TO THE STUDENT

I hope that you will both learn from and enjoy reading this book. I have tried to make it not just another ho-hum, run-of-the-mill introduction to . . . (yawn) . . . type of book. Rather, I address debates between scholars and give you the skills and knowledge to comprehend the world around you. That means this book is about—and it sounds scary—methodology and theory. Theory and method are not just dry, abstract concepts, but principles relating to life and society. Indeed, giving you new ways to look at the world is a major aim of this book.

So, this book is not about “religions.” Rather, it is a book about how to study religions. Reading this book first, or alongside, other books on specific religions will help you understand them (the books and the religions!) better.

Furthermore, religions are not separate from our embodiment and social life. We should not study religion as isolated ideas, texts, or rituals, but as part of human life. This is why the following issues are core to this text:

Politics: I do not mean being party political. However, all scholarship is political: it makes choices about what we study, who gets funding, what subjects are worth studying, and so on. Why the study of religion looks the way it does will be addressed.

Commitment: You may have been told that academic study should be neutral and uncommitted; however, there are academic traditions committed to
justice, the oppressed, and the welfare of all humanity (and sentient beings, other-than-human-persons, and the planet we live on). These debates will be addressed.

**Voices:** Western scholarship comes from Western traditions and the Enlightenment. While this has always been in conversation with global voices, much of the outside legacy has been hidden or sidelined. This has affected how the concept “religion” is conceived. Less fully represented voices, in terms of gender, race, and class, which challenge the standard construction of religion are explored.

**Decolonizing:** I will bring in insights from nonwhite and non-Western scholarship. This book will fail miserably to be truly decolonial and include all possible voices; there are just too many. But it will try.

**Enlightenment values:** Such values as equality, reason, and justice are key to this book, and the Western heritage behind the study of religion is part of how we have come to study as we do. But, as noted above, we cannot take it as the only voice; we must understand that scholarship has a political heritage and that various stances will help us see differently.

The rest of this introduction will do a few things, which you can read or skip. I have an introduction to instructors (what do I tell them but not you?); some notes on teaching theory (pedagogy) and scholarly choices; and a methodological introduction (or rant) which helps put some ideas in context. Although this last section is more directed at fellow scholars, it addresses concepts that are fundamental to this book.

**TO THE INSTRUCTOR**

If you are reading this, there is a good chance that you are thinking of adopting this book. I should therefore follow this with a sales pitch. However, I will do something more mundane and outline some key aspects of this text (which is, of course, simply a subtler sales pitch):

- **Student-centered:** A trendy buzzword, but I use it here meaningfully in at least two ways. First, the writing and style is accessible. Second, it aims to give students practical skills, tools, and knowledge to examine the varied phenomena we term “religion.”

- **Case study methodology:** Often seen in business schools, this approach has not been widely adopted in the study of religion. I say more about this later, but I believe case studies are of benefit to both students and teachers.

- **Theory and method approach:** This book does not address theory and method in the traditional ways of particular approaches (e.g., “sociology,” “anthropology,” “feminism,” etc.), but focuses on helping students understand religion in society as discourse and practice.
Critical approach: The book is underlain by a range of central theories and methods. I can name these as critical theory (broadly construed): concern with gender representation and theory; a postcolonial and decolonizing approach; an awareness of class and political issues; and, a critical hermeneutical phenomenology. However, I do not take any of these approaches uncritically. There is more on this below.

Flexibility: By this I mean three things. First, a wide range of theory and method is covered. Second, this book can be used from introductory undergraduate courses up to graduate-level teaching. This is partly through the case studies, which can be explored at many levels of complexity. It is written assuming no knowledge, so can suit absolute beginners, but because it enters areas of dispute and critical discussion it can lead into discussion with graduate students (used alongside primary texts). Third, this book can be used for method and theory classes, courses on specific religions (with specific case studies) for a methodological approach, or in sociology/history (etc.) of religion courses that focus on methodology.

Author’s positionality: This book comes out of my own teaching across over twenty years and several continents, so it is about what has worked for me. While mostly teaching in religious studies contexts, I currently find myself in a graduate school of international relations with students who normally have no background in the study of religion. This book comes from me finding no adequate text to make religious studies method and theory relevant and coherent to them. However, it is also very much for pure religious studies students. Below, I address further why I think a scholar’s own stance is important.

Hopefully my non-sales-pitch has convinced you, but you may still feel “Nah, it’s not for me.” I hope you at least read the next section before deciding; it may still convince you.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES AND SCHOLARLY CHOICES
WHY DID YOU DO THAT?
I will start off noting a few (but not all) key stylistic and pedagogical choices:

Focus: The book’s concern is contemporary religion and its role in society. While this book takes contemporary criticism of the concept of “religion” very seriously—and agrees with much of it—I argue throughout the book that we can still employ the term; you will find out more in chapter 1.

No diacritics: As an introduction, the book is student-centered and not off-putting. While some see using diacritics as showing a certain scholarly rigor, they do little to help an introductory student, and experts do not need them. However, I do use accents where they normally appear in languages which
use Roman characters and retain diacritics where they appear in quotations and book titles.

“We”: This book stresses a learning model that emphasizes the “expert” and student as colearners, rather than an information delivery model. As such, I normally use “we” to speak about the authorial voice and reader learning together. “I” is only used when I very consciously want to emphasize my choices (it appears much more here in the introduction than elsewhere). In other words, it seeks dialogue toward knowledge, rather than emphasizing a depository of ideas to be imparted—something developed in the case study method.

Chapters: Space means there is an inevitable arbitrary cutoff on what is, and is not, included. I will not justify every choice, but some points can be made. “Race” was not included as a chapter; however, it is central to the book, and chapters 7 and 18 cover it significantly. It is a theme not limited to one primary location. “Fundamentalism” and “violence” are covered together, which does not suggest that I see them as inherently linked. I did not want to leave either out, and commonly perceived associations made it logical to cover them together. I have not included fieldwork or research methodologies. They are important but did not seem to fit; the questions of the book are more, “Why do people collect data the way they do?” “Why do they interpret it the way they do?” Rather than, “How do they collect it?”

Intertextuality: The book aims to show that many topics, issues, methods, and theories are not discrete units but are deeply connected. Chapters, terms, and discussions are referenced back and forth. The final section of each chapter, “Questions and Connecting Thoughts,” makes such links. Boxes are, in part, used to make it easier for students to find some key ideas in other chapters if they illuminate something covered in another chapter. This is also seen in the recurring usage of a number of issues in specific religions to help provide different insights on particular issues.

Structure: There are three sections. The first three chapters deal with what I see as two fundamentals: what we think religion is, and some core methodology in approaching it. While the rest of the book can be read without reading these, they lay out some fundamental issues. The next section is primarily particular methods and theories, some of which are fairly central to the whole book, but none is essential to understanding other chapters. The final section turns to religion in society today.

Theory and method: This book seeks to bring together both methodological tools and theoretical lenses. My reasons should become clear, but we must reflect (theory) on why we think as we do (method, or “action”). To understand what is meant by theory here: “To theorize is to look at something in a special
way, one that achieves its perspective by distancing or by probing beneath a surface.”

History: This book is about contemporary religion, but I often engage history. My PhD was in the history of religion, and I believe that we cannot understand the contemporary world, or why things are as they are, without understanding how they came about. As such, one chapter engages historical methods and many chapters delve back hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years. However, in general, our focus remains on how this history affects us today.

Technical/foreign terms: Generally, English-language terms are used. This reflects a desire to be accessible to students at different stages, although foreign/technical terms often follow in parenthesis. These may be glossed or further explained in the glossary; definitions there normally appear under the technical/foreign term to stress their particular meanings. The book’s focus, though, is method and theory, so it does not generally delve deeply into tradition-specific terms. Occasionally, a foreign/technical term is used in the text where the reader should be alert to a very distinct meaning for a pedagogical purpose, even if that term is elsewhere rendered in English. My guiding principle is ease of usage for the reader while alerting them to further complexities; where and how instructors supply further details will, of course, vary depending on course objectives, level of students, and so on. Further, given that terms come from Arabic, Chinese, Latin, Greek, Pali, Sanskrit, and a range of other languages, it should be clear why this book avoids deep engagement with specific terms, whose meanings may also be the subject of ongoing scholarly disputes.

Text boxes: Heavy use is made of boxes, which do at least three things. One is to provide introductions to key theories, issues, and concepts which can be cross-referenced from other chapters when relevant. Another is to provide examples without interrupting the flow of the main text, so readers can stop to check them or carry on and come back to them later. A third is to provide key background knowledge which may be known to some readers but not others, so those to whom it is familiar can keep with the flow of the text, while others can read them. In some cases, one box may serve more than one of these purposes.

Oppression, Justice, and the Politics of Scholarship

This book expressly addresses a number of issues which affect the way that scholarship is written and how we are able to think about the world. This has made this book deeply political in that it asks questions about who controls scholarship, and what voices have been silenced or marginalized in scholarship. This means that questions of class, race, and gender frequently arise as they have shaped our categories. This also means that this
is a book deeply concerned with questions of justice and oppression. This is both a personal and an academic choice; such questions have been raised both as personal expressions and as academic choices by various academics.5

The contemporary study of religion has a history, in part as a tool of colonial classification and control. We cannot simply jump to a place of pure and objective criticism of this without asking where we stand. The notion of standing apart from such questions, or even simply offering some supposedly external critique without being grounded in a concept of justice, is a stance that is viable only for those who support the unjust status quo. Therefore, as Desmond Tutu and others have noted, to refuse to seek justice against the status quo is an act that continues to support oppression.6 It should be noted in this regard that this book is influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, including his notion that the oppressors can be liberated by the oppressed.7 That is to say, it is sometimes hard for those in positions of privilege to see views from elsewhere, and it takes hard work to recognize the validity of the stance of our “Others.”

To address some potential criticisms that may arise and clarify some issues, I will raise three points:

“Theses on method”: Bruce Lincoln’s famous statement on method largely aligns with my own stance and opinions.8 It is often one of the first texts I give to my students. However, I do not tell them they have to accept it all. When it comes to the thirteenth thesis, I believe there are good reasons why scholars may be advocates in certain circumstances. This is discussed in chapters 5, 7, 10, and 18. However, I raise it as a point of debate, rather than asserting my own position as correct.

*Does this book tell people what to think?* I am stating my own stance here because I believe that, as students and scholars, we need to be reflexive about our own stances, biases, and prejudices, as discussed in chapter 2. Autobiography can become part of our scholarship.9 However, I am very clear in asking readers to question the claims of this book.

*Is this book an SJW (social justice warrior) manifesto?* Many assert that academia is full of “cultural Marxists” who have stopped looking at evidence and only assert politically correct ideologies. My commitment to justice, decolonizing methods, and a concern with race, gender, and class may lead to this accusation. However, I would argue that objective and rational academic study will show that oppression is a real factor that shapes our world. My stance comes from evidence, not ideology. I do not, though, prescribe a single form of action nor what we could describe as a political agenda: those are questions I leave to the reader. This book also does not dismiss what the Western world and elite white males have contributed to our knowledge and understanding, which has been considerable. However, there are more voices to listen to, and hearing them will widen our knowledge and understanding further.
INTERRELIGIOUS STUDIES

This book is written in my role as a scholar who identifies with interreligious studies. Interreligious studies is a fairly new term in academia, and refers to several things:

- A multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach (respectively, using or learning from many distinct disciplines, and combining the disciplines in study or research).
- An interest in situations of religious diversity, so that rather than studying religions in isolation, we seek to understand the “dynamic encounters and interactions” that occur between different traditions, including secular traditions and non-religious worldviews. See especially chapters 2, 13, 14.
- The recognition that scholars are part of the creation of the discourse and cannot pretend to sit back as impartial observers who only examine other people’s discourse or practices. Many scholars of interreligious studies are scholar-activists and do not see this as inherently controversial or contradictory.
- An acknowledgment, following from the above point, that theological approaches and the secular academic study of religion are not strictly separate; secularism is discussed in chapter 16. Rather, we see a continuum of approaches. This book is definitely not a confessional theological one. However, it is open to learning from theologians when they have something to tell us. Theologians are sources of data for the scholar of religion, but can also be sources of theory, an issue discussed in chapter 2, but also raised in chapter 7.

This book focuses on contemporary society and diverse societies, and critically explores attitudes toward religious diversity and the practice of interreligious dialogue, the latter two in chapters 13 and 14, respectively. However, it does not advocate for dialogue nor any specific view on this.

CASE STUDIES

The sustained use of case studies is rarely found in the study of religion. Even when it is, it is not normally approached in the way it is here. The model here draws from what is seen as good practice in other disciplines, and is influenced by the pioneer efforts of Diana Eck in the study of religion. I will briefly explain the method and key features.

The case study is a way to bring theory or method to life for students. In particular, it shows that we are not simply discussing abstract concepts but issues that relate to and apply to the real world outside the classroom. Indeed, this interaction with real-world issues allows theory and method to be applied directly, and therefore understood better because it becomes an active method of learning. It also emphasizes that there are not necessarily right or wrong answers.