

## Signature Pedagogies in Comparative Perspective

### The Basic Courses for the Study of Religions at the University of Southern Denmark

**Tim Jensen, *University of Southern Denmark, Denmark***

**Abstract.** *This essay is part of a collection of short essays solicited from authors around the globe who teach religion courses at the college level (not for professional religious training). They are published together with an introduction in Teaching Theology and Religion 18:3 (July 2015). The authors were asked to provide a brief overview of the curriculum, student learning goals, and pedagogical techniques employed in their courses.*

#### **Study Program: Formal Framework**

At the University of Southern Denmark, as at the other Danish universities in Copenhagen and Aarhus, there is a separate department for the academic, secular, scientific study of religions. In Odense the name for the department as well as for the study program is *Religionsstudier*. Since so-called Religious Studies departments often are not totally devoid of religious agendas, the preferred translation is Study of Religion(s). A bachelor's degree affords very limited chances for a job, so most students at this level use the degree only to continue on to study at the graduate level.

A graduate student is formally qualified for a job as a religion education (RE) teacher in the upper-secondary school (Gymnasium) where there is a well-established, compulsory RE subject (sort of a mini study-of-religions RE) or as a teacher at the University Colleges where a religion education (in principle though not always in practice, as secular and non-confessional as RE in the Gymnasium), is also taught to the coming primary and secondary school teachers. Graduates are also qualified to apply for a PhD grant and thus for an academic career, as well as for a long list of more liberal or creative jobs in the public and private marketplace.

For years, at the University of Southern Denmark as well at the other universities, the goal of most students enrolled at Study of Religions departments was a career as an RE teacher in the Gymnasium. Very few had other dreams and very few had the qualifications, aspirations, and good luck to become PhD students and thus pursue an academic career. This, however, has changed. More and more students now hope to use their study of religions degree for the mentioned liberal market and more creative jobs as a consultant or supervisor with a special expertise in religion, be it in regard to integration, publishing, communication, or the like.

Since the early 1980s the study of religions has been increasingly attractive to a growing number of students. In Copenhagen as well as in Aarhus where the study of theology (in the Faculty of Theology) is also available, the study of religions has attracted more students than has theology for many years.

### Study Program: General Approaches and Aims

In principle, the Study of Religions department at the University of Southern Denmark encompasses human, social, and natural sciences. The program, however, as well as the linked research of the staff, does not have a special focus on religion studied from a natural science perspective (for example, in relation to cognitivist or evolutionist approaches). The basic approach, nevertheless, can be described as naturalistic. The subject matter for the study of religions program is religion as a human and cultural phenomenon, a social and historical fact. The history of the study of religions, with its various theories, methods, and methodological discussions, including those about the notion religion, is, of course, also central to the program.

Religion in general as well as the various phenomena or themes referred to with the use of analytical categories like ritual, myth, divination, authority, and so forth, are studied historically within various social, historical, and cultural contexts, as well as comparatively and cross-culturally.

The use of comparison as an analytical tool is emphasized, and the methodic comparison of religions and religious phenomena constitutes a core element in the study. All religions, (the Christian one too, of course) and all kinds of religious phenomena are, in principle, included in the total field of comparative history of religions (*sammenlignende religionshistorie* in Danish). This may be the name that the Study of Religion department ought to have at the University of Southern Denmark.

Apart from thus trying to balance a historical (and in certain ways also historical-philological) approach with a comparative approach, the study program at large aims to balance the study of past and present religion.

The program provides students with a qualified knowledge about the forms and functions of contemporary religion; for example, in relation to processes of globalization, integration, and so-called cultural encounters. They are also educated to be capable of critically analysing public discourse on religion, as shown in the news media and in popular culture.

Religion-related and study-of-religions-related philosophy, including political philosophy and ethics is also a constituent and integrated element in the study program, and it is, together with a specific module combining methodology of the study of religions with a study-of-religions based RE-didactics, one of the specialities of this department.

A major at the undergraduate (bachelor's) level consists of the following modules:

- Introduction to comparative history of religions (including sub-modules on phenomenology of religion, indigenous religion, and one or two religions of early or late Antiquity)
- Old Testament religion and Judaism
- Christianity 1
- Introduction to religion-related philosophy and philosophy of science
- Islam and religions of India
- Christianity 2
- Contemporary religion and sociology of religion perspectives
- Main features in the history of the study of religions
- Religion-related ethics and political philosophy
- Themes in comparative religion
- Modern kinds of and themes within Christianity
- Religion education and study-of-religions related RE didactics

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- Elective
- Religion in today's Denmark
- Sociology-of-religion perspectives
- Religion-related philosophy of science
- Religious innovation, past and present
- Special topics in comparative history of religions
- East-Asian religions
- Classical and modern philosophy of religion
- Subject related to a specific language
- BA project

The foundation for the bachelor's as well as the graduate degree is established by the first four modules above, not least by the first one with its three sub-modules. Each of the modules is described in more detail in the study program made by the study program committee and authorized by the dean of the faculty of the humanities. Each teacher has to comply with the normative study program, yet s/he, of course, has a considerable amount of freedom as regards the specific subjects chosen, the secondary literature, and the primary sources. Each module is evaluated at the end of the semester by the students as well as by the teacher, and the study program committee then examines the evaluations.

### Teaching Methods and Strategies

Each teacher has almost total freedom with regard to teaching strategies and methods, didactics and pedagogics. The six scholars currently teaching the first four modules each have their own style and preferences. Some use PowerPoint all of the time, some hardly ever, some may make use of hand-outs with definitions and questions to be discussed in groups, and some almost never explicate suggested readings for respective lectures by way of direct references. Instead s/he relates to the matter for discussion via his or her own research and expertise. Some teachers lecture without involving the students in discussion, apart from discussions related to the training of analyses of the primary sources. None of the teachers take any heed of the possible religious or non-religious or anti-religious positions of students. Students are there as students, not as believers or non-believers. They are there exactly to be trained to approach religion from a study-of-religions academic perspective.

The specific form of the examination varies from module to module. The most frequent examination methods are the home writing assignment and the oral exam (with thirty minutes preparation time or a synopsis handed in advance), but PowerPoint presentations, wikis, and oral presentations are also used. The faculty strategy is to find a balance between formative and non-formative forms of examination, such as encouraging that examination becomes an integrated part of the learning process.

As for teaching and learning methods and strategies, the faculty currently is in the process of demanding that each study program implements a variegated set of teaching and learning tactics, so that the students during a semester are sure to have been confronted with the whole set. It is thus not the individual teacher who must apply the whole set but the staff in total.

Personally, I am delighted that this is so. I use PowerPoints rarely, only if there is a specific need for it (such as images), I never use in-class discussions, and by and large only activate the students with the chosen texts (primary or secondary) that they are supposed to have read and that I then elaborate on, on the basis of my scholarship and with

the enthusiasm I have and hope to share with the students. My most successful classes are those where I combine close text reading with illuminating first-hand experience and anecdotal narratives, when the students discover that a single term can carry a world of meaning and revelation (for example, important political or ideological discourses or discursive conflicts). Since I teach mainly the study of religions RE-didactics, the close reading of the national curriculum with my added knowledge of contexts and involved stakeholders succeeds well in engaging the students – not least because they are not prepared to see how a close contextual reading of the text and the term in question can be so rich in meaning and information.

A pious hope for future faculty demands on teaching and learning tactics: please do not forget to include some of the oldest and the best; for instance, the one that consists of students sitting at home or in the library reading, not only the books on the reading list but also other books, simply out of interest in the subject; and the one where the lecturer masters his or her material to such a degree that s/he can walk in the door and start talking and walk out again forty-five minutes later – with at least some students just sitting there happily, thinking thoughts about religion and the study of religion that they had not thought before.

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