

TEACHING BUDDHISM

from a Comparative Perspective

By Kevin Trainor



Buddha in the Art of Gandhara, National Museum of India.
Photo by Miya. M 2009. Image source: <http://gandharan.blogspot.com/>.



Crucifixion of Rimini, by Giotto di Bondone in the Church of St. Francis, Rimini, Italy.
Image source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/47/Giotto_di_Bondone_084.jpg.

For the past twenty years, I have offered an introduction to the study of religion at the University of Vermont with a comparative focus on Buddhism and Christianity. In the essay that follows, I provide a basic overview of that course, highlighting my rationale for organizing the course material within a comparative framework and identifying some of the pedagogical advantages that such a framework offers. A comparative perspective, I maintain, addresses some potential problems that secondary and post-secondary teachers face in presenting Buddhism effectively in their classes. These problems emerge more clearly when we consider the different pedagogical contexts in which Buddhism is usually taught.

Coverage of Buddhism in public high schools is typically sporadic, since religion is seldom a part of the standard curriculum, and when it

is taught, it is usually in the context of social studies or world history classes.¹ The situation is somewhat different in colleges and universities, because many of these institutions have a historical or ongoing connection with Christian religious denominations. Courses in religion, including some coverage of Buddhism, often form part of a core curriculum or fulfill distribution requirements. In the case of secular public universities with religion departments, coverage of Buddhism most commonly takes place in courses on world religions, typically at the introductory level, which in many cases meet general distribution requirements in the humanities.

Each of these pedagogical settings tends to place particular constraints on how Buddhism is presented. As noted in the American Academy of Religion's recently issued guidelines for teaching religion

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in the public schools, because coverage of religion is largely absent from public secondary-school curricula, there are few clearly formulated standards for how religion in general (and by extension Buddhism) should be presented. Teachers tend to be influenced by their own religious and cultural assumptions, often uninformed by any formal training in the secular study of religion. Among the common ideas that often unconsciously inform the views of teachers and students alike are an assumption that authentic religion is a fundamentally private or “spiritual” matter that can be separated from culture and society, that the primary purpose of the study of religion should be the development of one’s personal religious perspective, and that the great “world religions” are essentially static and monolithic belief systems, each one clearly separate from the others. Moreover, when teachers do seek the advice of experts, they often turn to ordained clergy who, while no doubt highly knowledgeable about their own traditions, are seldom broadly trained in a diversity of religious traditions and in secular interpretive approaches.²

The constraints imposed on the teaching of Buddhism in universities and colleges with religion departments are somewhat different. While many religion departments offer an intermediate-level or upper-level survey course on Buddhism that explores the diversity of Buddhist traditions and cultures in some depth, the majority of students who encounter Buddhism do so in the context of a world religions class in which a number of religious traditions are sequentially studied. The number of traditions covered and the serial ordering of traditions over the course of the semester contribute to a tendency to treat Buddhism as one among a series of unique religions, each of which has its own distinctive worldview and set of rituals that reflect and reinforce the religion’s central beliefs. Such an approach tends to reinforce the problematic assumption that Buddhists throughout the world, and over the course of more than two millennia, have been participants in a shared tradition defined by a stable set of shared beliefs—beliefs that have provided them with a unitary worldview that clearly differentiates them from the followers of other religions. When diverse Buddhist cultural traditions are noted, their exploration is often located within an overarching historical narrative that is organized around an account of the life of the Buddha and the Indian origins of the tradition, the development of early Buddhist sectarian communities (largely identified with the Theravada tradition), the emergence of the Mahayana and the transmission of Buddhism to China and Japan, and the formation of the Vajrayana, associated with Tibet. Such an approach can easily become unconsciously linked to assumptions about the authenticity of various Buddhist beliefs and practices, either measured against some

“original” set of teachings that were later corrupted as that teaching was transformed by the demands of the laity and as it adapted to new cultural contexts, or when evaluated in relation to a developmental arc that begins with a narrow renunciant tradition that becomes transformed through the development of a more inclusive and compassionate religious ideal. What may also remain largely unexamined in such an approach is the analytical status of the categories “Religion” and “Buddhism” and their roles in obscuring the dynamic complexity of Buddhist beliefs and practices that have been culturally embedded in a wide diversity of cultural and historical contexts.

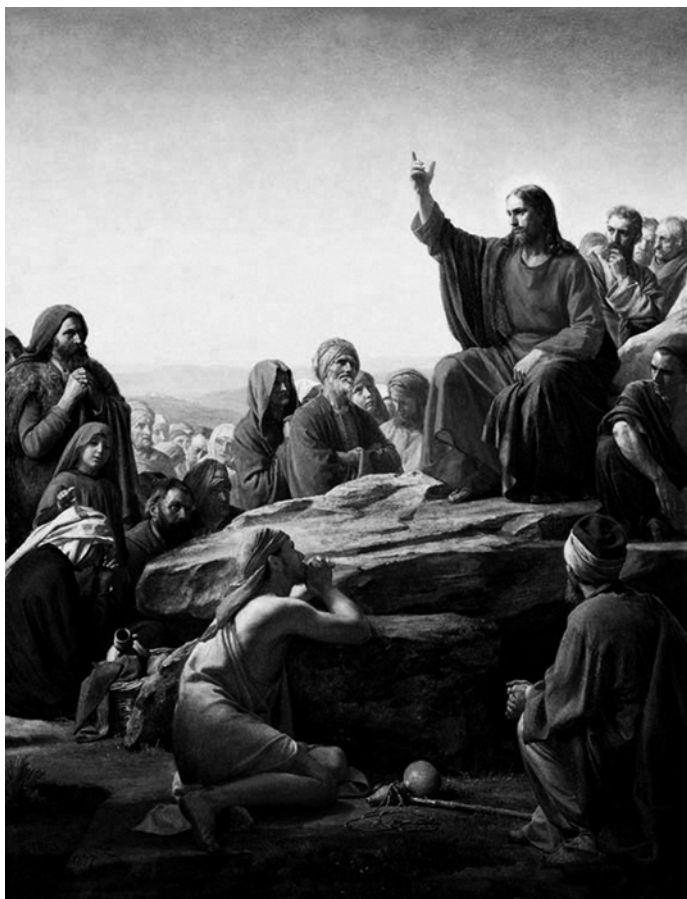
BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

A comparative course has, for three decades, been a staple of the introductory level curriculum in the University of Vermont’s Religion Department, and many faculty over the years have developed their own approaches to the course, typically with a focus on three or more religious traditions.³ My decision to focus on Buddhism and Christianity reflects the fact that my training has been centered on these two traditions, and my pedagogical concern is to cover these traditions in more cultural and historical depth than would be possible with the inclusion of a third tradition. My approach has also been shaped by my scholarly interest in religious ritual and material culture.

While one important goal of the department’s introductory-level courses is a study of specific religious traditions, another primary aim of these classes is to provide students with a critical introduction to the secular study of religion. All the department’s courses at the introductory level, regardless of the particular traditions that they examine, address this task. Typically, this involves drawing explicit attention to the category of religion and the diverse theories and methods that have been used to explore it, and to examining the relationship between secular and theological approaches to the study of religion.

Perhaps surprisingly, I approach this not through a survey of different definitions and theories of religion (though I do distribute a handout that juxtaposes some influential definitions), but by working through readings that highlight issues of objectivity and subjectivity in the understanding and analysis of human cultures and societies. A selection from Peter Berger’s *Sacred Canopy* sets out a useful social sciences model for understanding the social functions of religion, and this helps students develop their understanding of Buddhist and Christian traditions within a distanced, objectivist framework that is typically quite different from their implicit notions of religion and what it means to study it.⁴ When Berger’s functionalist approach is placed in dialogue with the selections from Renato Rosaldo’s and Rita Gross’ work, students have the opportunity to think about the role of emotion and the effects of one’s social location on how one sees the world and interprets the experience of others.⁵ Because most of our students tend to take for granted a highly individualistic approach to questions of understanding, the Berger, Rosaldo, and Gross readings together provide a useful counterpoint that emphasizes the power of social and cultural factors in shaping how people see the world and, by extension, the role that religious worldviews play in constructing authoritative representations of reality.

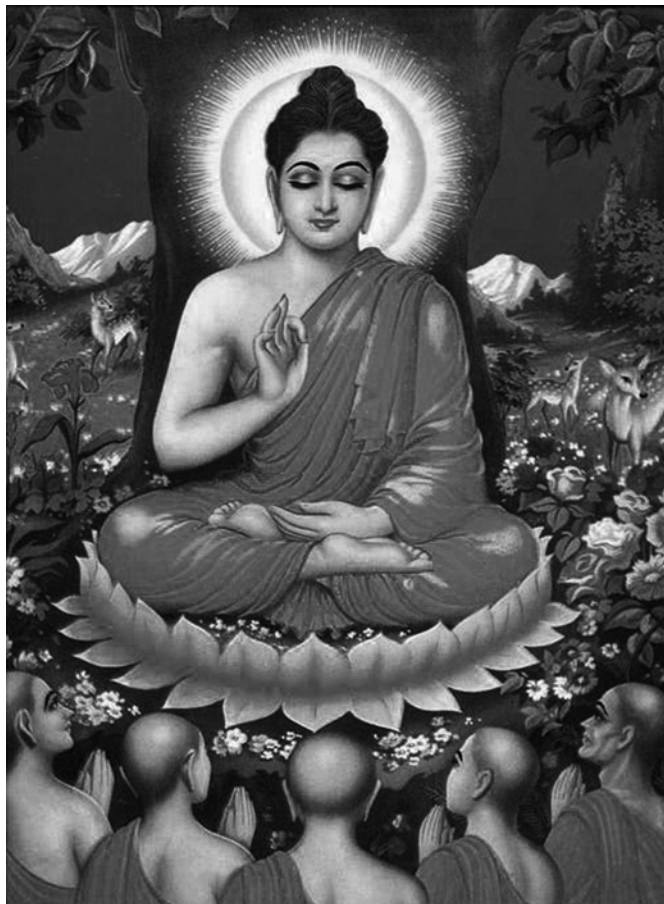
The course segues from these issues of interpretive standpoint to a consideration of specific religious myths relevant to understanding Buddhism and Christianity. A brief essay by Wendy Doniger effectively links the role of myth with the formation of personal and collective perspectives, and sets up our discussion of four texts—two biblical passages: Genesis, 2–3 and I Corinthians 15 of the Bible; *Rigveda* 10:90;



The Sermon On the Mount by Carl Heinrich Bloch. Danish painter, d. 1890.
Image source: <http://www.canvasreplicas.com/Bloch102.htm>.

and an excerpt from the “Kevaddha *sutta*” (“Kevaddha’s Discourse”) from the *Dīgha-nikāya* (*Long Discourses*) of the Theravada Buddhist scriptural canon (*Tipitaka*).⁶ Taken together, our exploration of these four brief texts models the practice of close reading, and also foregrounds some important points of similarity and difference between Vedic/Brahmanic and Buddhist cosmological accounts, and those accounts that have informed Judaism and Christianity. While many students have some familiarity with the selections from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, few students have encountered these Vedic and Buddhist texts. The “Kevaddha *sutta*” is of particular salience because it simultaneously depicts the presence of Brahmanic deities while relativizing their significance in relation to Buddhist religious aims, thus directly challenging widely held theistic assumptions about religion.

The next section of the course provides a general orientation to the geography, history, and basic doctrines of the two traditions, using two brief introductions: Damien Keown’s *Buddhism: A Very Brief Introduction* and Sandra Frankiel’s *Christianity: A Way of Salvation*.⁷ The primary pedagogical aim here is to give students a broad spatial and temporal framework for contextualizing the two traditions and to provide them with a functional knowledge of some of their formative teachings. By seeing the historical and geographical extension of the two traditions, students develop an appreciation for the fluidity and complexity of their expansion and transformation, while also gaining an understanding of some of the basic structural principles that have informed their respective religious worldviews (e.g., dharma, karma, rebirth, nirvana; creation, covenant, sin, redemption, heaven, Kingdom of God).



The Buddha expounds the Four Noble Truths to convert the first five ascetic friends.
Image source: <http://home.swipnet.se/ratnashri/buddhalife.htm>.

The remaining two thirds of the semester is devoted to the comparative exploration of several themes: “images of the founder—the Buddha and the Christ,” “renewal and reform—return to the sources,” “modes of religious transformation—meditation and monasticism,” “ritual practice—relic veneration and pilgrimage,” and “women’s religious experience.” I have chosen these particular topics for their utility in identifying some important dimensions of the two traditions, not because I regard them as essential or universal to religion in general. For example, not all religious traditions have “founders,” and I try to nuance the use of this category by pointing out that while Western scholars typically regard Siddhārtha Gautama as the historical founder of Buddhism, this perspective stands in contrast to Buddhist traditions that represent him as only the most recent Buddha. Also, these traditions afford considerable attention to some of his past lives in which he encountered previous Buddhas and received their predictions of his future Buddhahood. For this section, students read primary source accounts of the life of Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ, and the juxtaposition of these “sacred biographies” illuminates a number of shared motifs that students find surprising.⁸ These accounts also provide students with the opportunity to move beyond an overly simplistic myth/history dichotomy and to appreciate the ways in which these figures emerge as both paradigmatic models for their followers to emulate as well as figures of awesome singularity. I also pair these textual accounts with art historical representations that visually embody some of the diverse views that have emerged of these figures in different times and cultural contexts.



Relic enshrinement procession in southern Sri Lanka, 1986. Photo by Kevin Trainor.



Display of Buddhist relics prior to enshrinement in southern Sri Lanka, 1986. Photo by Kevin Trainor.



Flower offerings at the feet of the great standing Buddha image, Aukana, Sri Lanka, 1986. Photo by Kevin Trainor.

I use the section on “renewal and reform” to introduce students to the Protestant Reformation and Mahayana Buddhism. Framing these historical movements in this manner has the virtue of working against a tendency to regard them in normative or developmental terms. I emphasize that reform is an ongoing dynamic in many religious traditions, as is the tendency to authorize new teachings through a rhetoric of “returning to the origins” of the tradition. I also use two films from the BBC *Long Search* series to provide some examples of how these reform movements play out in contemporary settings (“Protestant Spirit USA” and “Buddhism: The Land of the Disappearing Buddha,” the first set in Indianapolis and the second in Japan). It should be noted here that the course syllabus gives relatively little attention to non-Theravada traditions of Buddhism, and this would be a serious limitation if it were my intention to give students a comprehensive overview of Buddhism. The comparative and thematic structure of the course, however, reflects an alternative organizational strategy that allows me to select specific case studies for their capacity to illustrate broader religious dynamics within particular historical contexts.

In keeping with my emphasis on the importance of the body and material culture in the study of religion, the next two sections of the course focus on “modes of religious transformation” and “ritual practice.” This material works to counter the common tendency to spiritualize and to decontextualize religion, and to reduce it to a collection of abstract beliefs that individuals either accept (“believe in”) or reject. In the first of these two sections, I focus on the role of monasticism and disciplines of mental transformation, both of which have had a formative impact on the histories of Buddhism and Christianity. Students read the sixth-century *Rule of St. Benedict*, arguably one of the most influential religious texts in the history of medieval Europe, and selections from the Pāli *Vinaya* (code of monastic discipline) that illuminate the life of the Buddhist *saṅgha*. Our discussion of these sources brings out the connections between specific religious ideals and the formation of inten-

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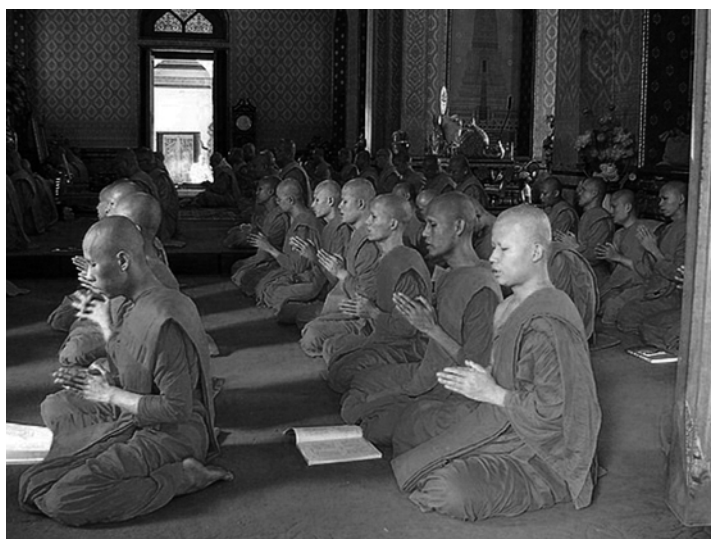
tional communities that are regarded as privileged sites for their attainment. We also explore how these intentional communities engage in complex relationships of reciprocity with the mainstream societies from which they are distinguished and upon which they depend. I make extensive use of audiovisual sources in this section of the course, including slides of contemporary Sri Lankan monastic life, pictures of the medieval Cistercian monastery in Eberbach, Germany, and recordings of Gregorian chant and Buddhist *paritta* (Pāli verses chanted by monks for their protective power).⁹ As with other parts of the course, the goal is not simply to identify apparent similarities between the two traditions. For example, while an emphasis on forms of ascetic discipline represent a point of commonality between these Buddhist and Christian monastic practices, Benedict's approach to religious transformation is organized around the role of obedience, while the form of practice set forth in the *Vinaya* emphasizes self-discipline.

Studies of Buddhism have a rather vexed history when it comes to the question of ritual and its role in Buddhist practice. As has been acknowledged for some time, nineteenth-century scholarship on ancient Indian Buddhism tended to downplay the role of ritual for a number of reasons, including the influence of implicit comparisons with Hinduism, the effects of what some have called the Protestant cast of the scholarly milieu in which these studies originated, and an over-emphasis on Buddhist textual passages that criticize particular forms of ritual.¹⁰ My research on Buddhist relic veneration in ancient India and Sri Lanka has informed my emphasis on the centrality of ritual in understanding Buddhism.¹¹ I approach religious ritual in this course very broadly, initially examining it as a form of "ritualization" (patterned behavioral routines that fall along a continuum of formality, from highly stereotypical to loosely structured) that marks a wide range of animal behaviors.¹² This shifts the question from, "Does ritual play an important role in Buddhism?" to, "What kinds of rituals are performed, and what are their functions in Buddhist practice?"

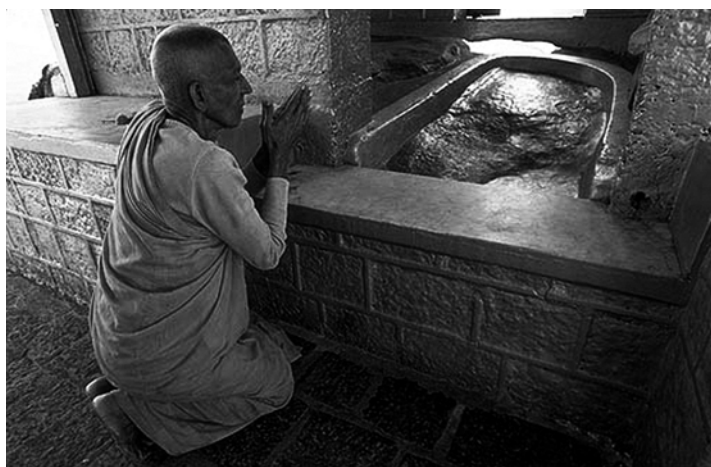
Our consideration of Buddhist relic veneration and pilgrimage begins with a look at Sri Lankan Buddhist devotional practices, and I again make use of audiovisual materials to illustrate common forms of a *Poya* day (monthly full-moon day of heightened religious observance) ritual at Buddhist temples, including offerings at stupas, Bodhi tree offerings, and offerings before images of the Buddha. This segues smoothly into a discussion of the role of relics in Buddhist practice (according to a common Theravada taxonomy, each of these devotional foci represents a kind of relic), and into an examination of Indian and Sri Lankan Buddhist pilgrimage, with a focus on the pilgrimage to Sri Pada, or Adam's Peak, a mountain in Sri Lanka believed to bear the mark of the Buddha's footprint, imprinted on his third visit to Sri Lanka, according to Sri Lankan chronicle traditions. Our Buddhist textual sources for this section are selections from the Pāli *Thūpavaṃsa*, or *Chronicle of the Stūpa*, that describes the enshrinement of relics in an important relic shrine in ancient Sri Lanka, and the *Mahāvāṃsa*, or *Great Chronicle*, that provides an account of the Buddha's three visits to the island and his creation of a



The monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz singing Gregorian chants.
Image source: <http://wedharma.com/creativity-lifestyle/the-secret-value-of-chanting/>.



Monks chanting the Buddhist *suttas* in Thailand.
Image source: <http://www.travelpod.com/travel-blog-entries/supremacy/2/1257173809/tpod.html#pbrowser/supremacy/2/1257173809/filename=monks-chanting-buddha-suttas.jpg>.



Buddhist monk venerating the "sacred footprint" at the summit of Sri Pada in Sri Lanka.
Image source: <http://www.univie.ac.at/cga/art/footprints.html>.



Depiction of the nun Sanghamitta Theri arriving in Sri Lanka from India to establish the women's monastic lineage and enshrine the sacred Bodhi tree. Image source: <http://sites.google.com/site/bhikkhunicommittee/>.

sacred geography through his contact with specific sites, many of which later become the locations of important relic monuments.¹³ We also read an account of a modern British woman's ascent of Adam's Peak, which raises some interesting questions about religion and subjective experience.¹⁴ These Buddhist sources are paired with a twelfth-century European account of a relic theft in Cornwall, England, and a selection from Felix Fabri's fifteenth-century account of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land.¹⁵ The juxtaposition of these Buddhist and Christian textual sources highlights how pilgrimage sites can facilitate the collapsing of conventional social distinctions within a religious community, while also heightening the tension between different religious groups, contributing in some cases to interreligious conflict. Many students readily associate these conflictual dynamics with Christianity while associating Buddhism with tolerance and nonviolence; these examples effectively complicate such easy generalizations.

The concluding section of the course is centered on questions related to women's religious experiences. While issues of gender differences are initially explored at the beginning of the semester through the Gross reading, and they are noted in relation to specific texts and issues at various points throughout the semester, this section explores the implications of gender in more depth with a comparison of the work of the twelfth-century German nun, Hildegard of Bingen, and selections attributed to ancient Indian female *arahants* (people who have gained nirvana by following the teachings of a Buddha) from the Pali canonical

text, the *Therīgāthā* or, *Verses of the Elder Nuns*. I use these readings to illuminate the social contexts in which the texts were situated, contexts that placed some significant constraints on female renunciants in both traditions. At the same time, both examples reveal ways in which women established their religious authority despite those social constraints. I find that many of my students express some familiarity with the challenges to women's religious authority in the history of Christianity but are surprised to learn of the challenges that women have faced in Buddhist communities, perhaps because of a tendency to think of Buddhism in idealized and highly individualistic terms. Our discussion of these texts also provides students with the opportunity to reflect on the ways that their own gender shapes the ways they read and respond to these texts. Once again, the comparative framework works against simple generalizations about the place of women in Buddhism and Christianity based on formal doctrinal positions and draws attention to women's active roles in negotiating their religious identities.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

While the specific readings and topics engaged in this course owe much to my own training and research, the comparative perspective that informs them is readily adaptable to a variety of courses. A comparative perspective encourages students to think critically about their own cultural assumptions and the ways those assumptions influence their views on specific religious traditions. When linked with primary source readings, audiovisual resources, and attention to material culture, a comparative approach to the study of Buddhism pushes students to recognize its great historical and cultural diversity, and helps them grasp more fully the complexity of its effects on the lives of different communities of Buddhists.

NOTES

1. The American Academy of Religion (AAR) has recently published guidelines for teaching religion in public schools. These include a brief discussion of the constitutional issues that surround the place of religion in the public school curriculum (see AAR Religion and the Schools Task Force 2010). In addition to coverage of religion in the context of social studies and world history courses, these guidelines also point to literature classes as a setting in which religious texts are sometimes discussed, e.g., in Bible as Literature classes. It seems unlikely that Buddhist canonical texts have made their way into these courses, though many students have their first exposure to Buddhism through reading Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, first published in English in 1951; for more on the influence of this work, see Morris 1999.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The department has regularly offered introductory-level courses focused on different groupings of religious traditions. Through the 1970s, two introductory courses were offered, one on Asian and one on Western religions. Beginning in 1980, two additional introductory courses were taught: the comparative religion course and one focused on the Bible (including ancient Near Eastern texts). More recently, introductory-level courses have been added on US Ethnic, Islamic, African, and global religions. When the comparative religion course was added in 1980, it had a clear three-part typological structure: "An exploration of the forms of man's religious life in three contrasting worlds—the ahistorical world, the archaic world, and the historical world." In 1982, this became "Study of the patterns and differences in man's religious life; selected comparisons of Asian, Western, and tribal religions." This description continued until 2004 (apart from the deletion of "man" from the description in 1989) when the three-part structure was formally dropped and replaced by "Comparison of diverse practices and beliefs from selected religious traditions and cultures."
4. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 3–28.

5. Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 1–22; R. M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 291–303.
6. An English translation of this text can be found online at <http://www.accesstoin-sight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.11.0.than.html>; I use the final section of the text, subtitled in this translation as “Conversations with the Gods,” and Wendy Doniger, “The Theological Uses of Double Vision,” *Criterion* 34 (1995): 16–22.
7. Sandra S. Frankiel, *Christianity: A Way of Salvation, Religious Traditions of the World Series* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1985); D. Keown, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
8. I use selections from the Gospel of Matthew and the fifth-century CE Pāli *Nidāna-kathā*, which represents the earliest surviving biographical account (albeit incomplete) of the Buddha’s life in the Theravada tradition; see Jayawickrama 2000.
9. The monastery at Eberbach, now a museum, has an excellent Web site that includes interactive videos of several parts of the monastery: <http://83.169.21.239:8081/v/klostereberbach/content/e2467/e2647/e8964/>. Many recordings of Gregorian chant are readily available; for Buddhist *paritta*, I use a CD entitled *Mahapirita*, which is online at http://www.vihara.org.au/t7/dhamma/media/audio/maha_piritha/maharagama/default.aspx.
10. Gregory Schopen, “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 31 (1999): 1–23.
11. David Germano and Kevin Trainor, eds., *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004); Kevin Trainor, *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravāda Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
12. We begin this section with Tom Driver’s “Ritualizing: The Animals Do It and So Do We,” *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991), 12–31. My approach is also strongly influenced by the work of Catherine Bell; see Bell 1992, 1997.
13. Mahānāma, *The Mahāvamsa*, trans., W. Geiger, (London: Pali Text Society, 1958); Vācissara, *The Chronicle of the Thūpa and the Thūpavamsa: Being a Translation and Edition of Vācissaratthera’s Thūpavamsa*, trans., and ed., N. A. Jayawickrama (London: Luzac for Pali Text Society, 1971).
14. B. Gunn, “To Be a Pilgrim,” *Blackwoods Magazine* 289 (1961): 78–86.
15. G. H. Doble, “The Relics of St. Petroc,” *Antiquity* 13 (1939): 403–415; Felix Fabri, “The Wanderings of Felix Fabri,” *Library of the Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society*, Vols. 7–10, trans., Aubrey Stewart (London: AMS Press, 1971).
16. This comes out clearly in a chapter that I assign from Gross on Buddhist women in ancient India (Gross 1993, 29–54), and through my presentation of material on efforts to reestablish the full ordination lineage for women in Sri Lanka.

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