

## Teaching Religious Plurality

### A Second Naïveté

Constance Wise and Richmond West, University of Denver/Illiff School of Theology

#### Abstract

University courses in diversity education typically revolve around issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation, but the religious factors of American diversity are generally ignored. This article argues that religious plurality should be included in diversity curricula. Because religious communities do in fact contribute to the public life of this country, undergraduate students should take religion seriously as part of the American public scene. Moreover, encountering religious differences can contribute to students' acceptance of other diversity factors. This essay reviews a course the authors designed and taught at the University of Denver. Students explored the issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and the environment as engaged by five religious traditions – Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and religious alternatives (such as Native American Spirituality and Wicca). To foster critical thinking, teaching methods were based on cooperative learning rather than teacher authority. In this course students learned to assess critically religious communities' contributions to the broader society. The course demonstrates that students can move beyond personal biases to focus on social issues that challenge internalized values.

#### Introduction

[1] In the United States we are acutely aware of our long and sometimes painful history of struggling with the issues of race and gender. More recently, our nation's conscience has been challenged by claims from those marginalized by age, disability, and sexual orientation. Look out across a typical undergraduate classroom in an American university and you might see Akihiro, a Japanese Buddhist; Tanya, a black lesbian who happens to be Methodist; Mario, a Roman Catholic Mexican American with a hearing disability; and Susan, age 54, a hard-core secularist who has returned to complete her degree and establish economic independence after raising four children on welfare. Universities try to welcome these students and make their social realities part of the academic setting by offering courses in multiculturalism or diversity education. These courses typically revolve around issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, attempting to raise students' awareness of marginalized groups and the challenges of a multicultural democracy. Although advocacy of differently-abled individuals and equitable treatment of persons of all ages are sometimes tangentially addressed, the religious factors of American diversity are generally ignored. This is perhaps because of the national myth of religious tolerance, or because of the increasing secularization of our nation's culture. However, the range of American attitudes towards Muslims in the wake of recent terrorist attacks demonstrates the danger of leaving the religion factor out of our national sense of diversity.

[2] As graduate student teaching assistants, we discovered that our university did not include religion in its diversity curriculum. We believed that our university should include a course on religious plurality for two reasons: First, religious diversity is a serious and sometimes

problematic component of our nation's social reality. Second, since students think that they are already accepting of religious differences, a course on religious diversity may foster a broader acceptance of differences based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

[3] The United States was once largely presumed to be a Christian nation, and Christianity had precedence in establishing values for American public life. With increasing secularization, the belief that religious values should have public impact is considered naïve. However, Paul Ricoeur has suggested a second naïveté, in which critical interpretation of our symbols within historically-constructed myths, rather than uncritical belief, generates meaning for human cultures (350-57). In a similar spirit, rather than uncritical acceptance of Christian values or a view of religion as obsolete on the American public scene, we suggest critical assessment of our nation's diverse religions as an avenue for appreciating their contributions to public life. We have devised a course in which we invite undergraduates into this second naïveté. We, who ourselves represent diversity in gender, sexual orientation, and personal religious conviction, taught our experiential course, "American Diversity: Religious Plurality," at the University of Denver, which has a student population comprised largely of white, middle-class individuals and espouses an institutional commitment to diversity education.

[4] In this paper, we will begin by examining the theory behind multicultural education and look at some examples of how religious diversity has been excluded from this discourse. We will then review the course we taught and assess its strengths and weaknesses in light of critical thinking theory. We will show that the course correlated well with the premise that cooperative learning rather than teacher authority best fosters critical thinking. We will also explain how the course encouraged students to take religion seriously as a part of the American public scene.

### **Including Religious Plurality within Multicultural Pedagogy**

[5] Bell hooks, one of the most respected theorists of multicultural education, proposes a form of education that achieves what she terms "transgression" - a positive outcome that is "crucial in the development of one's self-determination and self-actualization, most especially for members of marginalized groups" (Florence: xvii). To achieve transgressive education, teachers must be open to the voices of their students, specifically those who have been marginalized by race, class, and gender. The students then become the subjects of their own education instead of the objects of teaching by those in authority. Hooks draws on her own life experiences, including her involvement with Christianity and Buddhism, as the foundation for her pedagogy. Her educational theory is based on the works of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, Muslim Malcolm X, and Christian writers such as James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. Yet hooks' transgressive pedagogy does not address religious intolerance as a social problem, nor does she give particular attention to the voices of members of marginalized religious groups.

[6] Two further examples demonstrate how religious plurality is often excluded from the discourse on multicultural education. Raymond Wlodkowski and Margery Ginsberg have left religion out of their discussion of multicultural education within the Jossey-Bass series on higher education and the social and behavioral sciences. They present "culturally responsive teaching" in

the face of a “student population in postsecondary education [that] has become increasingly and undeniably diverse” (xi). Their strategy is to employ cultural factors to motivate students to learn, and yet they do not include religious diversity. Similarly, Joel Spring’s study of multicultural education has chapters on teaching about racism, sexism, language diversity, and ethnocentrism, but does not include any consideration of America’s religious diversity or the social problem of religious intolerance.

[7] One excellent resource for teachers of courses on diversity education that does include the factor of religion is *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams, Bell, and Griffin). This volume presents curricula designed to counter racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism. It also includes a chapter on anti-Semitism. Bell opens the volume with a helpful presentation of “social justice education,” and applies the concept to religious diversity:

For example, in spite of rhetoric that the United States is a secular nation, Christian symbols, holidays, and rituals are routinely integrated into public affairs and institutions. Other religious and spiritual traditions held by large numbers of Americans, including Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Native Americans, are invisible or marginalized so much so that when members of these groups protest they are often viewed as challenging the American (Christian) way of life (12).

Bell argues that oppression arises from “unmarked and unacknowledged norms that bolster the power position of the dominant group” (7). Within this definition, non-Christians in the United States suffer from a subtle but ever present form of religious oppression.

[8] In the context of religious oppression, unacknowledged subtle social patterns can cycle back to open and full expression. Weinstein and Mellen identify this pattern in the oppression of Jews: “Throughout history, overt anti-Semitic hatred and destruction have regularly subsided to more subtle manifestations and then reemerged with a fury” (171). Thus they assert “the importance of analyzing and confronting anti-Semitism in all its forms, no matter how subtle” (171). They warn that it is easy not to take this problem seriously. “Those who look at the present without an appreciation of the cyclical nature of this pattern may dismiss anti-Semitism as a thing of the past, much less important than other forms of oppression in today’s world” (171). Their concern reinforces our insistence that religious diversity be included in multicultural curricula. However, the only specific religious oppression addressed in this sourcebook is anti-Semitism. The analysis by Weinstein and Mellen nevertheless can be applied more broadly within the United States to all non-Christian religions. Muslims, Hindus, and neo-Pagans also continue to be vulnerable to social and legislative initiatives from some Christian groups to impose their religious beliefs, practices, and norms of behavior on our whole society. Groups that advocate “prayer in school,” for example, usually mean some form of Christian prayer, often ending “in Jesus’ name,” disregarding the exclusivism of this formula.

[9] There is, however, a counter trend that we find equally disturbing: the tendency to view all organized religion negatively and to reject religious contributions to public discourse. Richard John Neuhaus contends that this anti-religion stance leaves our nation with a “naked public square.” Likewise, Cornell West warns that the loss of the broad public influence of the Black Church leads to nihilism among black youth. Our position is that religion does have a place in

public life because, as we have learned from bell hooks, a democracy should value all voices. However, we also contend that all contributions to public discourse, including those of religious communities, are subject to critical review. Not only should we listen to diverse religious views in both the classroom and the public arena, but we should also assess critically the stand that various religious groups take when they speak out on public issues. A second naïveté of openness to religion in public discourse does not mean abandoning one's critical edge. We designed a course that helped students to listen to diverse religious voices, but to do so with a critical ear.

### **Components of the Course**

[10] We structured the course “American Diversity: Religious Plurality” to provide two levels of encounter with diverse religious communities in Denver. First, the students learned about the basic beliefs and practices of several religions selected to offer a cross section of faith communities. We grouped these communities under five general headings: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religious alternatives in the United States (see Figure 1 for the specific religious communities and Figure 2 for textbooks used). Second, the students investigated the actual attitudes and efforts to effect change by the members of these religions around five social issues - race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and the environment. Finally, we opened the discussion to a further concern - the attitudes of each religion toward other religious traditions.

[11] Because we contend that religion is an important factor in American diversity, that religious communities do in fact contribute to the public life of this country, and that encountering difference is a significant part of the learning process, we formulated the following learning objectives:

1. Students will appreciate the diversity of contemporary American culture, including the diversity of religious beliefs and practices.
2. Students will gain general knowledge of the beliefs and practices of five specific religious traditions.
3. Students will understand the social significance of the issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and the environment.
4. Students will comprehend the intersection of a religious community's beliefs with its teachings and practices around these social issues.
5. Students will employ critical thinking skills to assess the positive and negative contributions of various religious communities in helping American society address these social issues.

[12] In pursuit of these objectives, the course had the following components:

Presentation of five social issues through lectures, videos, and short readings (see Figure 2)

Group Report A describing the basic beliefs of one of the religions (see Figure 3)

Group interview of a community leader from this religion (see Figure 4)

Group attendance at a public gathering of this religious community

Group Report B analyzing the results of the interview and attendance at the public gathering with critical assessment of the religious community's attitudes toward and attempts to effect change around the five social issues (see Figure 4)

Individual student report on a personal religious experience or about a social issue with religious significance

Five multiple choice and essay quizzes covering the presentations on the five social issues and the contents of Group Report A

This course was one option for students to fulfill the undergraduate core curriculum of the University of Denver. We taught it twice, in the winter and spring quarters of 2000, and there were approximate thirty students in each class.

### **Assessing the Course in Light of Critical Thinking Theory**

[13] One of the goals of this course, as identified in learning objective five, was critical thinking. Parker Palmer notes how non-critical objectivism has been embedded in our traditional ways of thinking. He describes how, with few exceptions, the classes he was in as a student revolved around the authority of one person - the teacher (33). He objects to this treatment as strongly as bell hooks objects to her marginalization in the classroom as an African American student. For Palmer, to sit in a class where the teacher stuffs minds with information and insists on having the answers, while being uninterested in students' views, is to experience a lack of space for learning (43, 69-71).

[14] Concurring with Palmer's assessment, we structured our course to employ non-authoritarian teaching methods and to encourage critical thinking in student reports and essays. Team-teaching allowed us to model scholarly disagreement and the need to support one's position. Sometimes the students did not understand why we were arguing, but they learned some aspects of critical thinking by observing divergence of views. Lectures included models for inter-religious dialogue and abstract definitions of religion as well as presentations on the five social issues. These lectures tended to spark significant debate and class discussions.

[15] Later, in reassessing this course, we encountered another model for teaching critical thinking in a course on religion - the *cooperative learning* approach of Richard Penaskovic. He sees critical thinking as an umbrella term covering decision-making, problem-solving, and careful judgment. Critical thinking means to think actively and independently, testing one's thinking for internal coherence and consistency. It includes detecting bias and identifying unstated assumptions (3, 6, 9). Penaskovic provides theoretical guidance, as well as numerous practical suggestions, for advancing critical thinking in the classroom. He offers specific strategies for critical thinking that incorporate cooperative learning, in which small groups of students work together. In contrast to the teacher-centered classroom, cooperative learning groups force students to take the initiative (72). The student-centered approach of cooperative learning fits well with the emphasis on student voices in bell hooks's theory of transgressive education, and is an appropriate model by which to evaluate the critical thinking component of our course. We will, therefore, use Penaskovic's model, along with some insights from bell hooks, to assess our success in meeting our course objectives.

[16] In his model for cooperative learning, Penaskovic recommends varying the structure of each class so that the instructor is not predictable and students never know what to expect (150). Assessing our course in light of this recommendation, we note that our learning methods included class lectures and discussions, videos, interviews with religious leaders, attendance at public gatherings of religious communities, and class reports. However, we were not as spontaneous as Penaskovic recommends because our course syllabus clearly outlined each session's activities. Our technique for sustaining the interest of college level students was to take a non-traditional approach to the study of diverse religions through the lens of social issues. This strategy correlates with Penaskovic's use of "real world problems" to teach critical thinking skills (145).

[17] Penaskovic's model focuses on facilitating critical thinking by having students work together in small groups. He contends that this motivates students to try learning strategies and learn to think critically when they hear peers raise questions, wrestle with situations, and deal with uncertainty. Small groups force all students to take an active part in the class since it is virtually impossible for even shy students to adopt the role of spectator (77-78). We found this to be true among our students. For example, one deaf student who might otherwise have been reluctant to make an oral presentation participated adequately in his group's oral report. In keeping with bell hooks's theory of listening to all voices in a class, his fellow students learned to accommodate and respect his modified oral skills.

[18] We employed the essential element of Penaskovic's small-group model. Teams of two to four students investigated a specific religious community and reported their findings to the class. To make the reports a learning experience for all students, the whole class was tested on this material. In their first report, Group Report A, students made a fairly cursory presentation of the beliefs and practices of this religious community. Students answered questions that were worded broadly to be appropriate in some way for all of the traditions covered (see Figure 3). This wording helped students think about religion broadly rather than in categories of the dominant Christian paradigm. For example, the Zen Buddhist group was initially confused by the question "What is the nature of divinity for this religious community?" We used this as a pedagogical tool to discuss the depth of possible differences between monotheistic, polytheistic, and non-theistic religions, and how sometimes our religious language cannot cover every case within a broad diversity. Thus, Group Report A was designed to meet learning objectives one and two - to lead students into an appreciation of the religious diversity of this country and to provide a general knowledge about the beliefs and practices of specific traditions.

[19] Students drew their information for Group Report A from the textbooks for the course. Originally, we used a text by Julia Mitchell Corbett. However, we found that Corbett, writing from a sociological perspective, did not cover the actual beliefs of some of the religions in sufficient detail for students to do Group Report A. As graduate theology students, we tended to ask questions that Corbett does not address. Also, Corbett does not include Native American spirituality. Therefore, the second time we taught the course, we added a text by Jacob Neusner. This text added sufficient theological and doctrinal detail and did cover Native American spirituality, though we supplemented it with an article by George Tinker who is himself Native American. We also used the video "Wiping the Tears of Seven Generations." With these additions students were successful in finding sufficient information for Group Report A.

[20] One critique of Group Report A is that it might encourage a superficial understanding of the subject religions, and in fact some of the reports were less than adequate and had to be supplemented by us in class. In retrospect, we would have done better to limit student reports to assignments that actually required critical assessment. The factual content of Group Report A would have been better presented through our lectures.

[21] The next assignment, Group Report B, was designed to meet learning objectives four and five. It proved to be the most popular and perhaps most successful component of the course. For this report, students did field research by interviewing a leader from a local religious community and attending a public gathering of that community. We secured permission for these interviews in advance from religious leaders throughout the Denver metropolitan area. In the interview, students asked questions concerning the five social issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and the environment. For example, on the issue of gender, students asked “What does your tradition advocate concerning the role of women? Are women restricted from forms of leadership? How so? Does your particular community take any action to promote gender equality?” (see Figure 4 for a full list of the interview questions).

[22] In his cooperative learning model, Penaskovic encourages students to question authorities and provides opportunities for them to do so by pointing out inconsistencies in texts or in comments by a guest speaker. He offers exercises where students suspend their own views and argue from the other side (8-9, 11-12). In our course students were expected to suspend their own religious beliefs and to listen respectfully and make accurate notes during the interview. However, they then raised questions in Group Report B about the consistency between the religious community’s beliefs as described in Group Report A and its social practices as described by the religious authority they interviewed.

[23] The crux of Group Report B was the critical component, assessing the religious community’s stances and effectiveness within American society. This level of assessment seemed beyond the grasp of undergraduate students until we clarified our expectations by having the students answer, at a minimum, two specific questions: “What is the most positive contribution this community makes to American society?” and “What is one possible problem that could arise between this community and the larger society?” These framing questions allowed nearly all student teams to succeed in making at least two critical assessments of the religious community they investigated. These questions fulfilled Penaskovic’s axiom that “critical thinking must be facilitated, not taught” (152). However, this mid-course correction might not have been necessary had we heeded his advice to introduce critical thinking skills at the beginning of the course. He recommends spending two or three classes discussing the notion of critical thinking and explaining why it is important (83). In a ten-week quarter, one session would have been all we could devote to this topic, but this early attention might have prevented the loss of class time later. We made one final adjustment between the two quarters we taught the course. The second time, we added a question to Group Report B on each community’s teachings concerning the beliefs of other religions. This question helped the students conceptualize an overarching concern of the course - the issue of religious tolerance.

[24] In addition to cooperative learning, we employed several instructor-based teaching techniques. Prior to the two group projects, we tackled learning objective three by presenting the five social issues through lectures, short readings, and videos (see Figure 2). In keeping with learning objective four, our goal was to help students link the five social problems to the multiple ways in which different religious groups struggle with these issues. For instance, we used an essay by Rosemary Radford Ruether on the female nature of God. When we first taught this course in the winter of 2000, we followed the Ruether piece with a session in which we divided the students by gender and allowed them to explore their feelings about female God language. These discussions were lively and this session received high marks on student evaluations. Unfortunately, the second time we taught the course, the breakout sessions were less successful. From this we learned that the same teaching tool may not work equally well for different classes.

[25] Overall, we were successful in linking the issues of the environment and sexual orientation to religious beliefs. However, we were not as successful in making the link for race and gender. For race, we used an article by Audre Lorde. Unfortunately, her essay did not provide any overall reference to religion. In hindsight, we realize that the students read this article as problematizing the issue of race, but it did not help them see that race has historically been a positive factor in some religious traditions. A better text for our purposes might have been a selection from James Cone's *God of the Oppressed*, which argues how African American churches understand God to have a positive relationship to their race. Because the students made inaccurate statements in the Group Report B, such as, "Race is unimportant in Native American spirituality," we conclude that they often missed the relationship between religion and race.

[26] Furthermore, even though the Ruether piece and the breakout sessions raised issues concerning female God imagery, the group that reported on Wicca only partly understood the significance of gender for this religion. The students astutely reported on gender roles exhibited by participants in the Wiccan ritual they attended, but they still erroneously concluded, "Gender is not important in the religion of Wicca." In retrospect, we might have had more success in bringing critical thinking to the race and gender issues if early in the course we had, as Penaskovic suggests, devoted more time to practical exercises in critical thinking. He recommends in-class debates about real world problems such as abortion, physician assisted suicide, and genetic engineering (145). We now see that these more obviously contentious issues might have provided an easier platform for initiating critical thinking skills, since the students could not see the depth of the race and gender issues in the religions they investigated.

[27] The social issue that the students seemed most successful at linking to religion was the environment. The student group on Pure Land Buddhism, for example, observed that Buddhist values would have positive environmental implications, but they pointed out that Buddhists in the United States have a difficult time living out their values in the midst of a highly materialistic culture. The students concluded that, as noble as these values are, they may be unrealistic in our capitalist economy. The environment issue worked well as a type of real-world problem that Penaskovic recommends for teaching critical thinking skills. This may be because the environmental debate seems more current for undergraduate students, while they initially consider race and gender to be historical problems that have been resolved. The task for us as

instructors was to guide students toward more in-depth critical thinking around religious responses to race and gender, a task at which we were only partially successful.

[28] As Penaskovic's model would predict, we found Group Report B to be a highly effective teaching/learning tool, and student evaluations concurred with this assessment. For example, one significant learning experience occurred when a student assessed the Pure Land Buddhist value of focusing on individual enlightenment as neutralizing any political effectiveness of the tradition in the United States. Likewise, the Hare Krishna group expressed doubt about this tradition's ability to hold its altruistic and renunciatory values in a capitalist society. Thus, both of these groups were able to see clearly the impact of social context on religious belief and practice. The Islam group drew some subtle conclusions about the role of women in this complex and growing religious tradition. Turning to positive contributions of religious communities, three groups saw potential wisdom on environmental issues among the communities they encountered: Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and Native American spirituality. Also, the student team reporting on Wicca was surprised to observe members of highly marginalized groups, such as transgender persons, present at the ritual they attended. This led to a class discussion of how religious communities integrate marginalized persons and whether marginalized religions are more open to deviations from social norms. Completing Group Report B also required students to attend a public gathering of the community they were investigating; the teams reporting on Wicca, Zen Buddhism, and Islam were exposed to the most dramatically different types of religious experiences.

[29] Despite these successes, there were some group dynamic difficulties in teaching this course. We were not prepared for student resistance to critical thinking about religious values. Penaskovic warns that students will sometimes resist cooperative learning. He contends that by the time they are in an undergraduate class, students have had almost 20 years of working individualistically and competitively and will be unaccustomed to working together. They will insist on seeing the instructor as powerful, however much he or she tries to share power in the classroom (61, 92). However, we encountered student resistance with an opposite dynamic. In general the students cooperated with the requirements of small group work. Yet one student felt we were exercising too much power in the classroom. She consistently refused to acknowledge the need for critical assessment of religious beliefs and practices, and vocalized in class her concern that the instructors were making personal attacks on both other religions and on students giving reports. It is unfortunate that we were not able to counter this negativism. We could have used Penaskovic's advice to talk with a negative student outside of class to address her concerns and counter her resistance to critical thinking. Although we modeled critical thinking, we also needed to follow his suggestion to facilitate it rather than assuming students can understand the concept.

[30] One potential pitfall in teaching a course that focuses exclusively on diversity issues is that our zeal for the issues involved may lead to student resentment or charges of ideological bias. In order to guard against this pitfall, the diversity of student voices must be heard fully in the classroom. In our course we provided an opening for student voices through individual reports on their personal religious experiences. As instructors we modeled the individual report. One of us demonstrated a simple Wiccan ritual while the other discussed uncertainty concerning his faith

due to negative personal experiences within the Church. Diverse student reports included personal witnesses by conservative Christians; a beautifully performed Gospel hymn; a claim that smoking marijuana is a religious experience; an exciting account of a rescue by God of a mountain-climbing student; two defenses of atheism; an explanation by a Reform Jew of the meaning of keeping kosher; a beautiful presentation of ceramics and the meditational quality of hours at the potter's wheel; and an exquisitely-performed violin concerto by a music major. Several students discussed their current lack of religious affiliation, including critiques of how their personal and family experiences have led them to this impasse. While these latter reports were less dramatic, they showed that the students were struggling with religious issues. We were fortunate to have two international students who reported on their faith traditions. The first quarter, a Japanese student discussed Shinto and described some of the religious festivals of Japan. The second quarter, a Muslim student explained that he has adapted the Islamic practice of five prayers a day to pray only twice a day in his U.S. environment. Another student reported on drumming as a religious experience, including the phenomenon of *entrainment* from the African drumming tradition. According to this student's report, this practice entails the use of rhythm to achieve two religious values: a heightened state of consciousness and personal balance.

[31] Unfortunately, in the second quarter, a few of the individual reports degenerated to an uncritical level; for example, one student, without providing any evidence, claimed that virtually any experience, such as skateboarding, can be religious. Another frustration we had was grading such subjective material, and the grades tended to be very high. A solution to these difficulties would be to require students to submit an outline of their reports ahead of time and to link their religious traditions to one of the specific social issues covered in class. A potential critique of the individual reports could be that it is inappropriate to have students do confessional or devotional presentations in an academic classroom. However, we contend that their individual religious experiences are relevant data to a consideration of contemporary religion in the United States. In our lectures, we were able to draw concrete examples of religious phenomena from the students' individual reports. Most significantly, these reports allowed the students' own voices to be heard in the classroom. Hearing the diverse religious experiences of their fellow classmates reinforced the achievement of learning objective one, to appreciate the religious diversity of U.S. culture.

## **Conclusions**

[32] The success we encountered in teaching this course demonstrates that students can focus on social issues that challenge their internalized values and move beyond their personal biases. We do them a disservice by allowing them to evade this challenge. In our increasingly secular culture, one popular bias among undergraduate students is the rejection of religion as a public value. This course invited students into a second naïveté, critically reclaiming religion's powerful social voice.

[33] Overall, we believe we accomplished our goals in teaching this course, including the five learning objectives. We wanted the students to learn that religions do have a voice in our society, but that it is a highly diverse voice, and that each religion's contributions to the broader society can be assessed critically. We believe that most students developed a more nuanced understanding of the highly diverse and complex nature of religious plurality in the United States. Some students were able to assess critically the contributions various religions make to our

society. They came to appreciate religious communities' abilities to address the highly complex and challenging issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and the environment.

[34] We believe that universities should include courses on religious plurality within their multicultural curricula because religious diversity is a serious and potentially problematic component of our nation's social reality. The addition of religious plurality to multiculturalism offers the student a different and less threatening lens through which to view American diversity - differences based on race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

## **Figure 1**

### **Religious Communities for Group Reports A AND B**

- I. Judaism
  - a. Orthodox
  - b. Reform
- II. Christianity
  - a. United Methodism
  - b. Roman Catholicism
  - c. African Methodist Episcopal Church
  - d. Church of Jesus Christ, Latter Day Saints
- III. Islam
  - a. Sunni Islam
- IV. Buddhism
  - a. Pure Land
  - b. Zen
- V. Other Religious Alternatives
  - a. Native American Spirituality
  - b. Wicca
  - c. Hare Krishna

## **Figure 2**

### **Support Materials**

- I. To Teach About the Five Social Issues
  - a. Race  
Reading: Audre Lorde "Age, Race, Class, Sex: Women Redefining Difference"
  - b. Class and Poverty  
Game about class markers
  - c. Gender  
Reading: Rosemary Radford Reuther "The Female Nature of God"  
Break out session by gender to discuss female God language
  - d. Sexual Orientation

Video: "In the Life"

e. The Environment

Video: "Love the Earth and Be Healed"

## II. To Teach About the Beliefs behind the Social Practices of the Religious Traditions

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Neusner, Jacob (ed.). *World Religions in America: An Introduction*. Revised and Expanded edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000.

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### Figure 3

#### Questions for Group Report A

1. What is the nature of divinity for this religious community? How many representations of the divine, if any, are there, and what is the divine called?
2. How do people relate to this divinity?
3. What does this religious community teach is the major problem for people? What is the solution for this problem?
4. Does this religious community teach that the world or the universe is structured in a particular way? If so, what is this structure?
5. Does this religious community have sacred writings and or revelation? If so, what are they, and if not, does anything take their place?
6. Does the religion with which this community affiliated have a main historical figure? If so, who was he or she, in what century did she or he live, and what significance does this person have for this religion?
7. Does the religion with which this community affiliated have other saints or important historical figures besides the main historical figure? Who are some of these?
8. Does the religion with which this community affiliated have any important holidays or festivals? Please describe two or three and their significance to this community.
9. Is this religious community part of the American religious consensus as defined by Corbett? If so, what are some of the characteristics of the consensus that mark this community? If not, what are some of the characteristics of this community that make it stand outside this consensus?
10. Are there any other important beliefs or practices that need to be presented to give the class a full picture of this religious community?

## Figure 4

### Interview Questions for Group Report B

1. What are some of the most important beliefs and/or practices of your religious community? Or, if you prefer, tell what your religion means to you personally.
2. Does your faith tradition advocate any specific stand on race relations in this country? Does your particular community take any action related to this issue?
3. What does your tradition advocate concerning the role of women? Are women restricted from forms of leadership? How so? Does your particular community take any action to promote gender equality?
4. How does your tradition view issues of homosexuality? Does your particular religious community take any action to advance its official position?
5. Does your tradition have any official statements on class issues and/or issues of poverty? If so, what are they? Does your particular religious community do any forms of community service for low-income persons?
6. Does your tradition have any official stand on environmental issues? Does your particular religious community take any action related to environmental issues?
7. What does your religion teach about the beliefs of other religions?

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