film worth viewing is “India and the Infinite,” which is Part 3 of Huston Smith’s *The Mystic’s Journey* (29 minutes). More recently, PBS produced a fine comprehensive study of the history of India entitled *The Story of India* (360 minutes). This would also be a good time to become reacquainted with the Academy Award winning film, *Gandhi*. I highly recommend these films both for your preparations as well as for student viewing during the course of the semester. Other films for classroom use are listed in the Bibliography at another location on this web site.

Of course, the best possible preparation for teaching Hinduism is to spend time in India. If you have the time and money, a trip will help you understand and teach Hinduism like nothing else. (If you don’t have the money, you now have an excellent reason to apply for a travel grant!) India—and other countries on the subcontinent—are remarkably easy places to travel in, although they can be uncomfortable and frustrating at times. Still, the discomfort and frustration are part of the experience that will deepen your grasp of Hinduism. You need not sign up for a tour. I highly recommend traveling on your own. Pick up a copy of the Lonely Planet guide to India and go. It may change your life.

As you begin to design the course, consult my article entitled “How to Teach This Book,” which you will find elsewhere on this web site. That article will also provide you with specific ideas for presenting the Hindu traditions to novices. In that article, I discuss the special features of *The Hindu Traditions* and offer suggestions for how they may be used in the classroom. I also stress the necessity of augmenting the experience of reading texts with the study of Hinduism’s visual and aural resources. In other places on this web site, you find

various other resources for constructing your course, including sample syllabi, sample test questions, writing assignments, and lists of film and web resources. I hope these suggestions will prove useful. If I can help in any other way, feel free to contact me directly at [muesse@rhodes.edu](mailto:muesse@rhodes.edu).