One-Day Seminar on Teaching Across South Asian Religious Traditions

Gary Bunt

Report

The seminar was organised by the Religion and Education Group of CASAS (Centre for Applied South Asian Studies) in the University of Manchester. It was part-funded by the PRS Subject Centre. The seminar brought together around 15 people, primarily from the University sector.

Context

This seminar sought to address the problems posed by the dominance of the world religions paradigm in the study of South Asian religious traditions. This paradigm encourages the perception of discrete religious systems such as Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism and Buddhism existing side by side in a South Asian religious space. It is now quite widely recognized that such perceptions are both inappropriate to the complex network of practices and beliefs extant in South Asia, and politically dangerous in their apparent legitimation of particular essentialist worldviews both in South Asia and beyond. In order to move on, disciplinary practice at Higher Education level needs to explore new ways of delivering teaching which challenge these structures of understanding, by cutting across the perceived boundaries between these traditions.

The seminar built on the CASAS workshop held in 2001 on Teaching South Asian Religious Traditions, where the strategy of teaching across traditions was identified as a way forward (reports on this workshop available at http://www.prs-itsn.ac.uk/relig_studies/events/reports/south_asian.html and http://www.art.man.ac.uk/CASAS/events_files/teaching.htm). The following report seeks to provide the essential themes of the seminar.

Key Sessions

Introduction

John Zavos (University of Manchester) introduced the themes of the seminar, associated with the problem of the South Asia world religions/paradigm, including issues of:

- teaching across tradition(s)
- exploring strategies across disciplines
- reconciling these themes with the interests of migrant-origin communities
- the need for practical solutions relating to pedagogy
Roger Ballard (University of Manchester) provided a discussion paper ‘On unsettling received understandings: the challenge of teaching across religious traditions’. A number of issues were introduced associated with defining ‘Religious Studies’, and the challenges of lecturing on the subject(s) at higher education level. These included:

- received assumptions: underpinning and reinforcing the operation of a world religions paradigm which informs the comparative religion approach so prevalent in HE institutions
- the dynamic of difference and dimensions of diversity need to be taken into account
- teaching about this dynamic difference is the key task
- the growing significance of religious minorities in the UK brings a different dimension to this discussion: some elements of South Asian minority communities, of particular interest in the present context, may be seen to have appropriated the world religions paradigm as a means of maintaining status in the context of majority hostility towards migrant alterity
- this tendency reinforces the more general political urge to represent religious traditions as polarised in the modern world
- political representation of religions as essentialised, discrete systems needs to be deconstructed academically
- challenging the world religions paradigm therefore has an urgent significance both within and beyond the academy

Ron Geaves (Chester College) then provided a paper on ‘The Study of Migrant Faith Traditions: The Problem of Essentialism’. The paper explored the influence of a world religions model and nominalism on the representation of South Asian religious traditions, in the context of the social and cultural dynamics of multicultural Britain. Key elements in the argument included:

- the presence of South Asian communities in the UK has reinforced critiques of the World Religions approach to the study of religions as a series of discrete and mutually exclusive traditions, as it has enabled researchers to carry out ethnographic studies which reveal far greater complexity and diversity in religious practice, and in the construction of religious identity amongst migrant communities
- nevertheless the ‘belief essentialism’ and ‘nominalism’ associated with the World Religions approach was dominant in the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) model syllabi for the delivery of Religious Studies, published in 1994
- this approach ignores the complex and dynamic relationship between religion and ethnicity in the construction of identity.
- in this context, Religious Studies needs to focus on problematising the idea of traditions
- religious identity is ‘processual’ and ‘situational’, like other forms of identity; the encounters which inform the experience of migration reinforce this idea - hence the presence of migrant communities from South Asia in the UK may be viewed as a way of challenging essentialism: ‘Encounters, reciprocity, dialogue and oscillation between subject and object lead to a cultural multi-dimensionality which can shift and extend predetermined limits and standardisation’ - such as those which inform the World Religions paradigm

Eleanor Nesbitt (University of Warwick) was the discussant for the above session. In the ensuing dialogue with seminar participants, the following points and issues emerged:

- the issues raised reflect the experience of practitioners in both Higher Education and School based teaching
of Religious Studies

- in both sectors, the World Religions paradigm can operate to marginalize the unorthodox and to promote, increasingly, a form of 'religious racism'.
- the responsibility is on Higher Education practitioners to set new agendas and provide new strategies for doing Religious Studies
- a lot of interesting and challenging work is already being done in higher education institutions - this kind of work needs greater exposure
- more emphasis on language teaching as an integral element of Religious Studies is needed
- teaching across traditions can be impeded by lack of availability of textbooks and publishing priorities which favour the world religions approach - resources for teachers need to be improved

**Session 2**

**Thomas de Bruijn** (Leiden University) provided a paper entitled 'How many roads to Lanka? - The intercultural semantics of the image of the voyage to an imaginary Lanka.' This explored the hybridity of identity and fluidity within 'sacred' texts, focusing around:

'a comparative analysis of the way two major 16th century Indian poets, Muhammad Jayasi and Tulsidas - a Muslim and a Hindu - gave new meaning to the classical tale of king Rama's voyage to Lanka and his defeat of the demon king Ravan to free his abducted wife Sita...

From an analysis of intertextual links and the shared symbolism of the voyage to Lanka, de Bruijn argued that

- hybridity was part and parcel of all religious traditions in pre-modern India
- concepts of dialogism (modified from Bakhtin) and cultural capital (Bourdieu) could aid our understanding of this plasticity
- attempts to control hermeneutics are artefacts of modern political and cultural developments

**Mary Searle-Chatterjee** (Manchester University) then provided two case studies demonstrating the ways in which the study of religions can be undertaken through observing apparently cross-traditional practices, differentiated by language and concepts, and how labels can be imposed or self-imposed in relation to 'caste', 'brahmin' and 'Hindu' identity(-ies).

These studies suggest that:

- it is too crude just to describe shared practice to students
- we must not use term 'Hindu' uncritically as a given, but need to get students to see that different Indians use the Hindu identity label differently, eg high and low castes.
- we need to get students to distinguish questions of identity, present practice (and culture), tradition (perhaps by considering Ballard's qaumic, kismetric, dharmic and panthic dimensions)

She further argued that:

- What is taught about 'religion' (in HE and elsewhere) frequently represents elite traditions. 'Middle class' academics may perceive themselves as 'protecting' the 'non-elite', with the danger of patronising non-elites
- 'Western' and 'South Asian' religions may be taught differently, the former through high textual traditions and theology, the latter through anthropological study of popular practice, with the danger that negative judgments will be made of the latter. Hence there is a need for balance of anthropological approaches in former cases as well as textual and theological approaches in the latter.

**Jacqueline Suthren Hirst** (University of Manchester) was the discussant for this session. Amongst the issues that emerged were:

- the need to be aware that 'high-minded' motives to teach cross-traditions must not ignore issues of power relations and historical processes
- the need for academics to avoid romanticising the pre-modern period as a time when everyone shared unproblematically in popular practice
- the concomitant need for academics not to assume comprehensively essentialised practice in modern period
- various models of religious syncretism/cross-tradition/hybridisation themselves tend to imply bounded traditions
- recognition of elite high religion essential, including an understanding of complex differences and continua between elitist texts and 'popular' vernacular recitations (for example, in the nature of allusions made in a source, or the language in which it was expressed)
- "hybrid" texts themselves had their critics, including intellectual critiques from all points of view.