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Presenter Bio:

- Peel student from 1978-1992
- Social Science & History Teacher with the PDSB since 1999, including more than 13 years teaching World Religions
- Seconded to teach in the B.Ed program at York University from 2011-2014 (Spring)
- Currently Instructional Coordinator for Equity & Inclusive Education for the PDSB.
- MA in South Asia Areas Studies from the University of London (SOAS), UK (1999)
- Currently doctoral candidate in Religious Studies at McMaster University.

Before we begin....

- The views expressed in this presentation are not to be understood as the views of the Peel District School Board. The views are entirely my own, except reference to secondary sources.
- My reflections here are shared to help generate new and productive ways to think, talk, teach and inform policies about living with cultural difference

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difference?
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Do we clobber it to death?

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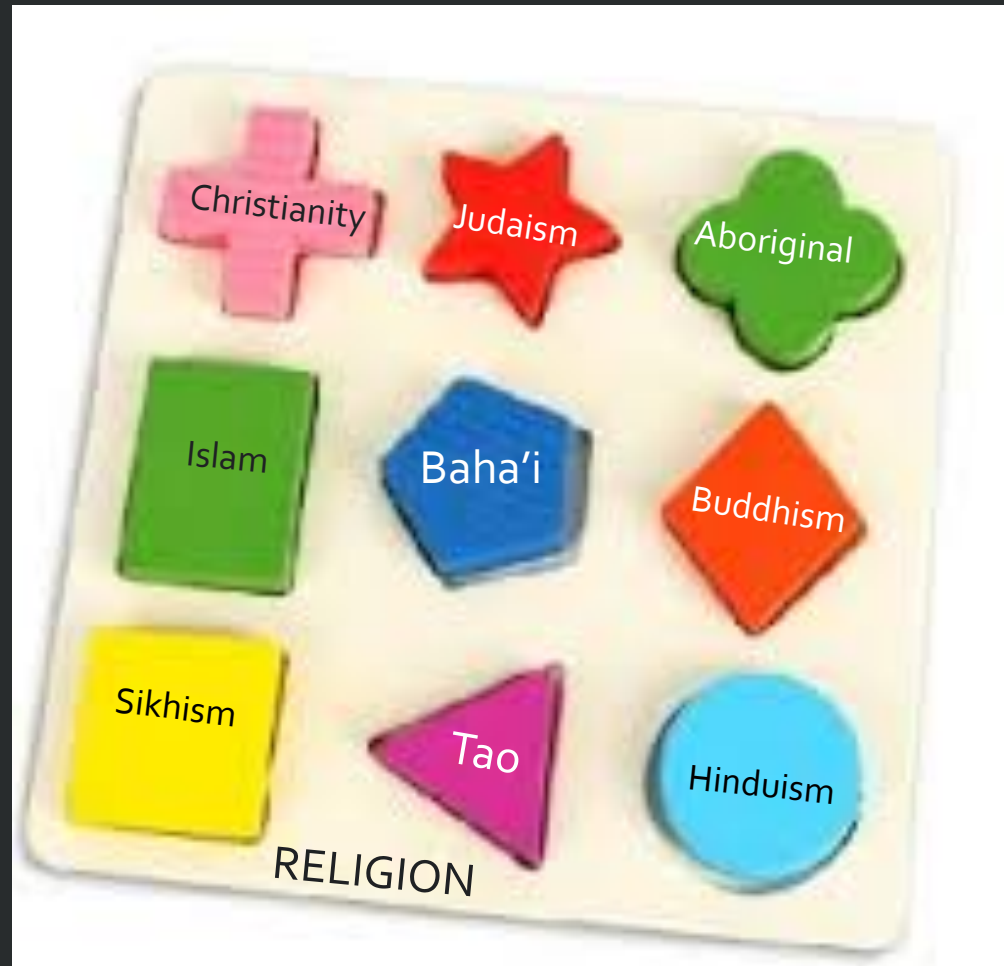
Do we look at it in awe
or purely in wonderment?
Do we work for it to disappear?

Do we pass it stealthily
Or change route away from it?
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ourselves?

What do we do with a difference?
Do we communicate to it,
let application acknowledge it
for barriers to fall down?

-James Berry (2004)

The danger of
unexamined
assumptions



Preamble 1:

Living with Difference

- What brings us here?
- What does it mean for Canadians to live with *difference*
 - Cultural ?
 - Ideological?
 - Religious?
- Why do we ask this question?
 - To *contain* or *manage diversity*; or
 - To better *understand the nature of difference* (and similarity)
- A 'sacred' balance
 - The value of being *practical*
 - The *wisdom* of being *thoughtful*

Preamble 2:

Religious diversity & student centered learning

- A decade of change in Ontario education policy
 - student centered teaching and learning
 - student experience a protected right in education
- Equity & Inclusive Education (= democratic education) policy
- Student success dependent on many factors
 - Freedom from discrimination & bullying
 - Mental & physical well being
 - Curriculum as 'window' and 'mirror' to self and other's experiences (Styles 1988)
- Social Science & Humanities curriculum
 - ≠ rote learning of facts and dates
 - Teacher ≠ 'sage on stage'
 - Students active co-constructors of knowledge
 - Student ideas, questions, experience now drives inquiry & learning & therefore how & why teacher's 'teach'

Preamble 3:

High school
'kids' make
awesome
religion
students

- Students :raw honest questions & observations
 - Not *innocent*. Their experience of the world has already constrained their thinking
- Think *through* their own experience and insights
 - Not through formal theology or academic categories.
- For students study of religion = self understanding; affirmation of experience; window into understanding their neighbours
 - Not a detached formal enterprise
 - Different than the formal approach to the academic study of religion

For conversation and inquiry...

- Given the context of *student centered* teaching and learning...
- And given the relevance of *student experience* as a protected provision of inclusive education policy...
- 1. Student 'experience' is (and will emerge as) the most *interesting* (for researchers) and *unsettling* (for teachers) source of knowledge when teaching 'religious diversity'
- 2. Indian cultural traditions— in particular--pose a significant problem to teaching and learning about religious diversity
 - Experience of these traditions by Indian students \neq the description of these traditions *as religions*
 - Presentation of Indian cultural traditions *as religions* leads to confusion for non-Indian students, and teachers of WR who continue to experience Indian cultural traditions *as religions*.

Why do I make these claims?

- Current research on CSC (Comparative Science of Cultures) at the University of Ghent, led by Professor SN Balagangadhara (1994) sheds important light on the issues I raise in the pervious slide:
- Religion as it is experienced in Western culture prioritizes and universalizes
- 1. Belief & belief dependent practices
- 2. The primacy of Propositional Knowledge, over all other forms of knowledge (That is, that human actions are necessarily intelligible, deliberate, and explainable) (Van den Bouwhuijsen, 1995 pg 105) .
 - In the case of religion, actions are explained and explainable because of the presence of scripture, and scripture sanctioned clergy
- 3. The taken for grantedness that the universe is pregnant with meaning and requires explanation— that explanation taking the form of religion (the dynamic of religion in Abrahamic cultures)

Constraints

- These 3 pillars of religion are reproduced in school education, through 3 important sources.
- 1. Legacy of the academic study of religion;
 - focus on cultural content (in source material) for teaching about religion (*propositional knowledge*)
- 2. Education policy: provincial and local
 - use universalist yet limiting definitions of religion
- 3. Teacher knowledge, resources and inclusive pedagogy
 - WR teachers ≠ religion scholars or anthropologists
 - Textbooks & web resources as practice constraining 'devices'
 - The experience of WR teachers of cultural difference?

1. Academic Study of Religion

- Based on a number of foundations:
 - 1. Religion is a cultural universal
 - Every culture 'has' religion
 - 2. Religion is distinct from other things (*Sui Generis*)
 - Religion is *not* that same thing as science, superstition or fantasy
 - 3. Different religions are different religiously.
 - Begs question: *What makes a tradition into a religion?*
 - God(s)
 - Higher Power?
 - Scripture?
- 4. Research on religion through social sciences: focus on cultural content=propositional knowledge= intelligible, explainable beliefs and belief dependent actions
- *Christianity without scripture ≠ religion*
- *Abrahamic religions without scripture, belief? ≠ religion*
- *Hinduism without scripture and scripture based ritual? = ?*

“Some properties are necessary for some traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) to be religions. If one accepts this, the threat is that other cultures appear not to have religions at all. For some reason or another ...other cultures are said to have religions too. However, the conditions under which other cultures are to have religion are precisely those that make it impossible for the Semitic religions to be religions. That is to say, if the Semitic religions are what religions are, other cultures do not have religions. If other cultures have religions, then the Semitic religions are not religions. The inconsistency lies in insisting that both statements are true.”

(Balagangadhara, 1994: 22)

Implications

- Religion is *not* imaginary
- It is real in the experience of Western culture that came into contact with Indians hundreds of years ago
- Continues to be real in the Western cultural experience of the world
- Western experience of religion as a cultural universal globalized through Westernization (or vice versa!)
- But begs the question: do Indians, ethnic Chinese, Aboriginal Canadians etc. experience their cultural traditions *as religions, or as something else*
- Litmus test
 - Are there confusions, mystifications, inconsistencies in the answers given?
 - *Is a puja a religious act? Is astrology religious?*
 - *Is smudging religious, or something else?*

What does this mean?

- South Asian traditions are very layered
- Many operate as ecumenical institutional organization (*Swaminarayana sampraday*, Hare Krishna, etc.)
- Over-representation of this trend in research (See Baumann 2008)
- Good reason for this iteration of South Asian tradition abroad
- Temple and central religious organization provides a place for gathering, community celebration, ritual performance, and a central efficient location for the transmission of culture in an alien cultural milieu
- But this is only one layer.....
- Back to Elder Cat Criger and now Indian scholars who have addressed the question of cultural difference through their own cultural sensibilities
 - How do we recognize and respect a different cultural experience other than our own?

“The inapplicability of Western notions of religion to the traditions of Asia has not only led to piecemeal errors of labeling, identification and classification, to conceptual confusion and to some name calling. It is also responsible for something more extraordinary: the creation of so-called religions. This act was primarily engaged in by outsiders and foreigners, but is sometimes subsequently accepted by members of a tradition

“In most parts of Asia, such religions do not exist, but scholars, laymen and Western converts persist in searching for them. If they cannot find them, they seize upon labels used for indigenous categories, rent them from their original context and use them for subsequent identification of what is now called a “religious” tradition. Thus there arises a host of religions: Vedic, Brahmanical, Hindu, Buddhist, Bon-po, Tantric, Taoist, Confucian, Shinto, etc. In Asia such groupings are not only uninteresting and uninformative, but tinged with the unreal. What counts instead are ancestors and teachers – hence lineages, traditions, affiliations, cults, eligibility, and initiation – concepts with ritual rather than truth-functional overtones “

(Staal, 1993: 393)

2a)Curriculum Policy

- Curriculum Overview of Grade 11 Course “World Religions and Belief Traditions”

“This course provides students with opportunities to explore various world religions and belief traditions. Students will develop knowledge of the terms and concepts relevant to this area of study, will examine the ways in which religions and belief traditions meet various human needs, and will learn about the relationship between belief and action. They will examine sacred writings and teachings, consider how concepts of time and place influence different religions and belief traditions, and develop research and inquiry skills related to the study of human expressions of belief.” (Ontario Curriculum Grades 9-12, Social Sciences and Humanities, pg 356)

2b) Religious Accommodation Policy

- Following the OHRC (Ontario Human Right Code) Policy on Creed and the Accommodation of Religious Services (1996)
- *"The existence of religious beliefs and practices are both necessary and sufficient to the meaning of creed, if the beliefs and practices are sincerely held and/or observed."*
- Boards of education throughout Ontario follow the OHRC definition

Teacher Practice

- Teacher knowledge & experience of religion
 - Continue to use a social science approach that premises content: belief and belief oriented practice
 - Textbook resources main source of 'official knowledge' in WR courses
 - Online Material
- All of the above structure the experience of religion as a cultural universal
 - Under researched area for educators and public policy makers invested in 'cultural difference'

Solutions

- “It is easier to tear down than to build”
(Bandyopadhyay 1995)

1. Is Religion Universalizable?

- Revisit the value of the term religion as a organizing concept for culture.
- Revisit the blind insistence that all cultures have religion— what sort of culture are we actually talking about?
- Increasing evidence now suggests that religion is a very specific iteration of *Western culture*.
- It has its own pattern and dynamic.

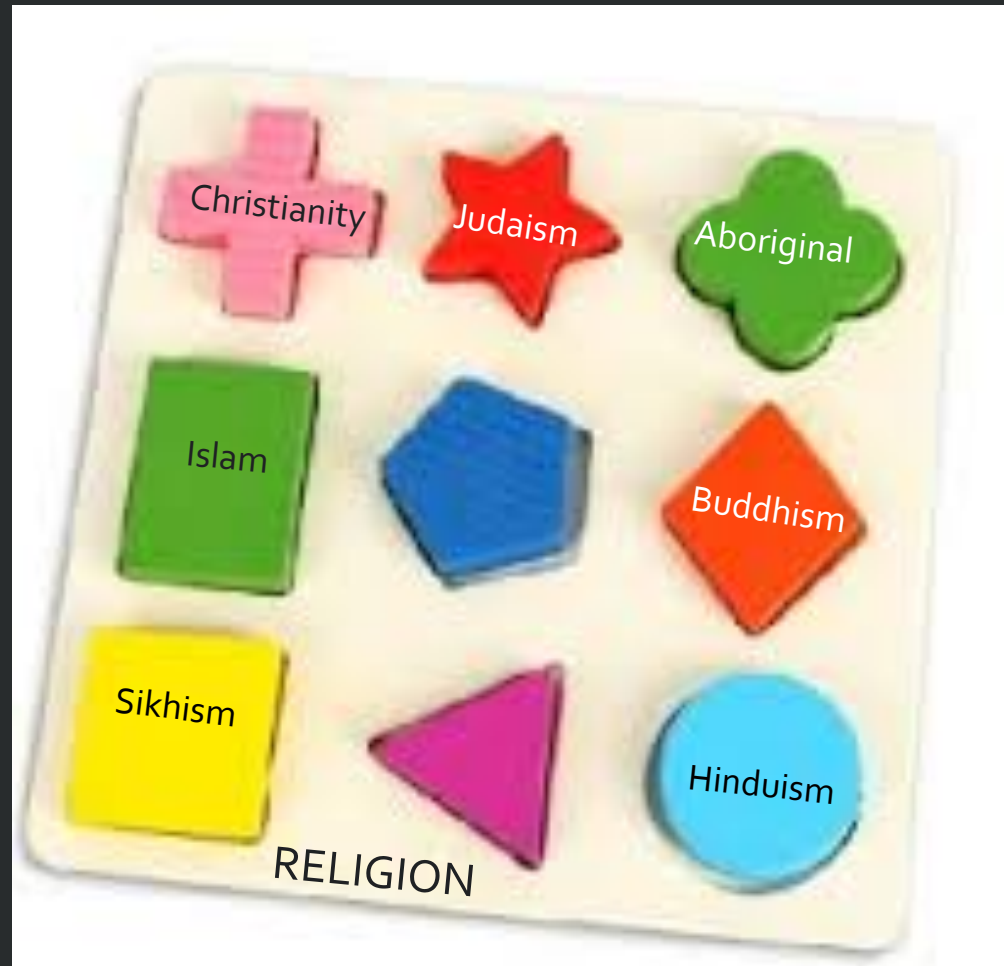
2. A new study of culture

- Shift from studying culture from *what* to *how*?
- "Cultures as configurations of learning" (Balagangadhara 1994, 396-433)
- *The way an individual makes use of the resources in his/her environment to navigate the world*
- *Configurations of learning: The way that communities learn to learn about the world. How do these 'traditions' structure experience of the world in specific ways?*
- Key:
 - How do cultural traditions create cultural pedagogies to facilitate *learning and teaching*
 - How do these configurations of learning become bracketed, ignored when in contact with the western experience of religion as a cultural universal?
 - What happens to students in this interaction? What are the prospects for equity, inclusion, and the protection of student experience in this context?
- Shift from culture as content to culturality as process

3. Inquiry

- Use terms and concepts that suspend easy answers in the study of 'religions'
- Terms and concepts should reveal how the experience of culture is not uniform or necessarily belief centered
- Encourage students to inquire , investigate, find patterns, draw conclusions
 - i.e. 4 dimensions of religion (Belief, Practice, Experience, Politics)
 - i.e. Religious Ethnography Assignment
 - Buriwale story
 - Sindhis: where do they fit?
 - Darghas rituals: can this be classified as 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' exclusively? Is this religious?

Summary



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