

***Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies.* By Paul Hedges. Oakland, California: University of California Press. xviii+561 pp. ISBN: 9780520298910. \$39.95, paperback.**

At the risk of disclosing too soon our judgement, we begin by declaring that what Paul Hedges has given us in *Understanding Religion* is a textbook of such relevance to the audience of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* that we, the journal's editor-in-chief and senior editor, have taken the unusual step of reviewing it collaboratively. In our joint estimation, *Understanding Religion* is a lucid, creatively structured, and nearly jargon-free introduction to theories and methods for studying religious communities and traditions in diverse societies, bold in scope, and presented in a manner that is undergraduate-friendly, yet sophisticated enough for use in a graduate-level course.

Hedges does not hide the fact that *Understanding Religion* is definitively *not about religions*, but rather about *how to study religions*. The writing is accessible, and the content of its eighteen chapters gives students practical skills, knowledge, and approaches for living, working, playing, and flourishing in a religiously and secularly diverse world, attentive to race, gender, class, and (neo-, post, and de-) colonialism. The book is well-organized. The chapters flow, one to the next, logically but not rigidly. Many could be studied out of order, if need be. Each chapter features a brief orientation to its topic, above which is a short list of what the reader can expect that chapter to explore. Judicious use of headings, subheadings, and "text boxes" help the reader navigate the material at hand. Indeed, the latter is a noteworthy feature of *Understanding Religion*. Scattered throughout each chapter, these boxes call out, introduce, and explain key terms, concepts, theories, issues, and ideas as they are encountered. The boxes are then cross-referenced whenever the subject reappears in the textbook. Students may refer to these boxes immediately or later; students who already know about a particular subject can skip that call-out.

Books introducing theories and methods in the study of religion are often structured according to various compartmentalized disciplines: history of religions, comparative religion, the phenomenological approach, anthropology of religion, sociology of religion, philosophy of religion, theology, ethnography, religion and literature, material religion, critical theory, feminist approaches, postcolonial approaches, decolonial approaches, hermeneutics, and so on. *Understanding Religion* proceeds differently, after the manner of interreligious studies. In this book, all of those approaches and more are seamlessly and constructively interwoven throughout each of eighteen chapters, even as each foregrounds certain topics. Hedges calls this strategy "methodological polymorphism." Since, as he explains, religion "is neither monolithic, sui generis, nor clearly definable," a multidisciplinary or even interdisciplinary approach is required to understand any given religious phenomenon, community, or person (8–9). Nonetheless, a "critical approach" structures how Hedges presents the study of religion: "this is a book deeply concerned with questions of justice and oppression" (6). By this Hedges means he employs a "critical hermeneutical phenomenology," an explanatory concept he uses to embrace a "critical, embodied, feminist, postcolonial, decolonizing, hermeneutical phenomenology" (9) shaped by both philosophical hermeneutics and critical theory. The approach on which he settles is neither non-realist/anti-realist or post-structuralist ("it's discourse all the way down") nor realist ("language and knowledge are neutral representations of reality"); rather, his is a critical realist approach that recognizes both how social realities bear upon what we can know and say about the world and also

how the embodied and material turn (and not just the linguistic turn) demands that we take lived experiences seriously.

The methodological polymorphism and critical hermeneutical phenomenology that informs Hedges' critical realist approach to religion produces a pleasant consequence in how he discusses "what's at stake" in any given theory, method, topic, or theme. While, as he makes clear in the book's Introduction, Hedges does have a position of his own, he presents the material, and especially his examples of contested issues taken from lived experiences of religion and scholarship in a way that leaves many questions open to discussion. This is a pedagogical technique that allows students to dispute the merits or demerits of any given approach in trying to understand a religiously and secularly diverse society. Refusing to allow 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century critique to cast aside a whole philosophical tradition, Hedges presents both the necessities and limits of critique, and even demonstrates the Whiteness of critique. A representative example of this is Chapter 7 ("Colonialism"), in which he explains how the modern study of religion arises from the Euro-American colonial and imperial projects of the last couple centuries, examines Orientalism and the mutual imbrication of race and religion, then turns to postcolonial and decolonizing scholarship, including ideas of the subaltern. In all of this, students are given a carefully crafted portrayal of both the necessity and limit of the Orientalist critique. Hedges introduces Homi Bhabha and W.E.B. Du Bois to illustrate how critical theory may still devalue the work of non-Western or non-White scholars who write at the intersection of religious studies and confessional theology (Black religious studies) or at the intersection of two cultures (Bhabha's "Third Space"). Presentations of the alleged "invention" of Hinduism and the constructed categories of magic, superstition, and religion bring this chapter to an end, but do not hermetically seal it. Rather, matters are left open-ended and ripe for in-class discussion.

In *Understanding Religion*, Hedges aligns himself with critical scholars of religion, such as Jonathan Z. Smith and Tomoko Masuzawa, who have long sought for the abandonment of the "World Religions Paradigm"—which once was a way to welcome other "major religions" into the academy, but is now regarded by scholarly consensus to be more harmful than helpful in understanding religions. Indeed, in spite of that consensus, at universities across the United States—be they Liberal Arts, Public, Private, R1, R2, Professional Schools, or otherwise—a required course in "World Religions" or "Religions of the World" remains ubiquitous. With its cogent arguments against the World Religions Paradigm, *Understanding Religion* gives departments and faculty a rationale by which to pitch to their institutions a different sort of foundational course.

A strength of this book is that each chapter ends with two scenarios exemplifying the theories and methods addressed therein. These may be used as opportunities to apply what the chapter has taught, or to explore some of the particulars of given religious traditions, communities, or persons—or interreligious interactions (in some instances). The frustration here is that Hedges calls these items "case studies." For those of us who make extensive use of case studies developed for use in the fields of Religious Studies and Interreligious Studies by the Pluralism Project at Harvard University (an initiative that Hedges does acknowledge), the name simply does not fit—and we will have little choice but to spend class time clarifying the distinction. Case studies as we know them are lengthy, complex narratives involving a decision. Hence, delighted as we are that *Understanding Religion* provides concrete, thought-provoking examples that can serve as prompts for discussion, reflection, or further research, we do wish Hedges had named them otherwise.

Be that as it may, the examples Hedges offers are fascinating and thought-provoking. For example, Chapter Five (“Power”), which explores social constructionism, the habitus, authority, and legitimacy, ends with a presentation on the 2009 national referendum in Switzerland banning minarets in new mosque constructions. Hedges explains how minarets were used by some Islamic caliphates to legitimize authority, and how they eventually came to be an essential feature of most mosques (even if contested by Muslims). The Swiss ban may likewise be interpreted as a power move that legitimizes the traditionally Christian nation’s culture and society as decisively *not* Islamic. His discussion questions then open up the class to understanding how architectural features may or may not create a certain habitus in terms of how religions are seen or understood. The second example, “Individual (New Age/Alternative) Spirituality as Modernity’s Ideology,” introduces students to the spiritual-but-not-religious category. Hedges presents the critique that this ideology is heavily shaped by consumerism and capitalism; however, he also offers the counter-critique, viz., “This misconstrues the way that religion has operated throughout history. It has always been part of the marketplace and essentially a commodity for sale” (137), from pilgrimage sites, to indulgences, gifts to gurus or monks, tithing, and the trade of relics, icons, charms, and more. While a theologian may proscribe the commodification of their religion, the scholar of religion is not in that position. The discussion questions again encourage students to debate the distinction between “religion” and “spirituality” and the sources of authority that (de)legitimize the discourse of “spirituality.” This pair of scenarios allows for a nuanced discussion about how context and social constructionism complicate how one understands religion in a religiously *and secularly* diverse world.

It is illustrative to offer another example of the so-called case studies because they are one of the gems of this book. Chapter 6 (“Identity”) explores social identity theory, in-groups, out-groups, conflict, constructions of the self, and narrative identity. Of the two cases with which Hedges ends this chapter, the first is a consideration of Hindu Nationalism and Hindutva, which enables students to see how aspects of the Hindu traditions are selectively emphasized while others are downplayed to construct a Hindu Nationalist identity in opposition to non-Hindus, particularly Muslims. The second focuses on race, religion, nationalism, and White Evangelicals in the United States during the rise of Donald Trump. The discussion questions facilitate an understanding of how religion, race, and politics are “deeply intertwined” (159) in the construction of individual and group identities.

While, as a textbook, *Understanding Religion* is entirely manageable by undergraduates with no familiarity with the study of religion, students in graduate-level courses may certainly benefit from it. Students with more knowledge on any given topic will be able to engage the cases with more nuance and apply their experiences, knowledge, and background to them in constructive and creative ways. In the graduate classroom, the basic text might be supplemented with additional readings from the various scholars introduced by Hedges. He facilitates this possibility by equipping each chapter with a concise “further reading” bibliography. An impressively detailed index makes this book even more useful.

The depth and breadth of *Understanding Religion* is outstanding. The list of theories, methods, and topics covered therein is too long to list in this review. (The table of contents is available online.) As instructors for gateway courses to Religious Studies or Interreligious Studies programs, we both were pleasantly surprised to discover in this book concise and engaging presentations of many topics we address. Making *Understanding Religion* the primary textbook for our respective courses will

free up lecture time and make room for far more in-class discussion and constructive debate. Therefore, we are in the throes of redesigning the syllabi for our respective fall courses. The result? Rather than learning *about* religions through an outdated World Religions Paradigm, our students—who are undergraduates majoring in biology, environmental science, political science, sociology, diplomacy, international relations, nursing, social work, pre-law, pre-med, criminal justice, psychology, engineering, or some other program (Axel’s) or who have matriculated in graduate programs in interreligious studies, peacebuilding, or chaplaincy (Lucinda’s) will learn *how to understand*—or how we often *misunderstand*—religion in our religiously and secularly diverse world.

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