

The Abrahamic Religions:

An Introduction to World Religions

**The Significance of Religious Lives
and Religious People:
Reading and Writing Religious
Autobiographies
Session Week 13**

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Introduction

- For Lesson 13 in the week beginning Week 13 write your own religious autobiography, at least 2 – 3 pages to share us.
- This assignment (your own religious autobiography) is to be submitted by 18th March 2013 (Mark 20%).

Religious Live

- The Significance of Religious Lives and Religious People
 - For a long time particular views of world held (and still hold) sway. Others were ‘spoken for’ or ‘hidden from history’. Power and domination. Modern and Postmodern.
 - Now, more ‘real’ people have opportunity to speak for selves. Literacy, individualism, political enfranchisement, mass media.
 - Understanding individuals take a hand in shaping meaning and significance of own experiences while all the time living, sometimes with difficulty, with/ in relation to cultures, communities and traditions. Agency and structure.
 - Difference and diversity of interpretations of religious traditions in historical and cultural contexts: taste for Judaism, Christianity, Islam.
 - Plurality, contingency, contestation, change through time and across space. Also genre – lest we think a tradition is monolithic.
 - But one voice cannot represent/ tell all about a religion. Rather quality and depth of material.

7 Dimensional Approaches to Religious Live

- **Uncanny** – or Supernatural or Transcendent or Experiential
- **Creed** – or Belief or Concept
- **Cultus** – or Ritual or Action
- **Character** – or Personal/ self/ Individual Identity
- **Community** – or Society or Institutions or Groups
- **Code** – or Morality or Ethics
- **Course** – or History or Tradition or Dynamics

N.B. All dimensions can be found in all religious traditions.

What is Autobiography?

- “An autobiography is the story of someone’s life, or of some part of that life, as the author remembers, selectively constructs, and then tells or writes it.”
- “Autobiographies differ from other forms of language usage because they contain plots and characters. That is, an autobiography begins at some point in time, rehearses events affecting the author, explains the author's relationship to other characters, and ends at another point in time.”
- “Usually autobiographies involve some kind of complication or conflict which is resolved by the end of the tale.”
- “Memory is central in religious autobiography because the stories look backward in time.”
- “Since the events related in the autobiography are told only from the author’s perspective, readers should be alert to the possibility of other interpretations of the events ...”
- “The history of events may also change for authors themselves as they mature and change over time ...”
- “ ... contingency and serendipity in the writing process. First, our memories are selective and not always reliable and, second, the literary form of autobiography itself exerts pressure to exclude episodes that do not fit the particular focus of the story.” (Comstok, 2003:3-4)

What is Autobiography? (2)

- Who an I? What events/ experiences have been most important in my life? Meeting? Journey? Dream? Writing autobiographies as self-accounting, exploring our self-identities, insiders and outsiders.
- The Art of writing – literary devices and strategies in constructing narratives. Characters, Plot, Mood, Style etc...
- “Autobiographies are made objects, artefacts that authors selectively construct and reconstruct” (Comstock: 14)
- **Expectations of Autobiographies:**
 - That the author will reveal his or her ‘self’ to us
 - That the author will tell us ‘the truth’ about themselves (their version of ‘the truth’)

Why write a Religious Autobiography?

- A useful personal task, understanding your own self-identity and your relationship (or lack of it) to a community, tradition or wider context.
- Accounting for our position, where we stand when we come to study other individuals and traditions. Knowing what it means to be an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’. Reflexivity.
- Learning about the construction and representation of self-identity through our own stories.

Autobiography: Some Format

- **Character**
 - Hieromonk, Priest, family, friends, communities, teacher,
 - Author, poor background but education, spirituality.
- **Plot**
 - Mostly context of your upbringing, roots
- **Memory**
 - Your reflections on childhood – bonds between family, people, community but critical distance too.
- **Self-identity**
 - Community encouraged study but no control over who became.
 - An insider but develops and outsider's voice.
- **Context**
 - Poverty, racism, and responses to this woven into text through lives.
- **Community**
 - General tension, 'Supportive' / 'passive' functions of religion.
 - Binds community and family together, eg. Rituals like baptism.
- **Tradition**
 - Confronts 'difference' through experience; eg. Sectarianism of Baptists / Methodists, relativist belief, eventually marries out.

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Religious Autobiography?

- Account of a religious or spiritual life, journey or experience of an individual and / or their relationship/ engagement with divine being (GOD), spiritual guide, community, tradition, religious people.
- Compare biography, hagiography, fiction etc. lives of religious, spiritual people (e.g. Biblical story about Prophets)
- Reading and writing own Religious Autobiography – your religious experiences

Where Should I begin (Religious Autobiography)?

- Topic straightforward (!?) – you are the expert.
- Asking yourself questions about your life, what it means and your textual reconstruction of it.
- ‘Who am I’ (The auto-logical question). How do I communicate who I am?
- What event(s) or experience(s) have been most important in my self?
- A reaction to something? A family occasion? A meeting? A journey? A dream?

Religious Autography? Me?

- What qualifies as religion? Narrow or broad, substantive or functional definitions of religion – the transcendent or meaning?
- A focus on particular dimensions; e.g. UnCanny, Cultus, Code, a sense of Course?
- A positive or negative, close or distant, experience of religion? Can write about either.
- Perhaps nothing extraordinary has happened to you? What was your experience growing up in community, the general shaping of your life?
- Can an agnostic/ atheist write religious autobiography?
- Could write autobiography explaining why not religious and/ or why chosen to study Theology and Religious Studies.

Reference

Gary L. Comstock (2003) *Religious Autobiographies*
(Wadsworth Publishing Co Inc.)