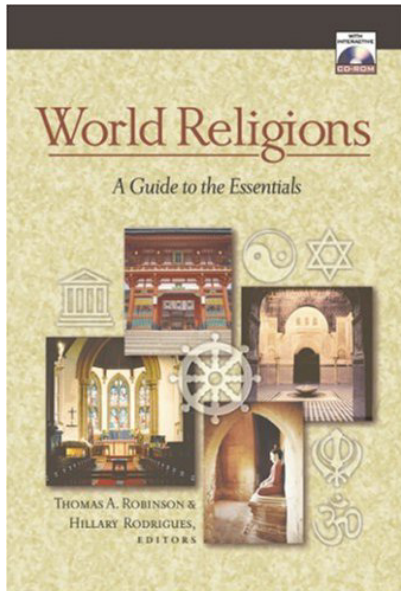


RBL 04/2008



Robinson, Thomas A., and Hillary Rodrigues, eds.

World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006. Pp. x + 339.
Hardcover. \$34.95. ISBN 1565633172.

Joseph Matos
Dallas Baptist University
Dallas, Texas

World Religions: A Guide to the Essentials is a collaborative effort of four faculty members in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. Thomas Robinson and Hillary Rodrigues are the primary contributors, authoring ten of the twelve chapters. James Linville and John Harding joined after the project was already underway and contributed one chapter each. All are eminently qualified for the task.

In terms of content, *World Religions* largely avoids the extremes of, on the one hand, being too comprehensive and detailed, leading to confusion for students, and, on the other hand, being too brief and risking oversimplification and possibly even misrepresentation. As the authors state, “Our aim in this text is to present a clear and condensed portrait—the essentials—of the major religious traditions and to give a sense of the importance and scope of religion in the human experience” (17). As will be shown briefly later, however, what the authors define as “essential” and how well they accomplish the latter goal is up for debate. Still, at 309 pages, there is no denying that the presentation fits well the time frame of a one-semester course.

The approach of the book is admirable. Each religion (or group of religious traditions) is presented individually and absent any judgment regarding its validity. This allows for the

religions to be understood on their own terms. There is neither apologetic for a particular religion nor polemic against a religion. Consequently, even if a course were to follow a comparative approach or one in which the validity of certain religious traditions was more closely scrutinized, a proper foundation must first be laid. This text can lay that objective foundation. The closest this text comes to being somewhat negative toward a religion is when it alerts the reader to questions about the lives of some founders (e.g., the Buddha, Mahavira, or Laozi). But even adherents to these religions would admit that such questions exist and would not find these statements offensive. Overall, the authors succeed in presenting an objective overview.

The text opens with a general introduction. This is followed by ten chapters on select religious traditions (ancient religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Chinese religions, and Japanese religions). Finally, there is a concluding chapter simply called "Other Religions." This approach differs from other texts both in what is treated separately (there is no chapter on oral or primal religions) and how it treats the religions they do include.

The introduction takes up the typical preparatory matters: the challenges of defining religion (and what designates a world religion); reasons for studying world religions; and methods for studying religion. But this text also mentions the difference between an "insider's" and an "outsider's" view of a religion and the notion of tolerance and religious competition. Next, the text distinguishes between the "ideal" and the "real," that is, what is preached and what is practiced. The author's reiterate that even a brief study of a religion must present the history of changes within a given religion. Other components in the study of a religion include "Aspects of Authority," "Sacred Space and Sacred Time," "Ritual Behavior," and "Ethics and Moral Systems." The chapter concludes with two explanatory sections. The first addresses the distinction between technical terms and jargon. Technical terms "capture in one word a complex concept that might otherwise be expressed only by a long paragraph" (15). Conversely, the jargon makes dialogue too coded. Thus, while the text is a basic guide, technical terms are retained; jargon is avoided. Clearly this benefits the beginning student. The second section wisely offers the rationale for the authors' use of B.C.E. and C.E. rather than B.C. and A.D., since even many modern students may either still be unfamiliar with the abbreviations or put off by them.

Once the book moves to its treatment of specific religions, the organization is logical enough, that of geographical origin. However, the text follows a pattern that runs opposite of most texts. *World Religions* treats the Western religions before the Eastern religions. Practically speaking, this is not significant because the authors' stated approach is an analysis of the religions individually. As such, a professor can use the text without altering his or her usual order. Discussing the Western religions first may in fact be more

suitable if the assumption is to begin with religions with which students in the Western hemisphere might be most familiar. Still, no explicit rationale for this organizational pattern is ever provided.

Most chapters on specific religious traditions are divided up into three major sections: history, beliefs, and practices. Exceptions are “Ancient Religions” and “Other Religions.” As well, the authors face a special challenge trying to maintain this approach in the chapters on Chinese and Japanese religions, each of which covers more than one religious tradition. The authors’ decision was to further subdivide each major section of these chapters into the various religious traditions relevant to those countries. As a result, while Buddhism has its own chapter, the chapters on China and Japan discuss the forms of Buddhism prevalent in their respective countries.

With regard to the amount of information provided in each chapter, the term “essentials” is at times a bit misleading. To be sure, the essentials of each religion are covered. However, the history sections are dense with facts, perhaps moving beyond what many professors would consider essential. Sometimes the rigid threefold division also leads to repetition of information, even to the point of offering full definitions and/or descriptions of terms or concepts treated earlier in the chapter. Rarely is an essential omitted, but one omitted essential is the name of God in the Sikh language (Sat Nam). Only the English translation “True Name” appears. When such an essential as what a religion calls the divine (or ultimate) appears in some original form for other religions, surely this applies to Sikhism.

Each chapter contains gray text boxes on the right side of right facing pages. These offer brief definitions of key terms, people, texts, and the like related to the respective religion. These serve as good quick references. A cause for confusion, however, is that these boxes contain information that appears later (although usually no more than a page or two) in the chapter. The features appearing in the text boxes also constitute the items found in the dictionary. Whether intentional or merely coincidental, the text boxes cease about two pages before the end of the chapter, perhaps serving to give the reader notice that the chapter is about to end.

The book concludes with “Other Religions.” The authors aptly acknowledge that students will encounter numerous other religions, yet, at just over four pages in length, this chapter is overly brief. There is roughly a one-paragraph overview each of Bahai, Native American religions, New Age movement, North American religions—covering Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Pentecostals—Church of Scientology, Unification Church, and Zoroastrianism. While chapter-length treatment of each of the above groups is not necessarily warranted, given the scope and purpose of this

book, four pages for all of them together seems hardly sufficient. Even if the average chapter length were maintained, a fuller picture of each religion could be provided.

Because so many foreign terms are used, the authors provide a “Spelling Guide to Terminology” at the back of the book. This includes how the words are spelled in the text (an uncluttered form helpful for beginners), what the transliteration would typically look like (familiar to the more experienced), and other optional spellings. Accommodating but awkward is the authors’ use of both the Pinyin and Wade-Giles systems of transliterating Chinese terms in the chapter on Chinese religions. Missing from the text is a concluding chapter that could more summarily address the earlier stated aim of giving a sense of the “importance and scope of religion in the human experience.”

Accompanying the text is a CD-ROM that contains a dictionary, pictures, extensive study review, and links to a companion external website, which itself offers further interaction and links to related Internet sites. It should be noted that the site is somewhat imbalanced and in need of updating. Because the book contains only text, the CD-ROM serves more than supplementary purposes; it is vital to the authors’ presentation. For example, except for the religions’ symbols appearing at the beginning of each chapter, users can view pictures only on the CD-ROM.

Helpful as the CD-ROM is, navigation requires practice. The root menu contains symbols for the religions on the left and links to other features (e.g., Review and Dictionary) at the bottom. Clicking on a religion’s symbol opens a review component for that religion. One can access the definitions and photos related to the religions only by entering the dictionary. All the words are gathered together in one list. One can type in a term or phrase to search the dictionary; however, it might have been more manageable for users if the dictionary were subdivided by religion or if a submenu with a link to a dictionary appeared when clicking on the religion icon. Furthermore, in its current configuration, the pictures are accessible only by clicking on a word in the dictionary and looking for a photo icon below. Again, a submenu with a link to a photo gallery for each religion seems preferable. On the other hand, also associated with the dictionary is a sound file feature, whereby one can listen to how the words are pronounced. This is particularly helpful, since a study of world religions introduces students to many new terms and/or ones whose pronunciation is not easily known from their spelling.

The review component has much to commend it. It is extensive, and users can modify it as needed. By clicking on Review, a user can proceed through a review of the entire text. There is also the option to tailor the exercise by selecting which religion(s) and which aspect of the religion(s) (e.g., beliefs, festivals, groups, offices.) to review. Questions range from very general to very specific (raising again the matter of what “essential” means).

With eight hundred questions total, the review is thorough. All questions are multiple-choice. Even this is adaptable, allowing one to select up to five answer choices from which to choose. The user can also choose to have the review scored, if desired, so as to provide an assessment of the level of competence in the area under review. One can select to time the review as well.

In conclusion, the text succeeds both as an introduction to world religions and as a reference. The CD-ROM has much to commend it in terms of its content, but its organization requires continued use to master navigating it.