

**Understanding World Religions: A Road Map for Justice and Peace. David Whitten Smith and Elizabeth Geraldine Burr. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.**

*Understanding World Religions: A Road Map for Justice and Peace* explores major religious and other influential worldviews and how each conceptualizes and seeks peace in the pursuit of social justice and prevention or abolition of war. It is co-authored by David Whitten Smith, priest and founding director of the Justice and Peace Studies Program at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Elizabeth Geraldine Burr, researcher in the same program. *Understanding World Religions* is an edited culmination of years of photocopied texts and student research that the authors have written and collected in the absence of an appropriate college-level textbook for teaching religious and ideological worldviews before the post-9/11 academic trend to do so. That is how we at Georgetown University came upon this book; in our search for valuable required reading for our undergraduate courses in conflict transformation in the Program on Justice and Peace, this book easily stood out as the most up-to-date, approachable, and comprehensive volume with its mission (although the authors refute that it succeeds at the latter), and with the necessary admittance in its preface and advertised description as being conceived and written from a normative, values-based perspective that invalidates impartiality and advances social action—in the form of writing—for peace. The authors also intentionally clarify early in the book that they write from a Christian worldview. We and our students were grateful for these disclosures (and have thereafter modeled the technique) in light of many readings for other courses that purport (and do not succeed at) impartiality and objectivity. Given these frank admissions then, readers may wonder why the authors do not include a more deliberate statement of their stance on American politics upfront, before the reader comes across poignant lines referring to the United States as, for example, a “declining imperialistic power.”

After an introduction that perhaps too quickly conceptualizes the notion of “worldview,” the authors borrow a structure of seven dimensions common to all or most religions from Ninian Smart’s *The World’s Religions* (1998) to organize the book chapters on the major worldviews, namely Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Native American, and

Marxist. These dimensions are: 1) Experiential and Emotional; 2) Social and Institutional; 3) Narrative and Mythic; 4) Doctrinal and Philosophical; 5) Practical and Ritual; 6) Ethical and Legal; and 7) Material and Artistic. Each chapter also concludes with a summary, a list of key terms (defined in a glossary at the end of the book), discussion questions, and suggestions for further reading. It should also be noted that the authors routinely update a website with expanded suggestions for reading, additional spokespersons for each worldview, and resource lists with commentary produced by their own students. This makes the book a continually evolving resource upon which students and teachers can depend.

The greatest strengths of this book rest beyond the chapters on religious worldviews, namely chapter 11 on “active nonviolence” and chapter 12 on “just war theory.” In our teaching experience, undergraduate students are inspired by case studies that showcase the successful use and influence of nonviolence. A chapter by Smith and Burr attends to active nonviolence as spiritual and moral, and then offers a new lens beyond it as a political strategy. Among the sea of dense literature on just war theory, chapter 12 is both consumable and enlightening, without being unsophisticated, for the purposes of undergraduate teaching. However, this chapter could be strengthened if the authors were to weave religious viewpoints discussed in the earlier chapters into theory. They do discuss each worldview’s ideas of war in their respective chapters, but an analysis of each religions’ take on the just war tradition within chapter 12 would be helpful.

In a few instances our students and we felt that the authors unfairly generalized the experience of a large group of a religion’s believers; for example, the authors’ claim that “most Hindus” do not interact with untouchables so as not to dirty their souls. A qualification to explain that, in general, it is conservative Hindus who feel this way may have been more appropriate. Inasmuch as our own primary research interests are steeped in comparative education and various learning and socialization processes, we would have personally enjoyed greater attention to how the major religions approach schooling and religious education.

Finally, there are two areas related to worldviews we hope the authors might add in any revised volumes. The first is a lengthier discussion of Christian evangelism, and how this movement has shaped the relationships between Christians and adherents of other religions. On a related note, we suggest a chapter devoted specifically to inter-religious dialogue and trans-religious collaboration, especially in relation to peace efforts. Overall, we are thankful

for this contribution from Smith and Burr and their students and have reinstated our order of the book for next semester.

Book Reviewed by:

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