*Patrick McArdle**

HOW TO TEACH RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD: A CONSIDERATION OF THE NSW STUDIES OF RELIGION EXPERIENCE

This paper considers issues that teaching Religions of the World have raised in the context of the NSW Higher School Certificate course, *Studies of Religion*. While the first part of the paper discusses *Studies of Religion* very specifically many of the comments and issues are pertinent to any study of religions.

The paper is divided into two broad sections. The first considers the history, nature and structure of the *Studies of Religion* Syllabus, as well as some specific issues for teaching and learning which arise out of the experience of teaching and marking this subject. The second section presents some ideas about the possible ways to teach religion. This is not definitive, but simply highlights issues for deliberation. This section uses the Christian tradition as an example, but the principles are equally applicable to other world religions.

Studies of Religion – A Case Study
A Brief Historical Background
The NSW Board of Studies implemented the Board Developed Course,[1] *Studies of Religion* in 1992 for initial examination in the Higher School Certificate Examination of 1993. It is one of the most popular courses in the HSC and continues to grow strongly. In 1995 4797 students attempted the examinations in this subject; by 1998 the number had grown to 7974 and by 2002 10 894 students sat for the examinations.[2] The majority of these students have been in *Studies of Religion I*, but *Studies of Religion II* is now growing at a faster rate.

This course was developed after many years of agitation by a range of scholars, teachers, religious groups and schools for an externally accredited course in Religion Studies. The syllabus underwent a rearrangement for the 1994 HSC in order to align with the requirements of the Pathways Review; it was revised for the New HSC in 1999 for implementation in the 2001 Higher School Certificate Examination. The course has now been examined for ten years and is currently undergoing review by the Board of Studies. It is likely that substantial change will be made to the Syllabus in terms of structure and perhaps in terms of content.

The Nature of the Course
Two features of the NSW *Studies of Religion* course make it unique in the Australian context: firstly, it is externally examined; secondly, it requires students to study more than one religious tradition for 40% of the course in relation to a concrete dimension of religious practice, thought or influence.

While the syllabus has not mandated a particular approach to take to the study of religion or religions it clearly encourages a sympathetic response to religious traditions: "these studies increase the student's capacity for understanding traditions in their own terms" (1991 Syllabus, p. 1) and "Studies of Religion... does not seek to establish one tradition to the exclusion of all others" (1999 Syllabus, p. 6). It is inappropriate for judgements to be made about relative merits of religious traditions, this most clearly seen in the values and attitudes objectives in the 1999 Syllabus (p. 8).

Through Studies of Religion, students will develop ...values and attitudes that:

- foster an informed interest in religion
- enable respect for religious beliefs and practices
- contribute to a free, multi-faith and just society.

In other words, the Syllabus does not permit the exclusive study of one religious tradition or a single variant within a tradition.

Structure of the Syllabus
The formal course structures can be found in the relevant Syllabus documents. However, some general comments are worth making.

[1] The term "Board Developed Course" can be defined as "A syllabus is available for each course developed by the Board. Schools must use the current syllabus for any Board Developed Preliminary or HSC course taught." {http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/acaca/nsw/ace_courses.html} Such courses are externally examined and results contribute to the calculation of results for Tertiary Entrance.

[2] Statistics are available from the Examination Reports found at the Board of Studies Website http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au or from the HSC Statistics section of the same site. There are discrepancies between the two sets of data but these are only minor. The HSC statistics are compiled on the basis of subject enrolment forms, while the Examination numbers are based on a physical count of examination papers.

Studies of Religion has had an unusual structure in the NSW Higher School Certificate Curriculum. It is the only subject that has been developed to be offered at 1 unit and 2 unit level (each "unit" represents 60 indicative hours of study in each of two years). In the 1999 revision of the HSC *Studies of Religion* is now the only subject to be offered at one unit level. In addition, the 2 unit course does not require greater dedication or application, it is intended to be simply double the amount of work.

As with all subjects in the NSW curriculum the course is divided into preparatory study in a Preliminary Course and then the HSC course taken the following year. Only material in the HSC course is directly examinable.

Preliminary Course
Consists of two broad areas – Foundation Studies and Depth Studies

- ❖ Foundations Studies covers the nature of religion and the influence of religion in Australian society 1788 to 1900.

- ❖ Depth Studies consist of the study of one of the following religious traditions:

    - Buddhism
    - Christianity
    - Hinduism
    - Islam
    - Judaism

Students taking the course at 1 unit level complete one depth study. Students taking the 2 unit option complete three depth studies.

HSC Course
Has three areas of study – Foundation Studies, Depth Studies and an Interest Study Project

- ❖ Foundation Studies at the HSC level covers Aboriginal Belief Systems and Spirituality; the influence of religion in Australian society from 1901 to the present; at 2 unit level Foundation Studies also includes learning about religion and media, belief systems other than religious in Australia.

- ❖ Depth Studies. In this section of the course are cross religion studies where two religious traditions are studied in the context of their history, beliefs and practices with respect to one of the following topics:

    - Religious Rites
    - Religion and Ethics
    - Sacred Writings and Stories
    - Ways of Holiness
    - Teachers and Interpreters
    - Religion and Women

Students opting for the course at 1 unit level complete one cross religion depth study, while 2 unit students study three cross-religion topics.

The other section of HSC study is an Interest Study Project which is an opportunity for students to define a research problem in religion and then to apply the knowledge and skills gained in the Depth Studies to an area of interest. There are four kinds of Interest Studies: the first is a broad list of seven areas defined by the Board which enables students to apply their knowledge and skills to the interface of religion and the broader cultural, social and environmental context. The second category is a study of an Asian, Melanesian or Polynesian religion. This significantly broadens the scope of the Syllabus to enable the inclusion of Pacific and regional interests. The third category is a study of the relationship between religious beliefs and non-religious worldviews. While the final category is developed by the school in relation to its own ethos.

Two things about the HSC section of the course should be noted. The spread of students attempting examination questions in the Cross Religion Studies section of the paper is uneven in terms of the topic studied and the religious traditions considered in relation to the topic. The Religious Rites depth study has been the most popular since the inception of the course. Religion and Ethics has been a clear second favourite topic followed by Women and Religion and Sacred Writings and Stories which have vied with each other for numbers. Ways of Holiness and Teachers and Interpreters have attracted only small numbers, but often the answers are of notably high quality. The other discrepancy in relation to the Cross Religion Depth Studies is that the consideration of religious traditions is very uneven. Here the unevenness is not only in terms of the study of traditions, but is even more noticeable in the study of traditions within particular Depth Study topics. Christianity is studied by almost all students. There is a relatively even split between those who study Judaism and Islam and Buddhism is growing in popularity for some of the Studies. Hinduism is studied by very few students. The interest in particular traditions probably reflects the degree of human and teaching resources that schools believe they have available.

The second point to note is that while the Interest Study Project is allocated 10 indicative hours of class time, it tends to occupy the students for a considerable period of time. Moreover, their

commitment to the process is very high. There is an essential conflict between teachers and students here. Teachers across the spectrum of schools are concerned about the time and level of commitment to the project (which is 10 marks of school assessment, therefore 5 marks in terms of overall HSC results). Students frequently report that it is the most meaningful part of the course and it is often considered something that makes the HSC worthwhile. In other words, the level of learning engendered by the project may be intrinsically more important than the marks it garners for the students.

Issues in Teaching Studies of Religion

This section of the paper highlights some of the issues for teaching this subject. *Studies of Religion* is highly unusual in that the vast majority of students come from particular sectors of the education system, predominantly Independent and religious schools. In these schools it is not unusual for *Studies of Religion* to be perceived as building on the school's own religious education framework or curriculum

The inception of the Syllabus in 1992 found only a handful of schools equipped to teach the new course. Teaching materials and resources appropriate to the students and directed to the Syllabus were very limited. Many schools also found that staff were not adequately prepared to teach the Syllabus. Students found the academic nature of the Syllabus very challenging. This was especially the case for students in schools which had previously had no formal religious studies program or where the previous program was not taught at a suitably academic level.

The decade since the first examination in *Studies of Religion* has witnessed a dramatic transformation in the quality of teaching, the depth and value of student learning, expectations and capacity to deal with the subject on its own terms. While teaching resources are now more plentiful, they remain relatively general. This is particularly the case in relation to the Cross Religion Studies where there are very few good resources available that are written at a Stage 6 level, have an appreciation of the Australian context and have an eye to the Syllabus. This has meant that *Studies of Religion* is highly reliant on human resources.

Teachers in this subject need to be very good students. The paucity of material at an appropriate level and at an appropriate depth requires teachers to digest substantial information to be developed into teaching resources. A number of resourceful practitioners have made available many of these ideas to colleagues, especially through the Association for Studies of Religion.

Given that there is currently no tertiary course of study to prepare teachers for this subject it is necessary that teachers be aware of some of the basic requirements to adequately prepare students for the examination and, more importantly, to achieve the aims of the course.

Annual Reports from the Examination Centre indicate issues that were evident in the early years of the subject and those issues which continue to be challenges for teachers of *Studies of Religion*.

In the early years of the subject it was common for the Examination Report to include comments such as these:

It is stressed that:

(1) The mark value of each part of the structured questions should be used as an indicator of the amount of time and space to be allocated for the answer to each part of the question.
(2) Students should write on sections of the Syllabus that they have actually studied; those who write outside the areas that they have studied seldom achieve high marks.
(3) Prepared answers are obvious and are seldom awarded high marks. Although there was some evidence of *answers in search of a question* this was not a major problem.
(4) The instructions on the front page of the examination paper and at the beginning of each section of the paper should be read carefully. This year large numbers of 1 Unit candidates answered both questions in Section II - Foundation Studies, even though only ONE was required, some of these students then ran out of time in answering their Cross-Religion question in Section III.
(5) Candidates should read all parts of a question before beginning their answers because, in most of the questions, all parts are related to, and depend on, each other.
(6) Candidates will be penalised if they describe only one variant of a religious tradition in the Cross-Religion Section of the Syllabus (1995 HSC Examination Report, pp. 1- 2).

These are useful instructions to provide any students sitting for any examination. However, their inclusion in the Examination Report indicates that these were problematic in the marking process and that the Supervisor of Marking thought it to be of sufficient concern to highlight them for the benefit of schools and teachers. The main issues highlighted here concern basic examination technique and generic skills. On reading the 1995 Report more specific concerns were also

highlighted. There is relatively frequent mention that answers demonstrated "only a general and basic attempt" to deal with the question (1995 HSC Examination Report, p. 3 - but also implied on pp. 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 15). Of greater concern was the comment in relation to one question that responses "often contained no accurate information" and that they were characterised by "brevity and lack of depth" (1995 HSC Examination Report, p. 3).

In the 1998 Examination Report, five years after the first Examination, the comments on generic problems is more limited. Prepared responses, responding to questions from the perspective of a whole tradition and ignoring variants and the expression of religion in Australia were highlighted as still of some concern, but these had greatly reduced in number by 1998 (1998 HSC Examination Report, p. 3). Issues which arose with specific questions noted problems with both content and skills development (1998 HSC Examination Report, p. 5 for example). These ranged from the need to demonstrate higher order thinking skills in discussion and analysis to serious omissions in the content students had at their disposal. Some of the content issues are directly related to the scope of material to be studied and the possibility that an examination question may focus on a small section of the Syllabus. One very pleasing comment repeated in most of the reports on the Cross Religion Depth Study answers was that students were much better prepared to answer the questions (1998 HSC Examination Report, pp. 9, 10, 11). A notable exception to this was with the most popular question on "Rites of Passage" where fewer students were able to deal with the higher order dimensions of the question at an adequate level (1998 HSC Examination Report, p. 8).

In 2001 the new HSC Syllabus was examined for the first time. The student responses demonstrated that while students now *knew* a very great amount about religion, they were encountering difficulties in demonstrating the skills which the new Syllabus required. As has been the case in each year of the examination in *Studies of Religion* the length of responses had increased, particularly in the Cross Religion Studies questions. Responses of 10 – 12 pages were not uncommon, even when students were not coping with the demands of the questions in terms of demonstration of skills. Comments such as this were made in the Report:

> The vast majority of candidates chose to answer Religious Rites, but many unfortunately answered it from the 'rites of passage' standpoint of the previous syllabus. As a consequence, many of these responses did not answer the questions, and so could not be awarded high marks (2001 HSC Notes from the Examination Centre – Studies of Religion I and II, p. 5).

Throughout the 2001 Report comments are made which indicate both that the students had a good deal of knowledge, though in relation to some questions it was of a general rather than specific nature, but did not recognise the new Syllabus's demand for high levels of demonstrated skills.

Marking guidelines are included in the Reports; these are developed in relation to the specific questions asked. They derive from the Performance Bands for the subject published by the Board of Studies, are initially developed by the Examination Committee and refined at the Marking Centre in order to take account of unexpected but legitimate interpretations of questions, and the justifiable concerns of markers.

In 2001 *Studies of Religion* came under some criticism due to the low level of Band 6 grades given. A careful reading of the Syllabus, the Performance Bands, Marking Guidelines and the Examination Report will indicate the reason for the spread of results – the students did not demonstrate the skills required to gain those kinds of results. High levels of concern in the community relating to the first examination of the new Syllabuses resulted in the Board of Studies reviewing the implementation of the new HSC. The Masters Review targets a number of issues which appear to be directly relevant to the marking of the 2001 *Studies of Religion* Examination (ACER, 2002). Many of these concerns appear to have been addressed by schools and teachers prior to the 2002 Examination.

The general comments from the 2002 Examination Report reflect the very different issues facing students and teachers (and markers) from those indicated in the 1995 Report:

> Teachers and candidates should be aware that examiners may ask questions that address the syllabus outcomes in a manner that requires candidates to respond by integrating their knowledge, understanding and skills developed through studying the course. This reflects the fact that the knowledge, understanding and skills developed through the study of discrete sections, should accumulate to a more comprehensive understanding than may be described in each section separately (2002 HSC Notes from the Marking Centre Studies of Religion I and II, p. 5).

These comments highlight the need for high level skills development and that students should expect

to be asked to apply their knowledge to specific tasks in relation to the Syllabus. While Masters was critical of the marking process in 2001, at least implicitly, the message about the need for detailed knowledge and demonstration of higher order skills was applied by teachers. The 2002 Report has frequent comments of this nature, "[C]andidates were able to cite specific and relevant examples in answering the question" (2002 HSC Notes from the Marking Centre Studies of Religion I and II, p. 6). For the first time this specific comment was made: "Familiarity with the syllabus or lack thereof, was evident in the quality of responses to this question" (2002 HSC Notes from the Marking Centre Studies of Religion I and II, p. 9). While it was made in relation to a specific question comments of a similar flavour were made about a range of questions.

In terms of the topic of this issue of the Journal, *How to Teach Religions of the World,* two major challenges can be discerned: the necessity of excellent human resources who can provide a context for disparate pieces of information and facilitate the acquisition of skills; secondly, that teaching skills in relation to the study of religion(s) is central and vital to the study of religion.

Approaches to the Study of Religion

One of the major hurdles encountered by many students in the study of religion is what methodology to use in the study. The *Studies of Religion* Syllabus does not mandate a particular methodology, preferring to consider a range of approaches as appropriate:

> There is a variety of valid ways of undertaking the study of religion. Any one approach to the study of religion has strengths and limitations; to this end, aspects of the phenomenological, theological, typological, historical and sociological approaches to the study of religion are employed in this syllabus (1999 Syllabus, p. 6).

As Connolly notes "information never occurs in a vacuum. Accurate, objective accounts of religious phenomena and religious traditions simply do not exist in their own right. All accounts of religion are accounts by people who approach their study from a particular starting-point (Connolly, 1999, p. 1). The particular methodology adopted in a field of study depends on the stance that the student is taking toward the religion and on the purpose for which the study is being undertaken. The stance generally can be thought of as being either from inside religion or from outside; it can be further clarified in terms of being sympathetic to religion or being sceptical in relation to religion. Sue Morgan discusses feminist approaches to the study of religion as a "critical transformation of existing theoretical perspectives" (Morgan, 1999, p. 42). These 'stances' are basic outlooks that determine attitudes and ways of viewing the subject under consideration. They operate prior to theoretical perspectives and, to some extent, determine the nature of the study.

The purpose for which the study is being undertaken is also important. It is possible to consider "religion" as such, that is, not particularly considering individual religions, but thinking about religion. It is also possible to study religion from each of the following perspectives: anthropological, phenomenological, philosophical, psychological, sociological, theological (Connelly, 1999, p. v), or additionally, from a typological or historical perspective (BOS, 1999, p. 6). In the case of most schools, even most centres of tertiary study it is unlikely that the study of religion divorced from any particular religious perspective will form a significant part of the curriculum.

Stances and Worldviews

It is important in any study of religion to be aware of the various stances that one can take toward the study and also the worldview that one brings to the study. For example, the most obvious stance that everyone brings to the study of religion is whether they are looking at it from the "inside" or the "outside". An inside approach is one where the person is viewing the religion as an adherent or believer would look at it. An outside approach, in contrast, is an objectivist view, looking at the religion in the same way we might study a cell or a building. This is a challenge in *Studies of Religion* since almost all the students are approaching the study of one of the religious traditions from a position of being an "insider", but will approach the other religious tradition(s) as distinct outsiders.

The inside stance is most applicable for those considering the religion from a theological or historical perspective. This stance considers the religion as believers live it. That is not to imply it is not possible to be critical or objective, just that one would not, ordinarily, question the *validity* of the religion. Some examples of this kind of approach could be studying the religions liturgical practices, in order to determine their authenticity or appropriateness to the current context. Note here, that such a study does not seek to ask whether or not there should be liturgical practices, but whether current practice is authentic and/or appropriate. Another example could be to elucidate the anthropology inherent in the religion or the accounts of the origins of the world; again from this stance, study of these aspects of the religion would not question that it has an anthropology or

views about the origins of the world, just what these are and whether they are appropriate.

The outside stance is one where the student does not view the religion as an adherent. The scholar may, in fact, be an adherent, but they are trying to distance themselves from the religion. Again this is a critical study, but need not be sceptical, it could be quite sympathetic to the religion. In this form of study the religious beliefs of the student are not of central importance. This stance is most likely to be associated with phenomenological, anthropological, sociological and psychological approaches to the study of religion. These approaches seek to determine the phenomena associated with religion and the role that religions play in societies, human relationships and psychological health.

The stance or worldview may also be linked to some over-riding critical perspective that determines the way one observes/reads/studies religion or a religious tradition. The most obvious example of this is in terms of gender: do males and females think about; deconstruct and construct; interpret and access religion in the same way? From a say feminist perspective an over-riding question would be "where is the voice of women in this religion?" Another example of a worldview would be a "liberationist" stance: here the student would first and foremost ask, "what does this religion say about or offer to the oppressed?" Such worldviews determine to a great extent what one actually notices about religion or in a religion.

It is important to stress that all these kinds of stances and worldviews do not mean that one is studying religion subjectively or objectively. Any academic study must, of its nature, be objective. To be objective does not mean that one is trying to tear holes in the religion or to render it meaningless. It does mean that there needs to be a certain distance, even if one is using an "inside" stance, between the student and the religion. The study of religion is not simply apologetics. This is a particular challenge for confessionally based schools. The tensions indicated here are manifest in teaching and learning in *Studies of Religion*, not because they are opposed, but because as indicated above the students may be using two quite different stances without really acknowledging it.

Theological Perspectives

Traditionally, within the Christian context, the usual method of studying religion has been through theology; that is, an investigation of a particular instantiation of the faith or a particular denomination. This method assumes the basic elements of the particular faith being considered and is a scientific exploration of the primary texts, the essential beliefs and doctrines of the faith, the rituals associated with the religion and the implications of the faith for the lives of adherents. This way of studying religion is done, if you like, from the inside, accepting the religion and its teachings and then inquiring about various aspects of it. Usually this method is used by adherents clearly studying and writing within the tradition primarily for other believers.

More basically, in terms of the study of the Christian faith, a theological approach assumes the basic 'truths' of Christianity: there is one Trinitarian God; Jesus Christ is both divine and human, was born to Mary, preached in ancient Israel was put to death and was raised from the dead; the scriptures are the revealed word of God; God is the creator of the universe and desires all creation to be re-united with the divine being for all eternity; that adherence to the Christian faith requires certain practices. Theology seeks to understand these precepts, explore their meaning in the contemporary setting and to clarify the implications of them for believers. It engages in this study from 'inside' the faith and is sympathetic to the faith; it does not seek to observe the faith, but to participate in it; it is not seeking to disprove the faith but to explicate it.

Alongside the theological perspective it is possible to consider the role of catechesis and/or religious education as they have been conducted in the Christian tradition. For the sake of brevity I will treat these topics as though they are the same discipline, but it should be noted that specialists in the field would argue that they are quite distinct. What demarcates these disciplines from the more general theological perspective has been their educational focus. Catechesis and religious education have emphasised the dimension of passing on the faith to those who by reason of age or culture have not previously been aware of all the aspects of the religion. There is about them an intention to inform people about the faith in a primary manner. Additionally, there is also an element of forming people *in* the faith. For a variety of reasons the activity of religious education in schools has begun to focus more solidly on the provision of information and the development of skills pertaining to the study of religion. At this point I want to briefly sketch the situation in religious education in the contemporary setting.

Since the 1970s religious education in Catholic schools has been increasingly characterised by a separation between the more formal classroom lessons in religion and the development of faith. This separation is also based on a view of religious education which holds that *Religious Studies* is the dimension of religious education which ***properly*** belongs to the school and a course of classroom

study, since it is here that teachers and the education system excel. The development of faith, on the other hand, is ***more*** properly the role of the family, as the first educators of children and the local parish as the basic Christian community (John Paul II, 1979).

This division has several major advantages: it enables the classroom course in *Religious Studies* to be treated just as any other subject within the overall curriculum; it enables students *and* staff to distinguish between the academic, theological study of the Catholic and other religious traditions and the nurturing of a living faith; it allows religious knowledge and skills in religious studies to be seen as the focus of assessment rather than faith. The implementation of this policy has enabled the development of rigorous, coherent and theologically sound curricula and accompanying resources. It is also the case that schools which identified with this approach and supported the study of religion as an academic discipline were much better prepared in terms of teachers and resources to handle the transition to *Studies of Religion.*

Philosophical Approaches

Fisher (1999, pp. 105-134) has identified a variety of sub-approaches within a philosophical approach to the study of religion. Principally, what each of these sub-approaches has in common is that they are directed to intellectual problems and content of 'religion'. In terms of problems this includes questions of the existence of God, the plausibility of religious doctrines, the problems of theodicy. In terms of the content of religion a philosophical approach focuses on "how ideas and concepts in the history of philosophy enable us to have a better understanding of doctrine" (Fisher 1999, p. 106).

Philosophical approaches are a means of examining religion on the grounds of reason and rationality; assessing the claims of religions on the grounds of the evidence available and evaluating the veracity of the claims made. This method of thinking about religion is inherently rational and employs a "hermeneutic of suspicion", in other words, calling into question the claims made by religions... testing the authenticity of doctrines and the sensibility of practices. This method is also inherently reflective, in the sense of subjecting all aspects of religions to scrutiny. The point of such an approach is to demand of religions that they be accountable for their teachings and practices in terms of being able to produce arguments that are logical and verifiable; that claims made are able to be justified.

Philosophical approaches to the study of religion are seeking wisdom about religion(s). Philosophy is ultimately about discerning truth, within the limits of truth in a particular setting. That is, in terms of questions about the existence of God, philosophy will not try to determine if God does, in fact, exist, since this could be beyond the limits of knowledge. Philosophy will, however, try to determine if a particular faith belief about God is plausible and able to be held as within the realms of truth. An example of this is some of the standard beliefs about God: *a being greater than which none can exist.* What are the attributes of such a being? Over time, religions in the West have argued that such a being must be omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent. Philosophy tests these claims and suggests ways in which each of these beliefs might be true or may be called into question.

The use of a philosophical approach to the study of religion, then, is a commitment to the truth. How the truth might be found can relate to any of the following: reflecting on the nature of ultimate reality; demonstrating the rationality of religious belief; by highlighting the limits of reason and the necessity of faith; as the analysis of the nature and function of religion; the nature of thinking about religion. In short, it applies the tools and skills of philosophy to religion and religious thinking. It seeks to clarify and interpret the claims of religion according to the dictates of reason.

It is interesting that this approach is not suggested as appropriate for *Studies of Religion* given that many of the critical comments from the Examination Centres highlighted earlier in this paper reflect the lack of philosophical rigour demonstrated by students.

Phenomenological Approaches

These approaches do not try to determine the truth or the validity of religious claims, but simply seek to examine *what is actually happening* within a religion. They are interested in studying the phenomena. A very good example of this can be the study of worship. Here a phenomenologist would look at statements, teaching and doctrine about the various forms of worship and would then observe the worship in practice and try to discern the role that worship plays in the lives of believers. It may be that believers' approach to worship and what they seem to derive from worship are completely aligned with religious doctrine or, perhaps, is quite at variance with it.

The findings of such a study need to be carefully examined since it is highly unlikely that most believers will articulate their worship in the same way that it is formulated in doctrine, but it may still be in keeping with the doctrine. On the other hand, some worship might seem to be aligned while being completely at variance with the doctrine.

To take the Christian Eucharist as an example. Catholic and Uniting church theology and church teaching would be at significant variance in the view of what was occurring at a Eucharistic celebration. A phenomenologist would examine the writings about ritual and then observe what actually happens at ritual celebrations, before making a determination that could well hold there is no genuine difference between the practices of the Uniting and Catholic denominations. The phenomenologist recognises the significance of the doctrinal statements of religions, the significance of liturgy and ritual in religious belief, but will be primarily interested in what is actually happening in the lives of the adherents of religions. In this case, it may be determined that there is, in fact, no substantial difference in effect of Eucharistic Liturgy in the lives of Christian believers of a variety of denominations.

This raises significant questions for the study of religion, as far as a phenomenologist is concerned if the ritual action and words are the same, the setting is the same, the structures are the same *and* the discernible effects in the lives of believers is the same, then the activity *is* the same in both cases. This could be argued on a strong or weak basis. A strong basis would refer, as I have done here, to ostensibly the same ritual in denominations within a religious tradition. A weak approach might be to compare rituals designed to effect similar or parallel outcomes in quite different traditions. Perhaps the most obvious example of this would be a comparison between Jewish Passover and Sabbath ritual meals and Christian Eucharistic liturgies. This is obvious since the Eucharistic ritual derives from a combination of the two Jewish practices (the format and words of the Last Supper rituals are those of the Sabbath meal, while in Christian tradition, the setting was that of a Passover meal). From this point a phenomenologist might ask if the Christian Eucharist and the Jewish ritual meals are not, in effect, the same as ritual meals in other religious traditions.

A phenomenological approach to the study of religion considers a variety of data, but is most interested in what this event/belief/ritual does in the lives of believers. A more pertinent example might be that of marriage. The phenomenologist will ask, if there is a ritual in a variety of religions that has as its intent and its effect the joining of two people in a relationship for life, is it not the case that the rituals are the same, that is marriage? It is of less importance that the stages of transition are different, that the words are different, or that even the doctrinal understanding of what is occurring is not identical. What is important is that the ritual is designed to bring about an identical effect: the joining of two people in a life-long relationship.

Feminist Approaches

Sue Morgan has argued that "feminism, like religion, addresses the meaning of human identity and wholeness at the very deepest levels, drawing upon a wide range of interdisciplinary insights from anthropology, theology, sociology and philosophy" (Morgan, 1999, p. 42). This identifies the common interests of feminism and religion; it is also the case that feminism has been a powerful tool to critique religion. This role has frequently been highlighted in contemporary religion studies, suggesting that feminist perspectives have contributed to religion studies by "proffering powerful, provocative analyses of religion's ambiguous treatment of women" (Morgan, 1999, p. 43). While not seeking to ignore this aspect of feminist insights regarding religion, in this paper I am more concerned with the methodological contribution of feminist discourse in religion studies.

It should not be assumed that when any scholar is discussing feminist perspectives or feminist analyses that there is a univocal stance or slant being presented. On the contrary, feminism embraces a wide range of views, and ideological stances. What is consistent within feminist discourse is the interest in viewing or reviewing situations, texts, practices from the perspective of women. It may be that this usually takes the form of a liberationist stance, seeking to expose and oppose any form of discrimination (personal, social, political or economic) that women suffer on the basis of their gender. In relation to contemporary religion, then, this means considering the way that religions think about and treat women. In order to do this it is necessary to examine not only present beliefs and structures, but also how these beliefs and structures came to be dominant in the religion.

Feminism in relation to religion studies is different to the other methodologies considered thus far. Theological, philosophical and phenomenological methods claim to be objective in their intent (they may not be, but this is a central claim); Feminist methods differ in this respect since they are claiming to both privilege women's perspective and to examine critically all facets of religion for bias against women. Of course, feminist scholars claim a certain degree of objectivity in their reasoning, but they make no claim about trying to think about a situation in a purely objective fashion. In addition to considering a scenario from the perspective of women, feminist scholars would argue that everyone brings to their study their own biases and agendas. The difference between most methods and those which like feminist stances might be considered "critical" in their orientation is that they are trying to identify and "own" their bias.

The key features of feminist approaches to the study of religion can be summarised as follows.

⇒ Re-imaging God in ways that are reflective of and supportive to the religious concerns of women:

- adapting symbols of God so that they are inclusive;
- recognition of the metaphorical nature of religious language;
- challenging androcentric imagery to transform the patriarchal concepts at their root.

⇒ Reinterpretation of religious texts:

- application of a feminist hermeneutic in reading and interpreting texts;
- textual revision to recover and amplify the voices of women in biblical texts;
- recognition of the equivalence of genders in creation narratives;
- appeal to the prophetic-messianic tradition within scripture as a self-critical perspective, equating social justice with feminist critique;
- reconstruction of early religious communities to uncover the roots of patriarchy in the tradition;
- recognition of the role and use of a community of readers to determine the meaning of the texts;

⇒ Retrieval of women's religious history:

- restoring the historical visibility of women in religions;
- recognition of the connection between self-identity and historical continuity;
- questioning the inter-relationships of gender, power and religion in historical contexts, particularly where 'feminist' interpretations are used to support patriarchal and hierarchical power relations;
- awareness of the creative female voices of history;

⇒ Re-imagining religions through feminist eyes:

- utilising the feminist emphasis on the connection between theory and action to effect transformation;
- a campaign for equality, moving to a thorough redefinition of paradigms of leadership, mission and service;
- recognition of the primacy of relationships as fundamental to religious communities;
- taking seriously the embodiedness of believers;
- moving from the embodied personal relationships to an awareness of the complex webs of meaning and responsibility that demand our attention within religions and more widely (adapted from Morgan, 1999, pp. 51-59).

Such a critical perspective in the study of religion can lead to powerful and transformative reformulations of the very way we think about religion. They can highlight the inherent biases and agenda of the theologies and philosophies that have been part and parcel of our way of thinking about and studying religion. Feminist analysis is not the only critical theory; others have been liberation theologies or contextual theologies. Feminism has, however, been the most powerful of these critical stances in Western societies.

Conclusion

Teaching world religions remains an important challenge for Australian society. The first years of the twenty-first century have demonstrated the need for enhanced appreciation and understanding of the religious views which permeate our world. Effective teaching of religion requires close attention to content, but even closer attention to methodology. Religion is one discipline where *how* we learn about it will determine to a great extent what it is that we learn. The experience of teaching, marking and reflecting on the NSW course *Studies of Religion* has convinced me that to achieve the aims of the Syllabus the teachers need to be practitioners who have the values and attitudes that the Syllabus attempts to communicate.

The study of religion is a very old discipline and at the same time one that has been given new impetus in recent years. The 'newness' of this study derives from the changed foci deriving from awareness of different methods of investigation and from the altered circumstances of the world. We no longer live in societies that can maintain the illusion of Christian dominance; we live in a world with a plurality of religions and religious ways of thinking about the major questions facing humanity. While

there is no longer any certainty that a particular tradition has all the answers, there is a growing awareness that religion as such does hold a key to appropriate ways of thinking about many of these problems. The study of religion does not occur in a vacuum but engages with the world and with the questions that humanity seeks to answer in the contemporary setting.

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Patrick McArdle is a lecturer in the School of Theology (ACT), Australian Catholic University. He has been a marker for HSC *Studies of Religion* since its inception, taught the subject in schools between 1993 and 1995, served on the Examination Committee for Studies of Religion between 1997-2000, and has been part of the Board of Studies Consultations about revisions to the Studies of Religion Syllabus in 1999 and 2003. His principal teaching and research interests are in the fields of religious ethics, Christian anthropology and practical theology.