

Re-imagining Religion: Towards a Thematic Approach to Religious Studies at UKZN¹

Beverly Vencatsamy
vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

Examining the Introduction to Religion module, RELG 101, offered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, reveals a rigid adherence to the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) in structure and content. This article assesses the alignment of the RELG 101 module with the content, context, and intellectual growth objectives of Clingerman and O'Brien (2015). It also highlights the limitations of the current framework in meeting the specified objectives, providing insights into the challenges which the students face, and proposes a shift from the current adapted WRP approach to a thematic approach.

Keywords: Religious studies, world religions paradigm, thematic approach, religious literacy, critical thinking

Introduction

In 2023, one of my students asked: 'Would cultural practices from a specific race or tribe be considered religious? For example, hair is considered sacred in the online black community, hence black fishing, etc...and the attire, for example, are sacred to every tribe. So, does religion only apply to Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.? What if another group of people find other things sacred?'

This quote is extracted from an online class activity, being a compelling entry point into the ever-evolving landscape of religious studies (RS). By empha-

¹ University of KwaZulu-Natal.

sizing the intersectionality of culture and religion, it calls for the recognition of cultural practices beyond mainstream belief systems. The study of religion has advanced nationally and globally, extending beyond traditional boundaries and giving rise to new themes, some of which may be perceived as controversial, often demanding interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary engagement. Traditionally, RS in South Africa has been taught through the lens of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP). In contrast, a review of the curricula in the USA and the UK reveals a thematic structure where religions are examined collectively through engagement with contemporary issues.

Over the past decade, the study of religion/s at South African tertiary institutions has become increasingly entrenched, but with a renewed focus on pedagogy. In the current social context at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), marked by a diverse religious and cultural background, it is imperative to consider the plurality of the students. Simultaneously, any successful attempt to rethink the teaching approach of RS must aim to produce critically engaged students who are knowledgeable about the various ideologies embedded in the different religions. Striking a balance between acknowledging student diversity and encouraging critical engagement becomes crucial for a practical and inclusive pedagogical approach. This article focuses on whether the current approach (curriculum structures and teaching methods) of RS at UKZN can develop student competencies to engage critically across religious traditions on contextually relevant issues.

The student's question (above) foregrounds the diverse cultural and religious expressions that students encounter, transcending the traditional definitions of 'religion'. Given the history of the education system in South Africa and the dominance of Christianity in terms of the religious affiliation of its populace, it is unsurprising that students tend to use Christianity as a benchmark in comparing religions, familiar as they may be with its features. While providing a relatable reference point, this stated practice introduces a challenge, as the disproportionate emphasis on Christian norms risks inadvertently side-lining the values and diverse aspects of other religious traditions. This practice, if left unchecked, may impede the development of a comparative approach to studying global religious practices.

Using the framework of Clingerman and O'Brien for designing introductory modules, which calls for a more contextually relevant approach to RS, this article provides a critical overview of the Introduction to Religion module, RELG 101, at UKZN, illustrating its adherence to the WRP. This

article suggests shifting from the WRP to a more thematic approach that embraces diversity. It explores the importance of reorganizing RELG 101 around specific goals stressing the value of religious literacy and fostering critical thinking (Walvoord 2008b; Gallagher 2009).

It also discusses the influence of the post-apartheid era on education towards a more diverse approach to religion education at secondary level. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) played a crucial role in this transformative process by implementing the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in pursuing a more inclusive education system. By contextualizing the objectives of Clingerman and O'Brien with the idiosyncratic student body at UKZN, this article presents a conceptual syllabus illustrating how a thematic restructuring of the RELG 101 curriculum can achieve a goal-driven approach, prioritizing critical thinking over content-driven instruction. As Gallagher (2009) highlights, encouraging critical thinking through contextual relevance assists students to engage more deeply with the content.

The COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the transition to online learning, highlighted the inequalities in the South African education system, severely impacting the disadvantaged communities that UKZN serves. This was evident in the drastic decline in the enrolment numbers in RS. It has therefore become imperative to adapt teaching methods to secure the future of RS at UKZN.

Critical Perspectives of the World Religions Paradigm

Clingerman and O'Brien (2015:328) assert that introductory religion modules should provide content on religion relevant to the student's context to foster intellectual growth and critical thinking. The historical trajectory of RELG 101 at UKZN reveals a particular adherence to the WRP in both structure and content. Analyzing the adherence of RELG 101 to the WRP, it may be argued, in keeping with the critique of Chidester (2018:46), that the paradigm perpetuates a Eurocentric bias, excluding indigenous perspectives.

Clingerman and O'Brien (2015:330) emphasize that the purpose of introductory religion modules ought to transcend mere knowledge dissemination. They stress the need to tailor course content to specific circumstances and institutional settings in religiously diverse environments. These courses cannot rely on a shared religious background and should rather acknowledge

and draw upon the varied religious viewpoints existing among the students. Making assumptions about the students' prior knowledge of religious traditions are inappropriate in such circumstances. As a result, it is crucial to design a module that considers the diverse backgrounds of the student body, thus ensuring the curriculum accounts for the students' varying degrees of prior knowledge. Clingerman and O'Brien (2015:327) underscore the importance of fulfilling general education requirements and introducing subject majors while being mindful of the broader curricular context.

Based on the views of Clingerman and O'Brien, the content and structure of the religion module should be integrated rather than separated from the larger curriculum setting. It should complement and contribute to the overall educational experience of the students, fulfilling the general education requirements and adding value to their academic journey, irrespective of their majors. This integration acknowledges the cultural influences that shape the curriculum and aligns with institutional policies, learning objectives, and social needs. The module should also cover basic principles, equipping students for further advanced, specialized classes in RS or related fields. This comprehensive approach will create a curriculum that meets academic standards and addresses broader educational and societal contexts.

By adopting this approach of Clingerman and O'Brien, academics can create a more integrated and cohesive educational experience for students. This approach would encourage RS to go beyond a specialized enclave and become indispensable to a student's intellectual development. It would also allow the student to be cognizant and appreciative of the interdisciplinary intersections between RS and other academic fields, cultivating a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. In essence, conscientiously being mindful of the broader curricular context enhances engagement and the practicality of the introductory religion module within the larger educational framework.

Religious Literacy as Theoretical Framework

The term 'religious literacy' has become a central theme in the religion education discourse. The concept gained popularity through the work of Wright in the 1990s, who realized the need for a form of religious education characterized by critical thinking, reflection, and engagement with the subject mat-

ter to improve religious literacy amongst students. Wright defines religious literacy as the ability to reflect and respond to the phenomenon of religion in an informed manner (Wright 1993:47). While he contends that the decline in religious literacy is attributable to the collapse of confessional arguments that focus on promoting specific religious doctrines, this decline is also influenced by the broader cultural and educational shifts that contribute to the changes in religious education. Additionally, it may be argued that engaging with the challenges of religious literacy may require a more contemporary approach to religious education that considers various philosophical and cultural perspectives.

Scholars such as Prothero and Moore offer alternative perspectives on religious literacy. Prothero (2007:13) highlights the necessity for students to comprehend and apply religious terms, symbols, beliefs, and practices in meaningful conversations. In the context of his work, Prothero argues that the American population employs religious language but often lacks a sound understanding of the content, context, and meaning of this language. Failing to understand basic concepts often leads to public debates based on religious rhetoric, impeding productive conversations and contributing to misunderstandings and stereotypical thinking.

Moore's definition includes discerning and analyzing the intricate intersections of religion with social, political, and cultural dimensions (Moore 2006). Dinham and Francis (2015:16) further highlights the significance of religious literacy in a multicultural and multireligious society. They contend that it is necessary to equip individuals with invigorated knowledge, understanding, and skills to successfully negotiate the wide range of religious beliefs and practices in society.

Gray-Hildenbrand and King (2019:199) commend Prothero's emphasis on religious vocabulary and content, recognizing the importance of religious literacy. However, they note a limitation in the exclusive focus on what to know rather than how to engage critically with and evaluate that knowledge. This limitation is consistent with the argument of Gallagher (2009) concerning RS, where academics are encouraged to go beyond conventional knowledge delivery. According to Gallagher, academics should build on content knowledge to explain how religion may help people navigate the world, express themselves, and find direction and purpose in their lives (Gallagher 2009:208). The focus on language and symbolism is crucial to develop a comprehensive understanding of religious concepts, providing cultural con-

text, and preventing misinterpretations. This emphasis promotes accurate and respectful discussions, encouraging critical analysis and enhancing cultural literacy.

Additionally, Gallagher (2009:208) contends that religious literacy should transcend beyond a superficial understanding of ‘what’ religion is, advocating for a shift towards the ‘how’ of religion. Gallagher emphasizes that learning about religion goes beyond memorizing facts (‘what’), as it involves understanding the dynamics and processes (‘how’) that shape religious beliefs and practices. According to Gallagher, religious literacy requires insight into the reasons behind religious behaviors, shifting the focus from a basic understanding of concepts to a deeper exploration of their impact and significance (‘how’). This transformative approach encourages critical thinking and promotes interpretation, avoiding bland rote memorization.

Consistent with the perspectives of Prothero and Gallagher, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) emphasizes the importance of exploring the diverse ways of being religious in the academic study of religion (AAR 2018). This approach empowers students by enabling them to contextualize their personal experiences and convictions within broader historical and comparative frameworks. By acknowledging the diversity inherent in religious beliefs and practices, the study of religion aligns with the acknowledgement that there are indeed various expressions of spirituality and faith. This comprehensive exploration enriches a student’s understanding of religion and develops a broader perspective beyond individual viewpoints, fostering a nuanced appreciation for the complex nature of all religious traditions.

In light of these perspectives, it is crucial to highlight the recurring theme of literacy – the ability to comprehend, interpret, and critically evaluate written texts. This theme is embedded across the Life Orientation curriculum at school level, the objectives of the RELG 101 module, and the NQF policy. The characterization of religious literacy by Parker (2020:129) integrates understanding the historical context, core texts, belief systems, rituals, and the evolving influence of social, historical, and cultural backgrounds on religious traditions, aligning with the viewpoint of Moore (2015:30-31).

Moore contends that a religiously literate individual ably comprehends the influence of religions within specific contexts and recognizes how they integrate into all facets of humanity (Moore 2015:31). This individual’s knowledge extends beyond the facts about religion, while understanding and

imagining what it is like to inhabit someone else's worldview. In contrast, Moore (2006) further defines religious illiteracy as the lack of understanding regarding the basic tenets of the world's religious traditions, the diversity within these traditions, and the profound role of religion in social, cultural, and political life. Religious illiteracy, according to Moore, often results in misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and marginalization because a student's primary source of information about religion is typically located within their own religious tradition.

Expanding on illiteracy, Moore (as quoted in Gray-Hildenbrand & King 2019:199) further contends that when individuals lack the training to critically assess information sources or view these within the broader context of religion locally and globally, religious illiteracy is likely to persist, fueling biases and stereotypes toward other religious traditions.

Gallagher (2009:218) proposes a goal-driven approach to religious literacy, emphasizing that the focus should extend beyond content. Through critical reasoning, the goal is to develop improved conversationalists, intellectuals, and compassionate people. This approach supports the assertion of Walvoord (2008a:7) that students often lack a nuanced understanding of how critical thinking can intersect with conviction and commitment. Gallagher advocates that religious education should prioritize developing skills contributing to a more profound understanding of religious concepts and customs.

In light of these insights, this article aims to evaluate the current approach and proposes an alternative for the RELG 101 module at UKZN, considering the necessity for a more comprehensive and goal-oriented approach to studying religion.

Post-Apartheid Religious Educational Inclusivity

Substantial developments in the RS landscape began to unfold in post-apartheid South Africa. These advances focused on inclusivity and diversity, ensuring fair and equal educational opportunities for students of all races and socio-economic backgrounds, leading to a more representative learning environment. Changes in RS reflected the broader educational reforms fostering a pluralistic understanding of religion. This evolution has set the stage for critically examining the WRP within a constantly transforming academic landscape, emphasizing religious pluralism in South Africa.

Originally following a confessional approach, RS catered to students from shared racial backgrounds, languages, and often similar cultural and religious affiliations (Frahm-Arp 2021:8). Significant changes also occurred in the late 1980s when universities admitted students from various racial backgrounds, leading to increased heterogeneity. This move prompted a transition in RS from a confessional to a non-confessional approach, exposing students through formal instruction to religious traditions other than their own.

Implementing the National Policy on Religion and Education at school level was another noteworthy development. In an attempt to move away from the Christian National Education policy of the Apartheid era, the reformed religion education policy advocated for teaching and learning objectives centered on religious pluralism. To advance religious literacy and create a more inclusive society, RS were incorporated into the Life Orientation curricula at secondary school level (Clasquin 2005:6). The intention here was to provide students with opportunities to develop an understanding of various belief systems, fostering empathy and encouraging critical reflection on the differences among religious traditions and individual identities. The policy emphasized the significance of valuing various belief systems, practices, and perspectives without censure and/or judgment. Despite the outlined objectives to equip students with the means for engaging with diverse religious concepts and promoting a sense of agency, the practical implementation has given rise to significant concerns. The envisioned agency, aimed at enhancing the students' questioning, analyses and understanding of factors shaping their religious identity, appears to have fallen short in its subsequent execution, raising questions on the effectiveness of the implemented strategies. While highlighting the development of the abovementioned skills, the tangible outcomes regarding student engagement with varied religious concepts have remained blurred. Despite the emphasis on skills development it is uncertain whether these interventions actually impacted on the students' engagement with various religious concepts.

A significant challenge in the Life Orientation curriculum lies in positioning religious education as a basic peripheral aspect within the broader theme of democracy and human rights rather than receiving dedicated attention. This issue, as highlighted by Nthonto and Addai-Mununkum (2021: 439), diminishes the focus on religion within the curriculum, relegating religious education to a supplementary role at best. This relegation potentially

limits the student's comprehensive engagement with religious teachings. This 'content drop' (Nthontho & Addai-Mununkum 2021:441) often leads to students entering tertiary-level modules with a limited foundation in religious teachings. In addition, the reliance on informal sources impedes their ability to critically analyze and engage with diverse religious concepts, thus undermining the original intention of the education policy.

Noteworthy national guidelines underpinned these efforts to create a more inclusive education system. The Department of Basic Education was pivotal in establishing critical educational bodies, including the South African Council on Higher Education. This Council's primary objective was to create an equitable higher education and training system. Central to this initiative was the establishing of SAQA, a national entity entrusted with overseeing and maintaining qualitative education and training in the country. SAQA (2012) ensures uniformity and standards across educational programs by assessing and recognizing qualifications. Against the backdrop of the Apartheid legacy which segregated education systems along racial lines, the NQF (as implemented by SAQA) is authorized to institute a cohesive system for recognizing learning achievements in higher education (HE). The aim of the NQF is to streamline access to education and facilitate a seamless progression through different education levels.

Understanding how the NQF principles align with the objectives of RELG 101 is vital for evaluating intellectual growth. The 10-level descriptors outlined in the NQF policy specify the expected learning achievements for a qualification at a given level. They encompass competencies related to the scope of knowledge, knowledge literacy, method and procedure, problem-solving, ethics and professional practice, accessing, processing, and managing information, producing and communicating information, context and systems, management of learning, and accountability. Each descriptor includes competencies or categories indicating the expected growth as the students progress through different levels of their qualifications by advancing or improving their competencies.

Simply stated, there should be growth in student skills and abilities as they advance through different levels of their qualifications. A first-year module like RELG 101 is ranked at level 5. Smith (1988) and Gallagher (2009) support a goal-driven approach for introductory-level courses and emphasize the need to have meaningful conversations on religion. This goal-driven approach aligns with the fundamental principles of the NQF. These

guidelines highlight the significance of cultivating critical thinking abilities beyond rote memorization. The NQF promotes information analysis, evaluation, and synthesis in students, which assist them in becoming more adept at applying knowledge and to better understand complex issues.

Religious Landscape in South Africa and KwaZulu-Natal

Exploring the religious demographics of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) is pivotal in order to shape the approach to teaching religion, particularly in an introductory module at UKZN. According to the 2022 Census, while 85.3% of South Africa's population identifies as Christian, in KZN where UKZN is situated, the Christian representation is notably lower at 74.9%. The province exhibits a distinctive religious landscape with higher proportions of African religions (13.6%), Hinduism (4.4%), individuals with no religious affiliation or belief (3.4%), and Islam (1.9%) (Stats SA 2022). The uniqueness of the KZN religious demographics prompts a re-evaluation of how religious diversity is understood and integrated into academic discourse. This distinctiveness stresses the importance of extending religious pluralism beyond the academic setting into the broader social contexts. Discussions on religious diversity should serve as catalysts for real-world engagement, aligning with the learning objectives of an introductory module and ensuring that it remains relevant, inclusive, and engaging, not only to the students at UKZN, but at tertiary institutes across the country.

Religion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Enrolment in RELG 101

The RELG 101 module has undergone significant changes over the years, marked by notable shifts in student motivations and enrolment trends. In 2008, there was a surge in the popularity of the module among students from other disciplines (Smit & Vencatsamy 2013:288), solidifying the module's appeal to the broader student body. Initially touted as a way to gain easy credits, this was soon replaced by a genuine interest to 'learn more about religion [because it] looked interesting' (Smit & Vencatsamy 2013:285). This departure from a credit-driven strategy to a more intrinsic motivation to understand religious traditions highlighted a dynamic and responsive interest in pursuing knowledge about other religious traditions (Smit & Vencatsamy

2013:285). However, several notable challenges over the last few years have cast doubt on the sustainability of the module.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities in South Africa's HE, posing challenges for institutions such as UKZN serving disadvantaged communities. While manageable to some, the unexpected shift to online learning presented significant obstacles for many students facing poor living conditions, limited access to technology, insufficient internet connectivity, and even hunger (Motala & Menon 2020:89). This shift accentuated the pre-existing socio-economic disparities inherent in the HE system (Wangenge-Ouma & Kupe 2020:10), affecting students at UKZN, where 84% lacked essential resources during the 2020/2021 academic year period (UKZN 2021).

The consequence of these challenges was a marked drop in enrolment figures for modules such as RELG 101, from 275 enrolled students in 2019 before the pandemic to 37 in 2023. This extraordinary decline has raised serious concerns regarding the feasibility of RS at the university. Government funding received by 44% of the students in 2020 (UKZN 2020) has sharply decreased in recent years, further compounding this issue. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) struggles to manage student housing allotments efficiently, and budget cuts from the National Treasury contribute to this significant reduction in financial support (Damons 2023). This problem is particularly relevant to UKZN, as it caters to students from remote locations. Due to resource allocation and management inefficiencies, students opt to enrol at alternative universities offering distance learning, such as the University of South Africa (UNISA).

In 2020, data from the Annual Teaching and Learning report revealed yet another significant hurdle for the student population at UKZN. A majority, 58% of UKZN students, come from quintile 1 to 3 schools², signifying their backgrounds in socially and educationally disadvantaged environments (UKZN 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated declining enrol-

² Post-1994, the National Department of Education surveyed school communities across South Africa, focusing on crucial factors such as parental income, family vehicle ownership, and property value. Subsequently, schools were categorized into five quintiles, ranging from 1 to 5. Quintile 5 was assigned to schools with the most resources and families with higher incomes, while quintile 1 schools served the most economically disadvantaged communities.

ment figures and made the viability of RS a more substantial issue. Without changing the *status quo* in how we approach this situation, there is a tangible risk of phasing out RS altogether due to the persistently low enrolment numbers. The pandemic serves as a stark reminder of the urgency to adapt and innovate to secure the future of RS within the academic landscape.

The Current Structure of RELG 101 at UKZN

The RELG 101 module serves as a core component for a major in RS and as an elective for students taking other majors. This 16-credit point module is designed to engage students for 160 notional hours³ consisting of 52 lecture hours and five hours for assessments. Self-directed study is allocated as follows: 30 hours for reading, 30 hours for research, 23 hours for revision, and 20 hours for assignments or projects. This 14-week module, offered in the first semester of the academic year, is designed to cater to first-year students.

The curriculum commences by exploring theoretical aspects of religion, including discussions on the definition of religion and its origin, and reasons for studying this module. Subsequently, six religious traditions are introduced: Hinduism, African religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the New Religious Movements, with each section allocated a 14-day timeframe. RELG 101 has evolved to incorporate the advent of diverse religious traditions in South Africa and their historical adaptations. This adapted version of the WRP reflects a contextual outlook on the six religious traditions and predominantly focuses on each religion in isolation. The RELG 101 module is structured around seven topics:

Topic 1: Introduction to Religion Studies

- Introduction to the academic study of religion.
- History, definitions, and preoccupations of religion.
- Overview of prehistoric religions, ancient belief systems, and primal religions.

³ Students must obtain a minimum of 384 credit points over six semesters for a standard three-year Bachelor's degree at UKZN.

Topic 2: Hinduism

- Origins, scriptures, worldview, beliefs and practices of Hinduism.
- Historical development of Hinduism.
- Influence of neo-Hindu movements.

Topic 3: African Religion(s)

- Focus on African religions, beginning with indigenous communities.
- Examination of the AmaZulu religious traditions.
- Study of sacred specialists, conceptions of evil.
- The impact of the Western culture and Christian mission.

Topic 4: Judaism

- Introduction to the study of Judaism.
- Exploration of core beliefs, practices, and historical development.
- Significance concerning the history of religions, particularly Christianity and Islam.

Topic 5: Christianity

- Historical context of Jesus.
- Development of Christianity.
- Beliefs, practices, and the role of Christianity in South Africa, including Apartheid and the post-apartheid eras.

Topic 6: Islam

- Early history of Islam.
- Beliefs, practices, festivals, and Shari'ah Law.
- Presence of Islam in South Africa.

Topic 7: New Religious Movements

- Exploration of the African Initiated Churches.
- The religious landscape of South Africa: Continuity and change.

This conventional system of structuring the RS content typified by the WRP, tends to support the notion that each religion maintains its unwavering and indisputable characteristics. Cusack (2016:154-155) criticizes the viewpoint that portrays each religion as a unified, self-contained entity with a cohesive

system of beliefs and practices. This inert depiction oversimplifies the complexities inherent in religious traditions and limits our understanding of their dynamic natures. Religions are not monolithic entities but multifaceted and subject to diverse interpretations, internal variances, and constantly evolving practices. While the structure above is characteristic of the WRP, the choice of emphasis was reliant on the necessity to introduce all religions on an equitable basis, given the dominance of Christianity in the history of South Africa.

Towards a Reconfigured RELG 101 at UKZN

Encouraging a pedagogical approach that goes beyond the confines of the WRP, this article underscores the importance of recognizing and analyzing the dynamic and diverse nature inherent in religious traditions. It advocates for a more in-depth and nuanced exploration of the intricacies within these traditions. In line with the objectives of Clingerman and O'Brien, the article calls for a departure from the rigid WRP, emphasizing that introductory religion modules should provide content relevant to the students' contexts. This departure resonates with the plea for a more adaptable and inclusive framework for studying religions. This proposed shift aims to foster intellectual growth and critical thinking thus enabling students to engage with religious content that mirrors their diverse backgrounds, fostering a deeper understanding of religious traditions.

In its current configuration, the module focuses on imparting knowledge on fundamental principles, rituals, and practices to provide a solid intellectual foundation for understanding different religions. However, its existing structure lacks the facilitation of critical thinking. The module hinders the development of robust critical thinking skills by concentrating on specific religious components, thereby failing to empower students with the necessary skills to identify common themes across different traditions. The emphasis on isolated content restricts opportunities for students to engage in comparative analyses and discern broader patterns within RS.

Content

Critics such as Alberts (2017) posit that the WRP creates a significant challenge in learning about religion. By questioning the excessive use of the WRP as a teaching tool in RS, Alberts suggests that most HE courses are structured to convey specific information about various world religions

through predefined teaching units. Alberts raises a valid concern about the impact of the WRP on religious education, prompting a reconsideration of the effectiveness of current teaching methods in RS.

This criticism exposes the necessity for examining the inherent challenges associated with the WRP, particularly within the context of the RELG 101 module at UKZN. Drawing on the argument of Smith (1988:728) that it is impractical to comprehensively cover the content and context of any religious tradition in an introductory module, Prothero, Gallagher, Pearson, Robinson, and Stortz (2016) emphasize the importance of a lecture hall as a space for students to engage in conversations, comparing and contrasting the content. Through active participation and engagement, students contribute to the construction of their own knowledge.

Although the arguments of Smith and Prothero *et al.* are convincing, it is essential to note that the general content of introductory RS would be much the same regardless of the approach used, whether presented in a thematic framework or from the perspectives of the WRP. The critical consideration here lies in the presentation of this content. The WRP encounters challenges in its presentation due to its implicit claim that Christianity is the ultimate measure against which all other religions are juxtaposed. This framework compels other religious traditions to conform to the predefined categories derived from Christian perspectives, presenting specific challenges for religions characterized as theistic or reliant on oral texts. Corrywright (2016: 171) further emphasizes that pedagogy often revolves around how concepts and phenomena are taught – a crucial aspect when defining and classifying religious concepts and phenomena.

Chidester (2018:42) adds another layer of dissenting discourse to this discussion, suggesting that the terms ‘religion’ and ‘religions’ go beyond being mere subjects of study. They provide opportunities for critical and creative reflection within the humanities and social sciences. This ongoing effort implies that studying and understanding religion is a dynamic and evolving process shaped by human thoughts, actions, and interpretations. This exploration constantly contributes to new ways of understanding meaningful discussions, behaviors, and societal frameworks rooted in the notions of that beyond the ordinary or sacred.

This explorative method becomes a source of further contention in RELG 101 when students expose variations such as the contrasting reverence for the supreme being in African Traditional Religions compared to the ven-

eration of ancestors. Similarly, the academic classification of Hinduism as a monotheistic religion whose many gods are manifestations of the supreme being illustrates the intricate subtleties inherent in each religious tradition. These examples highlight the difficulties posed by the WRP and the limitations of studying religious traditions in isolation.

To address these challenges, students in RELG 101 need to acknowledge their lived experiences and evolving realities from a more comparative perspective. This acknowledgement aligns with the overarching theme of literacy in RS, prompting students to engage critically with diverse cultural and religious practices. Adopting the thematic approach enables students to contribute to a more reflective understanding of religious traditions, fostering an environment that promotes critical thinking without encouraging misconceptions and social exclusion. This approach advocates for a thorough and inclusive analysis of religious practices worldwide, challenging the WRP classification by considering religious plurality.

Context

The RS discipline at UKZN serves a diverse student population in a context where 85% of South Africa's population identifies as Christian. Notwithstanding this prevailing religious affiliation, the Howard College Campus⁴ is a testament to the amalgamation of diverse cultures and religious beliefs. The RELG 101 class becomes a microcosm of rich diversity within this context. The students in the class are drawn from various religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, African religions, and Hinduism, while some students maintain strong connections with their religious traditions and others identify as non-religious or atheists.

A significant portion of the students in RELG 101 derives from African religious groups affiliated with African Independent/Initiated Churches (AICs), representing a combination of Christianity and African religions. Influenced by the historical context of colonialism and Apartheid, students from disadvantaged communities are often raised by parents and grandparents who were greatly prejudiced by Christianity in their formative years and during their educational journeys. This complex relationship with Christianity often positions it as a comparative yardstick, intentionally perpetuating inher-

⁴ The module is offered across two campuses i.e., the Howard College Campus and the Pietermaritzburg Campus where it serves as elective for the Theology degree.

ent disparities among religions and undermining the value of other belief systems. Recognizing the diversity within the RELG 101 class, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the concept of epistemic relativism (Du Preez 2009: 92). From this stance, knowledge or truth is not regarded as universally objective but depends on the perspective, context, or cultural framework in which it is situated. According to Du Preez (2009:108), taking an epistemological approach can stimulate critical dialogue on religious content and assist students in maintaining a balance within their own religious beliefs while remaining receptive to the beliefs of others. However, students often find it difficult to critically engage with religious concepts because their existing beliefs and backgrounds shape their epistemic framework.

While most RELG 101 enrolments are first-year students having recently completed secondary school, the class also includes second- and third-year students searching for an easy elective. As an entry-level module, it has no prerequisites for students wanting to enrol as an elective. As part of the BA major, one often finds that students opt to major in RS during their second year at university. This mix of students brings diverse expectations, questions, ideas, practices, and beliefs to the classroom, creating an engaging yet challenging learning environment. Many students initially enrol hoping to learn more about God, only to discover that the course is a comparative religion module emphasizing and requiring critical thinking. However, the rigidity of the module structure makes it challenging to compare religious traditions effectively.

Important to take note of is that students entering RELG 101 exhibit varying levels of understanding of religions beyond their own, with many students often lacking in comprehensive religious education due to content limitations in the Life Orientation curriculum. For many students, the academic study of religion is unfamiliar territory, starkly contrasting to subjects like History or English, where previous exposure may have influenced expectations. In RELG 101, students navigate their religious affiliations and explore intersections between Christianity, Islam, and African religions. At the same time, others may grapple with the complexities of being lapsed Christians whose only affiliation might be in commemorating Easter or Christmas celebrations.

While South Africa officially adheres to the principles of a secular state, the National Policy on Religion and Education (Department of Education 2003:4) has adopted a distinctive cooperative model to address the nexus

between religion and public education. This model recognizes the significance of legally separating religion and the state while acknowledging the potential for creative interaction between them. By delineating clear domains for religion and state, the Constitution encourages them to engage in dialogue. The intention is to prevent religious discrimination or coercion against fellow citizens while promoting an ongoing dialogue between religious groups and the state on shared concerns. This deliberate approach recognizes a religion's cultural and social importance even within a secular context.

In keeping with the cooperative model, it is crucial to consider the role of social constructivism in nurturing religious pluralism. Du Preez (2009: 99) stresses how, despite its critiques, social constructivism advances the study of religion by challenging conventional views of knowledge. Although social constructivism encourages critical thinking and the objective analyses of different belief systems, it does not guarantee that students will overcome their pre-existing biases. It recognizes that the students' social and cultural backgrounds shape their understanding, and may explain why students find it difficult to distance themselves from their religious convictions.

In this light, incorporating RS into the education system aligns with the broader goals of the cooperative model. In this context, it is vital to ensure that individuals and religious groups are free from state interference concerning their conscience, religion, ideas, beliefs, and opinions. By including RS in the curriculum, South Africa can maintain its secular principles while promoting a more advanced understanding of other belief systems.

Conversely, Smith (quoted in Bassett 2016:22) suggests that viewing religion as a constructed category assists scholars in identifying similarities and differences among cultural characteristics. This approach allows students to distance themselves from their religious beliefs and provides a space to examine different religions objectively. Nonetheless, many students find it challenging to examine various religions objectively and to comprehend religion as a concept. Students face challenges in conceptualizing religion as a category and studying various religious traditions without favoring one over another, regardless of their specialization in RS or other subjects.

Building on Alberts' criticism of traditional teaching, which strongly focuses on factual information, students should be encouraged to think critically when studying religion in diverse contexts. This change in approach is crucial for resolving the constraints related to the WRP in the UKZN RELG 101 curriculum.

Kumar (2006:274) asserts that religious pluralism disrupts traditional classifications of world religions and religion. He casts doubt on the criteria for including and excluding religions within these categories, illuminating the colonial roots of such classifications. While attempts have been made in RELG 101 to focus on local religions, understanding religious pluralism can be difficult as it entails accepting the diversity within a single religion and the coexistence of several religions.

The nuanced understanding and accommodation of dual religious identities that embrace the complexities highlighted by Kumar in the context of religious pluralism, is particularly important in recognizing that some African students may identify with both Christianity and African religions – a category not formally recognized in the conventional WRP.

Examining the AICs in South Africa in this context provides a powerful example of the significance of contextualization in the study of religion. The AICs are a unique blend of Christianity and African faiths that show how religious traditions may adapt and alter throughout time in response to historical and socio-cultural circumstances. The rise of the AICs was significantly influenced by the forced conversion to Christianity that occurred during the colonial and Apartheid eras. Several African communities combined Christianity with their traditional beliefs to create a worship style tailored to the unique realities of South African communities. This syncretic manifestation of religion highlights how religious traditions dynamically evolve in response to historical events and cultural influences, challenging the erroneously assumed static aspect of religious traditions that is typically associated with them, as discussed above.

Intellectual Growth

UKZN implements measures to support students from diverse backgrounds, including academically unprepared students, through access or foundation programs. These programs are designed to bridge the gap between a student's current educational level and the requirements for their chosen program, by enhancing the students' academic and psycho-social skills in the hope that their academic paths remain free from unnecessary challenges. However, the universal application of such programs involves having to compromise. The additional year required to acclimatize to academia thus comes at a cost.

RS do not form part of the access program, hence students entering these programs do not benefit from additional support in gaining academic

skills while studying religion. Consequently, teaching detailed content of each religion within the limited timeframe of regular programs is impossible. Instead, a thematic approach would equip students with the skills to integrate the meanings of religions, as well as their belief systems and symbols, ensuring a focus on developing critical thinking and analytical abilities within the broader context of their academic journey.

For students entering the university system underprepared, the challenge lies in developing critical thinking skills and effectively comparing different aspects of religions. An insufficient understanding of foundational knowledge hampers their ability to effectively analyze and compare different aspects of religions. Understanding how religious practices and beliefs fit into their cultural and historical contexts can become onerous. This lack of preparation makes it challenging for students to recognize interconnected relationships across different religions, hindering their active participation in class discussions and limiting the sharing of diverse perspectives. Being underprepared impedes students from fully engaging with and benefiting from RS.

Sobuwa and McKenna (2019:14) claim that students who enter the university system from sound financial backgrounds and have had access to good schools, are better prepared for success. In contrast, the disadvantaged students tend to fall behind as the curriculum design fails to meet their educational needs, leading to being underprepared. They contend that HE is understood as a meritocracy where the student's success depends on hard work, disregarding the contextual nature of teaching and learning. This perspective tends to distort the complex dynamics within educational environments, emphasizing individual effort without sufficiently recognizing the myriad external factors that can substantially impact on a student's learning experience. The contextual nature of teaching and learning encompasses various elements, including the socio-economic background, access to resources, educational support systems, and institutional structures. Ignoring these contextual issues may result in an inadequate understanding of the difficulties faced by students and impede the development of more inclusive and equitable educational policies and practices.

According to Vorster (2020:8), a student's lack of preparedness means that the dropout and failure rates are higher, as many do not fully comprehend academic and discipline requirements. Vorster further contends that students prioritize what they learn over how they learn, since they frequently enrol in institutions to obtain a degree that will grant them entry into

the labor market (Vorster 2020:9). This exclusive emphasis on credentialism tends to put pursuing a degree above that of the learning process and intellectual growth. The pressure to secure qualifications that align with market demands can inadvertently lead to a utilitarian approach to education, where the primary goal is to equip students with skills directly applicable to the labor force.

The limitations of the WRP are outlined in a previous analysis (Vencatsamy 2024), highlighting the division of religious traditions as separate entities, impeding a critical comparative analysis. This approach perpetuates obsolete hierarchies and hinders intellectual advancement because it overlooks the heterogeneity of non-Christian, non-Western, and non-white religions. In addition, the hierarchical framing of major and minor religions go against the principles of religious plurality and further impedes mutual respect and understanding among students. The compartmentalization inherent in the WRP inhibits critical thinking and fails to promote interconnectedness between religious traditions.

In contrast to the WRP approach, a thematic approach would, for example, allow for a Religion and Society theme that examines the dynamic interplay between religion and contemporary society, where students would explore how various religious groups respond to and shape societal changes, analyzing the influence of religion on politics, culture, and social issues. They would also study the diverse manifestations of religious influences, including rituals, art, literature, and social norms, highlighting the diverse expressions within various religious traditions. Additionally, the curriculum would explore the emergence of contemporary religious movements and investigate the rise of modern religious groups and their impact on political movements, human rights advocacy, and responses to issues like economic inequality and globalization in the contemporary world.

Gallagher and Maguire (2018:1) emphasize critical thinking and the ability to make comparisons as central skills for the successful engagement with module content. Echoing a similar sentiment, Gray-Hildenbrand and King (2019:192) assert that these competencies enable students to participate effectively in RS, providing a clear path for their learning journey in the RS classroom. A significant facet of this engagement is the concept of ‘religion’ itself. Religion does not have a universally agreed-upon definition, and this challenge goes beyond academic discourse, as it also affects students who often find it difficult to express what religion means to them.

Addressing the Need for a Thematic Approach

Given the emphasis on intellectual growth and critical thinking, the existing content structure of UKZN's RELG 101 curriculum does not fully align with the NQF principles for developing these crucial competencies. In addressing the misalignment, a thematic approach emerges as a more fitting alternative, drawing inspiration from the content, context, and intellectual growth objectives of Clingerman and O'Brien. This approach facilitates critical thinking and ensures a comprehensive exploration of content and context within RS.

Advocating for a thematic approach in the curriculum is essential as it empowers students to explore the complexities of religious traditions thoroughly. This method enhances their understanding of the content and places it within the relevant historical, cultural, and social contexts, fostering a richer and more meaningful learning experience. This three-prong approach meets the NQF objectives and enhances the educational experience, providing students with a more enriching perspective of RS.

Clingerman and O'Brien articulate fundamental objectives that, while not explicitly endorsing a thematic approach in their study, provide a robust argument and foundation for advocating its implementation in RS at UKZN. At its core, this approach is goal-driven, prioritizing the development of critical thinking skills, conversational proficiency and empathetic engagement through analytical reasoning and written expression. It strategically redirects the pedagogical focus from rote memorization to the nuanced comprehension and utilization of religious terminology, symbols, beliefs, and practices in substantive discourse. By creating learning experiences that actively encourage critical thinking and written expression, this new focus promotes a deeper and more interactive engagement with the subject matter. The thematic approach also considers the institutional context, demonstrating sensitivity to the student's diverse backgrounds and aligning itself with the requirements of both general education and major programs. By acknowledging and appreciating the diversity in cultural, religious, and educational experiences among the student body, the approach is designed to be inclusive, ensuring that the curriculum reflects the broad spectrum of perspectives represented by the students.

Furthermore, it aligns itself with the requirements of the degree programs. The thematic approach is structured to meet the overarching goals of general education, encouraging critical thinking, cultural awareness, and

practical communication skills. Simultaneously, the approach is tailored to meet the specific objectives and expectations of the major programs, ensuring that students receive a comprehensive and relevant education within RS. This dual alignment enhances the coherence of the HE experience and supports students in achieving their broader academic goals.

Thematic Syllabus Overview

This theoretical syllabus, structured around thematic units, aims to transform the approach to studying religion. Transitioning from the isolated analysis of individual religions to thematic explorations, it aims to offer students a more comprehensive and critical insight into religious traditions, developing a more wholistic perspective. This approach encourages them to think critically, challenge preconceived notions, and engage with critical aspects of RS within a broader and more interconnected context, enhancing their understanding and appreciation.

The following thematic units comprise the proposed curriculum, each designed to address specific areas of study.

Theme 1: Sacred Narratives and their Impact

- Exploration of the stories, myths, and sacred narratives across different religions.
- Analysis of how these narratives shape belief systems and practices.
- Comparative study of the role of sacred narratives in religious identities.

According to Davidsen (2016:496), despite the importance of narratives in RS such as shared texts, histories, traditions, and lived experiences, major handbooks in religion primarily overlook the ‘narrative’ theme. This oversight limits the comprehensive understanding of the role of narratives in religion and the broader socio-cultural impact. In my experience, students tend to recall the narratives or myths associated with religious events such as Easter or Diwali, rather than the specific textual details in which the religious doctrine or ritual is found. A helpful example is the discussion on Diwali, where students vividly recount the story of Lord Ram’s return to Ayodhya and the

significance of light in celebrating the triumph over good and evil instead of recalling the text – the Ramayana – in which it is found.

Similarly, during Easter, students often profoundly engage with the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Despite the centrality of narratives in the lived experiences of religious adherents, there is a noticeable gap in this theme in academic literature. Students are encouraged to explore how they shape cultural identities, influence ethical values and contribute to interfaith dialogue by critically analyzing narratives. Examining the evolution of narratives allows for a deeper comprehension of religious traditions, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between storytelling and the lived experiences of religious communities.

Theme 2: Rituals and Symbolism

- Study of religious rituals, symbols, and practices in various religious contexts.
- Comparative analysis of the meaning and significance of rituals.
- Understanding the role of symbols in religious expression.

Bell (1997:15) emphasizes the significance of rituals as embodied practices within religious traditions, suggesting that rituals are not merely intellectual exercises, but rather lived experiences. People engage with religion not only through thoughts and beliefs but also through actions and physical movements. These actions are coordinated and synchronized, fostering a sense of unity among people. According to Bell (1997:186), the interpretation of rituals varies among scholars and individuals. Some view rituals as synonymous with religion and society, while others take a more skeptical approach. In the case of RELG 101, a theme on rituals offers the perfect opportunity for comparative analysis, not only between but also within religions. This theme invites students to examine the diverse ceremonial practices across various faiths, encouraging them to identify commonalities and distinctions. For example, when examining rituals associated with rites of passage, students may compare the ceremonies marking birth, marriage, and death in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and African religions. Moreover, within a single religion such as Christianity, the theme prompts an examination of how ritual practices may vary between denominations or cultural contexts.

Theme 3: Religion and Society

- Examination of the relation between religion and society.
- Comparative exploration of the influence of religion on politics, culture, and social issues.
- Study of religious diversity and contemporary religious movements.

Theme 4: Exploring Belief Systems

- Investigation of core beliefs and worldviews across different religious traditions.
- Comparative analysis of how belief systems impact religious practices.
- Understanding the evolution of religious beliefs over time.

Theme 5: Religious Traditions in Africa and Beyond

- Focus on African religious traditions, including indigenous beliefs and practices.
- Comparative analysis of how Western culture and Christian mission have influenced African religious dynamics.
- Study of religious specialists and conceptions of good and evil in African contexts.

Theme 6: Religion Online in the Era of COVID and AI Advancements

The ‘Digital Religion’ concept, as defined by Campbell (2013:5), provides a valuable perspective on how religion intersects with online culture and traditional beliefs, transcending the boundaries of the physical world. This theme allows students to explore religious practices within the digital realm and may be expanded to include the broader theories of digital religion by considering the following subthemes:

- Explore the emergence of digital religion and its characteristics.
- Examine how various religious traditions have adapted to the digital age.
- Discuss the impact of digital technology on the practice of religion and its implications for the future.

This theme highlights how digital technology is influencing contemporary religious practices and beliefs in a transformative way.

Transformative Approach for Religious Literacy

Comparing the traditional WRP with the proposed thematic approach reveals a significant shift in addressing the current challenges of RELG 101 while seamlessly aligning with the objectives of Clingerman and O'Brien. The thematic approach promotes a more comprehensive and critical understanding of religious concepts within the course structure.

Specifically evaluating intellectual growth, the thematic approach surpasses the WRP by emphasizing contextual and comparative analysis. Students are encouraged to apply critical skills and explore the interconnectedness and variations within religious traditions by examining common themes across various religions. This approach ensures the inclusion of central values related to pluralism, enriching the students' educational experiences and encouraging a comprehensive understanding, which may be achieved using interactive assessment methods.

Recognizing the substantial Christian majority in South Africa, adopting a thematic approach in the RELG 101 curriculum becomes even more relevant and essential. The thematic approach allows for a more inclusive exploration of various religious traditions, ensuring that students comprehensively understand all the religions with which they engage. By structuring the curriculum thematically, students can explore overarching themes such as rituals, ethics, or aspects of divinity across different religions. This approach ensures that the content is not disproportionately focused on a single religious tradition and is in alignment with the diverse religious landscape of KZN. The thematic approach acknowledges the prevailing reality and creates space for the unique composition of UKZN, mirrored in the religious diversity found within the RELG 101 module.

In navigating the challenges arising from the disparities in the current teaching approach, the emphasis on inclusivity evident in the thematic approach becomes even more pertinent. By embracing this approach, RELG 101 has the potential to transform the intellectual landscape, fostering a more nuanced understanding of RS and providing a platform for students to engage critically and comprehensively with diverse religious traditions.

According to Desjardins (2016:132), allowing students to explore religion through popular themes makes it more engaging and challenges their preconceived notions while equipping them with crucial insights into RS. In doing so, the significant steps as outlined in the NQF policy towards achieving the desired religious literacy outcomes are taken.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the changing landscape in HE in South Africa challenges the way we teach religion, specifically RELG 101 at UKZN. The focus on producing critically engaged students conversant in religious literacy has become crucial for effecting teaching and learning practices in RS. However, producing knowledgeable students calls for a rethinking and revision of traditional pedagogical frameworks that have dominated the RS curriculum for decades.

This article focused on the possibility of exploring a new curriculum design where the content is structured around thematic teaching. In order to analyze this conceptual syllabus, I offered a critical perspective on the WRP and the adherence of the RELG 101 module to it. Using the three objectives of Clingerman and O'Brien which postulate that introductory modules must provide content about religions relevant to the student's context to facilitate intellectual growth, I positioned this article within the broader context of UKZN, acknowledging the cultural influences that shape the curriculum. However, as an introductory module is tasked with introducing students to a specific field of study, we need to understand the role of religious literacy in a multicultural and multireligious society to equip students with the necessary competencies to negotiate this pluralism.

In order to propose a new curriculum design, we need to understand some of the challenges in a post-apartheid South African HE. Hence, I attempted to briefly give an overview of some of the educational policies and curriculum changes established to ensure inclusivity and facilitate the seamless progression across the different education levels. In response to these policies, I provided an overview of the religious landscape of KZN and highlighted the enrolment numbers of RELG 101 over the last few years, noting some of the challenges posed by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges have raised a significant concern about the viability of the RS modules at UKZN. An analysis of the current pedagogical structure foregrounds the critiques of the WRP, which limits a comprehensive understanding and inclusivity across religious traditions. These limitations focus on the need to re-evaluate teaching methods, emphasizing active student engagement, contextual understanding, and promoting religious literacy. It also becomes imperative to address some of the challenges facing underprepared students by aligning module content to the principles set out by the NQF. Overcoming these limitations requires embracing pedagogical approaches mindful of in-

clusivity and critical approaches to foster intellectual growth, hence the call for a thematic approach in RELG 101. Rooted in the objectives of Clingerman and O'Brien, this approach calls for a comprehensive understanding of religious traditions from a comparative stance. A thematic approach transcends the limitations of the WRP by fostering a critical analysis and addressing gaps in the traditional pedagogy. It is also transformative in achieving broader educational goals and cultivating religious literacy among students.

References

- AAR. 2018. AAR religious literacy guidelines: What US college graduates need to understand about religion. Available at: <https://aarweb.org/AARMBR/AARMBR/Publications-and-News-/Guides-and-Best-Practices-/Teaching-and-Learning-/AAR-Religious-Literacy-Guide-lines.aspx>. (Accessed on November 25, 2023.)
- Alberts, W. 2017. Reconstruction, critical accommodation or business as usual? Challenges of criticism of the world religions paradigm to the design of teaching programmes in the study of religions. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 29, 4-5: 443-458. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341404>
- Bassett, M.H. 2016. Teaching critical thinking without (much) writing: Multiple-Choice and metacognition. *Teaching Theology & Religion* 19, 1: 20-40. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12318>
- Bell, C. 1997. *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, H. 2013. *Digital religion: Understanding religious practice in new media worlds*. London: Routledge. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203084861>
- Chidester, D. 2018. World religions in the world. *Journal for the Study of Religion* 31, 1: 41-53. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2018/v31n1a2>
- Clasquin, M. 2005. Religious studies in South(ern) Africa – an overview. *Journal for the Study of Religion* 18, 2: 5-22. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4314/jsr.v18i2.6167>

- Clingerman, F. & K. O'Brien 2015. Teaching introductory upper-level religion and theology classes. *Teaching Theology & Religion* 18, 4: 326-342. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12302>
- Corrywright, D. 2016. Complex learning and the World Religions Paradigm: Teaching religion in a shifting landscape. In Cotter, C.R. & D.G. Robertson (eds.): *After world religions: Reconstructing religious studies*. London: Routledge.
- Cusack, C.M. 2016. Archaeology and the World Religions Paradigm: The European neolithic, religion and cultural imperialism. In Cotter, C.R. & D.G. Robertson (eds.): *After world religions: Reconstructing religious studies*. London: Routledge.
- Damons, M. 2023. NSFAS budget cuts could leave more than 87,000 students without funding in 2024. Available at: <https://groundup.org.za/article/nsfas-budget-cuts-could-leave-more-than-87000-students-without-funding-in-2024/>. (Accessed on December 10, 2023.)
- Davidson, M.A. 2016. Fiction and religion: How narratives about the supernatural inspire religious belief – introducing the thematic issue. *Religion* 46, 4: 489-499. doi: 10.1080/0048721X.2016.1226756
- Department of Education. 2003. National policy on Religion and Education. Available at: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/religion0.pdf. (Accessed on November 23, 2022.)
- Desjardins, M. 2016. The Desjardins diet for World Religions Paradigm loss. In Cotter, C.R. & D.G. Robertson (eds.): *After world religions: Reconstructing religious studies*. London: Routledge.
- Dinham, A. & M. Francis 2015. Religious literacy: Contesting an idea and practice. In Dinham A. & M. Francis (eds.): *Policy and practice*. Bristol: Policy Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447316671.002>
- Du Preez, P. 2009. Thinking about knowledge amidst religious diversity: Epistemic relativity and its impact on religion in education. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Alternation Special Edition* 3: 91-111.
- Frahm-Arp, M. 2021. Rethinking the course content and pedagogies used in learning about 'Asian religions'. *Journal for the Study of Religion* 34, 1: 1-23. doi: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2021/v34n1a5>
- Gallagher, E.V. 2009. Teaching for religious literacy. *Teaching Theology & Religion* 12, 3: 208-221. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2009.00523.x>

- Gallagher, E.V. & J. Maguire 2018. *The religious studies skills book*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Gray-Hildenbrand, J. & R. King 2019. Teaching in contexts: Designing a competency-based religious studies program. *Teaching Theology & Religion* 22: 191-204. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12495>
- Kumar, P.P. 2006. Religious pluralism and religion education in South Africa. *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, 3: 273-293. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006806778553534>
- Moore, D.L. 2006. Overcoming religious illiteracy: A cultural studies approach. *World History Connected* 4, 1. Available at: <https://world-historyconnected.press.uillinois.edu/4.1/moore.html>. (Accessed on December 18, 2023.)
- Moore, D.L. 2015. Diminishing religious literacy: Methodological assumptions and analytical frameworks for promoting the public understanding of religion. In Dinham, A. & M. Francis (eds.): *Religious literacy in policy and practice*. London: Policy Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781447316671.003>
- Motala, S. & K. Menon 2020. In search of the ‘new normal’: Reflections on teaching and learning during Covid-19 in a South African University. *Southern African Review of Education* 26, 1: 80-99.
- Nthontho, M.A. & R. Addai-Mununkum 2021. Towards religious literacy in South African schools: Is the Life Orientation curriculum potent enough? *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 42, 4: 436-449. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1859790>
- Parker, S. 2020. Religious literacy: Spaces of teachings and learning about religion and belief. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 41, 2: 121-131. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2020.1750243>
- Prothero, S. 2007. *Religious literacy: What every American needs to know about religion and doesn't*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Prothero, S., E.V. Gallagher, T. Pearson, J. Robinson, & M.E. Stortz 2016. Conversation with Stephen Prothero. *Teaching Theology & Religion* 19: 389-407.
- Smit, J.A & B. Vencatsamy 2013. Religion in the Humanities. *Alternation Special Edition* 10: 270-318.
- Smith, J.Z. 1988. ‘Narratives into problems’: The College Introductory Course and the study of religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, 4: 727-739. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/LVI.4.727>

- Sobuwa, S. & S. Mckenna 2019. The obstinate notion that higher education is meritocracy. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* 7, 2: 1-15. doi: <https://doi.org/10.14426/cristal.v7i2.184>
- SAQA (South African Qualifications Authority). 2012. Level descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework. *Government Gazette* No. 34749. November 11, 2011. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Stats SA. 2022. Census 2022. Available at: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16716#:~:text=Census%202022%20data%20collection%20started,be%20postponed%20to%20February%202022.> (Accessed on October 12, 2023.)
- UKZN (University of KwaZulu-Natal). 2020. *Teaching and Learning Annual Report 2019/2020*. Available at: <https://ukzn-utlo-report-2020.netlify.app/>. (Accessed on September 6, 2022.)
- UKZN (University of KwaZulu-Natal). 2021. *Teaching and Learning Annual Report 2020/2021*. Available at: <https://ukzn-utlo-report-2021.netlify.app/>. (Accessed on September 15, 2022.)
- Vencatsamy, B. 2024. The World Religions Paradigm: Why context matters in religious studies. *Critical Research on Religion* 12, 1, 12-25. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032241226966>
- Vorster, J. 2020. SoTL: A mechanism for understanding and finding solutions to teaching and learning challenges. *SoTL in the South* 4, 2: 6-21. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36615/sotls.v4i2.149>
- Walvoord, B.E. 2008a. *Teaching and learning in college introductory religion courses*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Walvoord, B.E. 2008b. Students' spirituality and 'big questions' in the introductory religion courses. *Teaching Theology and Religion* 11, 1: 3-13. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2007.00391.x>
- Wangenge-Ouma, G. & T. Kupe 2020. Uncertain times: Re-imagining universities for new, sustainable futures. Available at: <https://www.usaf.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Uncertain-Times-Paper.pdf> (Accessed on October 19, 2023.)
- Wright, A. 1993. *Religious education in the secondary school: Prospects for religious literacy*. Abingdon: David Fulton Publishers.

Beverly Vencatsamy

Ms. Beverly Vencatsamy
ORCID link: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3901-2239>
School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban
vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za