



Religion as Agency: The impact of curriculum structure and teaching approaches on student learning in introductory religion modules

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DECLARATION

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As the supervisor, I hereby approve this thesis for submission.

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Dr. Heidi Matisonn

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'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

– 2 Corinthians 12:9

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DEDICATION

"Education does not change the world. Education changes people. People change the world."

– Paulo Freire (1921 – 1997)

To my children, Joshua and Caeli ... you will always be my reason.

IN MEMORY OF

My parents, for their many sacrifices in affording me the opportunity of higher education.
This is for you dad, I carry your name with pride.

My niece, Racquel Keziah Vencatsamy, you left too soon, Baby Girl.

ABSTRACT

The approach to teaching Religious Studies (RS) in South African higher education has long been shaped by the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), a framework that categorises religious traditions into distinct, albeit often static entities. However, this pedagogical approach has been widely critiqued for its Eurocentric biases, lack of contextual relevance, and reinforcement of essentialist understandings of religion (Smith, 1978; Masuzawa, 2005; Owen, 2011; Fujiwara, 2016; Alberts, 2017). This study critically examines how RS is taught at tertiary level, specifically whether it fosters the students' ability to engage critically with religious diversity, and explores alternative pedagogical approaches that may enhance and support student learning in a decolonial context.

Drawing on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and framed within a constructivist pedagogical perspective, this research employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of different teaching methodologies on student engagement and learning outcomes. A comparative analysis of two consecutive cohorts of students—one taught using the WRP and the other through a thematic approach—highlights the pedagogical limitations of the former and the benefits of contextually relevant, student-centred learning. The study also incorporates insights from academics at various South African universities, examining broader disciplinary trends and the challenges exposed through the process of curriculum transformation within RS.

The findings indicate that transitioning from the WRP to a thematic, comparative approach enhances student engagement, critical thinking, and religious literacy by enabling students to contextualise religious traditions within idiosyncratic historical, social, and lived experience frameworks. Moreover, this shift also aligns with broader decolonial imperatives, challenging dominant epistemologies and developing a more inclusive, reflexive, and dynamic study of religion.

This study contributes to ongoing debates on curriculum transformation, pedagogical innovation, and the role of SoTL in RS. The study argues that the thematic approach not only facilitates student agency and intellectual growth but also offers a more

sustainable and equitable model for teaching religion in South Africa's diverse and often fragmented educational landscape.

Key terms: Religious Studies (RS), World Religions Paradigm (WRP), Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), curriculum transformation, decolonisation.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CHE	Council on Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institutes
NQF	National Qualifications Authority
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
RS	Religious Studies
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SoTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
UDW	University of Durban-Westville
UKZN	University of KwaZulu-Natal
WRP	World Religions Paradigm

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1. A Personal Journey

The thesis titled *Religion as Agency: The Impact of Curriculum Structure and Teaching Approaches on Student Learning in Introductory Religion Modules*, explores teaching approaches in Religious Studies (RS) within the context of South African higher education generally, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal¹ (UKZN) specifically. To address the central research question and objectives, this thesis is structured around three core papers, each offering a distinct contribution to the overarching argument. This introduction provides a rationale for the study, outlines the methodological approach, and presents the framework detailing how the three articles collectively advance the thesis.

According to Connaway and Malherbe (2024), whereas a PhD thesis was traditionally regarded as the culmination of a life's work, it is now almost a requirement to gain entry into an academic career. In contrast, the recent move to allow a PhD by publication at South African universities reflects the notion that such a PhD is aimed to showcase the portfolio of a career. Connaway and Malherbe (2024) state that the first PhD by publication was conferred in 1929 on philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Since then, but particularly more recently, this method, according to Frick (2017) has since become an established mode of attaining a doctoral degree, offering an alternative to the traditional monologue (Frick, 2019). While there is no standard agreement on the number of stand-alone but related articles required for this version of the PhD, there is a requirement that these articles be accompanied by a narrative that transforms the project into a coherent argument. My choice for the route of a PhD by publication was two-fold: first, I hoped to distinguish myself in a 'publish or perish' profession; second, I did not wish to see my PhD thesis collecting dust on a library shelf. Instead, I wanted this work to inform and be informed by my teaching practices. Discussing the development of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) as outlined by Hutchings and Shulman (1999), Killen and Gallagher (2013) state that scholarship must become public, contending that it does not become authentic scholarship unless it becomes a body of critical review. The first published article in this portfolio has to date garnered eighty-six reads since publication.

¹ Due to the distinct characteristics of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, it is easily identifiable. While some may question the necessity of naming the institution, ethical clearance for this study was granted by UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Ethical Clearance number: HSSREC/00002948/2021

Choosing the format for the research was more difficult than choosing the critical research question. In some sense, the essence of this PhD – religion as agency – is as much about myself as it is about my students, and offer a brief account of my career as a religious studies academic to explain this. My career as an academic, albeit initially on a contract (non-permanent) basis, in the discipline of religion at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) in 2002/2003 had a somewhat incidental start. Having just completed my Master's degree in Religion Education, I was approached to teach the Introduction to the Religion module, among a few others. In an attempt to emphasise the equality of religions and promote an interreligious agenda, the senior academics had designed the module's template to focus on African Religion, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and the New Religious Movements, as these were the most dominant religious traditions in the greater Durban area. This design signalled a move towards a comparative approach to the study of religion, each module including contextually relevant topics. For example, the module included the history and role of Hinduism in South Africa, a short history on Christianity in the apartheid and post-apartheid years in South Africa, and a short history of Islam in South Africa, its ethnic and religious divisions, and its role in the liberation struggle in post-apartheid South Africa. Recognising the history and contextual nature of African religions, the African Traditional Religions section dealt with the impact of Western culture on African religious beliefs and practices during the colonial period, as well as the consequences of Christian missions and conversion on these traditions. I continued to teach these modules until my contract expired in June 2006, a year into the merger of UDW, a traditionally 'non-white' university and the University of Natal, a traditionally white university. This merger effectively brought together the disciplines of religious studies and theology under one school or department.

Fast forward to August 2012, when I was employed as a permanent member of staff in the now School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics. I was once again tasked with the teaching and coordination of the introductory module and a few others. While I did not intend to make academia my permanent career, my interaction with the students over the years has drawn me closer to this profession. Feeling more secure in my role, I began to ponder on my teaching in these 'inherited' modules designed by others. Since the modules had been approved in 1999 by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), specific regulatory processes prevented me from revising more than 50% of the module. This disturbed me as I felt the module was not functioning as I had envisaged. To be more contextually relevant and internationally aligned with religious disciplines, we often compare our modules with those offered at other

institutions across the country. Our module evaluations explicitly require moderators and external examiners to respond to the question:

‘Are the standards of the module being set for, and achieved by, UKZN students comparable with similar subjects offered at this level at other universities?’²

This question, the subsequent responses, and my reflection on those responses offered me my first glimpse into what I thought could become a viable PhD study. Although our content in terms of prescribed readings reflected both the current and contextual discourses in religious studies, the way the content was structured and its effectiveness in comparing religious traditions began to occupy my thoughts. One glaring feature emerged when comparing the curriculum structure to other comparative religion modules. The curricula in the United States and the United Kingdom revealed that religious studies courses³ were taught using a thematic structure, as opposed to the traditional approach, broadly construed as the World Religions Paradigms (WRP). A thematic approach considers the collective engagement from all religions to specific themes, such as religion and power, religion and gender, religion and conflict, in contrast to the traditional approach, where each religion is taught as a separate entity, as is the current approach at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Closer scrutiny of the course outlines of other Southern African institutions revealed an affinity for teaching religion from a traditional stance. Only one institution out of the five outlines I had perused, taught their introductory module from a thematic stance. I questioned the divergent approaches and wondered whether we were doing our students a disservice, and if so, to what extent, if any, did the traditional approach provide agency to students in the current contexts of immense challenges facing higher education.

Ultimately, this PhD is a response to this growing concern that has intensified over the last decade, begging the question, how could we best teach religious studies in the context of a university such as UKZN, in a country such as South Africa and in a world such as it is today.

² Adapted from the External Examiner’s Evaluation Report, College of Humanities. University of KwaZulu-Natal,

³ In this thesis, the terms ‘course’ (used internationally) and ‘modules’ (used in South Africa) are used interchangeably to refer to academic units or subjects of study.

2. Rationale and Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised around three interrelated articles, each addressing a different aspect of the central research question:

How do the current teaching approaches in Religious Studies at UKZN develop the competencies for students to engage in thinking about critical social issues across religious traditions?

The first article, 'Decolonising Religious Studies through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A South African Perspective', serves as a comprehensive literature review. It explores the history, theory and application of SoTL in Religious Studies and forms the theoretical foundation for the thesis by emphasising the necessity of adapting teaching methodologies to meet the needs of specific learning environments.

Recognising the unique challenges South African students face, particularly highlighted by the #FeesMustFall movement and ongoing calls for decolonisation in higher education, the article underscores the fact that a multitude of disparities persist despite the formal ending of Apartheid. By centring the students' lived experiences, the article advocates for Religious Studies to adopt a constructivist pedagogy. This approach empowers students by allowing their religious beliefs to give them agency in constructing their knowledge.

The second article, 'The Big Five – Why Context Matters in Religious Studies' critiques the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) as an unsuitable framework for introductory Religious Studies in South Africa, a framework which has long guided the RS curricula. The WRP's reliance on Eurocentric assumptions perpetuates the colonial mindset, hindering the student's ability to make genuine religious comparisons. This dominance stifles critical thinking by firmly establishing Christianity as the benchmark for religious assessments. This paper advocates for the challenging of the dominant narratives and biases, allowing students to engage with religion on their own terms. Recognising the social, economic, and political factors shaping student lives, it calls for dismantling the oppressive WRP and implementing an educational approach that respects diversity and promotes critical thinking. By embracing contextual dynamics, the curriculum can offer a transformative education experience that will honour and respect the religious expressions in South Africa.

The final article entitled 'Re-imagining Religion: Towards a Thematic Approach to Religious Studies at UKZN' presents a conceptual curriculum for RS, focusing on thematic teaching and

religious literacy. This article proposes practical solutions to the issues identified in the critique of the WRP. It advocates for a thematic approach to teaching RS, one that emphasises critical thinking and intellectual growth and discusses the practical implementation of religious literacy as a vital component of the curriculum.

3. A Note on Agency

Bandura (2002:2) defines personal agency as the intentional capacity to influence one's functioning and life circumstances, emphasising the individual's ability to shape their environment. Agency broadly refers to an individual's capacity to act independently and make their own choices. In educational contexts, student agency is critical as this empowers students to actively participate in their learning processes rather than passively receive information. Felten et al., (2013) highlight the transformative potential of engaging students as partners in SoTL and curricula development. They argue that such active involvement enhances motivation and nurtures their intellectual agency – the students' ability to take ownership of their learning experiences and contribute to disciplinary knowledge.

Since the 1980s, constructivist learning theories have highlighted the active role of students in constructing knowledge (Packer and Goicoehea, 2000; Prawat, 1996). These theories and sociocultural perspectives assert that learning involves reflective and higher order thinking processes, where students actively develop their own understandings of complex concepts in diverse learning environments (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Within a religious studies framework, agency extends to the active shaping of religious identities Leming (2007), defines religious agency as the ability of individuals to shape and transform religious institutions through personal choices and actions. However, this agency is enacted within specific social contexts rather than in isolation. The ability to claim and enact religious identities – whether acquired through family and religious organisations or actively sought– aligns with a constructivist pedagogy, which promotes engagement and personal meaning-making in the study of religious traditions.

While agency has been widely explored in intersectionality and gender studies (Singh, 2015; Caulfield, 2017), its role as a pedagogical tool is paramount in enabling students to critically engage with religious traditions in a comparative religion module. Understanding agency in this context allows students to comprehend the similarities and differences between traditions, moving beyond rote learning to actively engaging in religious literacy.

Beyond student agency, my agency as an academic involves critically assessing and reshaping the introductory module in religion. Jacob (2021) critiques individualised views of learning in South Africa, with Boughey (2013) noting that such perspectives often depict students as independent from the social environment. This decontextualisation limits the depth of comparative analysis in Religious Studies by disconnecting the students' learning from their lived realities. My academic agency, therefore, lies in critically reconstructing the curriculum to facilitate meaningful comparisons between religions, ensuring that the module reflects contemporary understandings and relevancy of religious diversity and intersectionality.

Ganas et al., (2021) argue that pedagogical engagement hinges on both the participants and the facilitator, highlighting the role of academics in shaping learning environments. Scholars such as Edgerton (2001) and Smith et al., (2005), emphasise the use of pedagogical tools – including constructivist strategies – to enhance engagement to meet disciplinary goals. Ganas et al., (2021) further argue that engagement should be critically aware of the power dynamics related to religion, race, class and gender particularly in addressing colonial biases embedded in educational frameworks.

Traditional pedagogical models such as Freire's banking model, have historically perpetuated passive learning, where students absorb information rather than critically engage with it (Freire, 1996). This model limits the student's ability to exercise agency in shaping their own learning and inhibits the development of critically engaged scholars (Ganas et al., 2021). In contrast, creating a collaborative environment fosters comparative analysis, enabling students to critically evaluate and challenge perspectives within and across different religious traditions. Through this process, students reclaim their agency in constructing religious identities and knowledge, while as an academic, I exercise my agency in designing a curriculum that nurtures this intellectual autonomy.

4. My Approach(es) to Teaching

Thinking about my approach to teaching reminds me of a particular article by Schmidt (1988) on 'What is Religion'. While the material has value in explaining some of the ambiguities of defining religion as a working concept and identifying some of the features of religion, the article ends with the following passage, which aims to show that a serious study requires an open mind:

Nan-in, a Zen master, was approached by a learned professor who wanted to know what Zen was all about and why anyone should adopt Zen. The master asked one of his disciples to bring tea for the guest. He poured the tea into the cup and continued pouring till the tea overflowed, and the puzzled professor pointed out to him that there was no more place in the cup for it to hold any more tea. Nan-in told him that his mind was like the cup; overfull with notions and ideas and conditioning, and unless he first emptied it of all that was already in it there was no use trying to understand what Zen was! (Schmidt, 1988:26)

While I had adopted this approach to my teaching for many years, I realised that asking students to figuratively empty their cups and leave their religion at the door was not only further marginalising their religious beliefs in an already marginalised space in the way the module content was structured, but were also required to relinquish their agency, reducing them to 'empty vessels' incapable of meaningfully contributing to class discussions. Gravett (2018) states that for many years academics have encouraged students to suspend their personal beliefs in religious studies classes so as to better understand and empathise with the variety of religious perspectives presented. She references Adler, who states 'that bringing one's own religious assumptions to the material would only be valid or meaningful within the context of one's own religious tradition' (Adler, 2014, as cited in Gravett, 2016).

In contrast, however, Walvoord (2008) critiques this idea of bracketing personal beliefs, arguing that it is problematic as students fail to use the opportunity to understand how critical thinking can inform their own religious development. Gravett (2018) further contends that bracketing is disingenuous, as the very interests and questions students bring to the class also connect the course material to their lives. For her, this is key to their learning.

This led me to reconsider my approach. I now request the students to bring all their religious knowledge to class, and aim to create a safe space where there are no right or wrong answers. After the initial meet-and-greet lectures where they are informed of the module contents and discuss their definitions of religions, I intentionally use my personal views to refute some of their preconceived, sometimes misconceived, ideas of how religion and culture intersect. As I am usually positioned in the centre of the lecture hall, I ask students to describe me using the first thought that comes to mind. Indian, Hindu and married are most often the initial responses, only two of which are correct. Unlike what I want from the students, I have conditioned myself to leave my religion and any subjectivities (biases) I may have, at the door. As an academic,

my religion should not impact on how I teach, nor should it inform how I facilitate discussions about different religious traditions. This exercise serves to illustrate to the students that we all harbour assumptions about others, regardless of our intentions.

5. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

It became clear that my PhD project would traverse the fields of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and Religious Studies (RS) and situate itself as an inter-disciplinary study. Killen and Gallagher (2013) assert that situating SoTL in a particular disciplinary focus involves a continuous shuttling through diverse intersections. From their perspective, these intersections "are points where teachers, learners, curriculum or disciplinary traditions of knowledge and practice, social and cultural expectations, and the influence of the contexts of their engagement converge" (2013: 110). Intersectionality involves understanding how various identities and social positions (such as race, gender, class and others) intersect and affect educational experiences and outcomes.

According to Huber and Hutchings, SoTL advances knowledge incrementally by framing questions, gathering and exploring evidence, testing and refining new insights in the classroom and sharing findings publicly for others to build upon (Hutchings and Huber, 2008, 20-21). This process may be summarised by a set of interrelated steps that do not necessarily follow a linear sequence:

1. Identify a problem or question about student learning in a course.
2. Contextualise it with the SoTL literature.
3. Propose a solution or new understanding of the problem.
4. Gather evidence using appropriate methodologies.
5. Discuss the evidence with peers.
6. Make findings public through formal publication or other outlets.

In aligning my approach with the above steps, this research focuses on whether the current approach to RS at UKZN can develop students' competencies to engage critically across religious traditions on contextually relevant issues. The following research questions provided the impetus for the research and formed the foundation for each article.

6. Critical research question

I set out to determine whether the current approach to teaching religious studies at UKZN effectively develops the competencies for students to engage in thinking about critical social issues across religious traditions.

Research sub-questions

To address the primary question, the following sub-questions were considered:

1. What are the current approaches used to teach Religious Studies at UKZN in comparison with national and international methods?
2. What competencies are students who register for religious studies modules expected to develop?
3. Which RS approach/es could be implemented to enhance the students' knowledge and critical thinking within the discipline in the context of UKZN?

7. A Brief Literature Review

In the context of South Africa's growing democracy, coupled with globalisation and secularisation, it is necessary to reconsider the current teaching approaches in Religious Studies within higher education. According to Corrywright (2016), pedagogy is often not about what is taught but rather how it is taught. Owen (2011) argues that teaching religion has long relied on the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) to guide the RS curriculum. Cotter and Robertson describe the WRP as "a particular way of thinking about religions which organises them into a set of discrete traditions with a supposedly 'global' import" (2016: vii).

Within the South African context, introductory religion courses often mirror the WRP, structuring curricula to begin with the theoretical sections on defining religion, its origin and the theory behind studying religion. The module is then divided into different traditions or categories, analysing religious symbols, myths, rituals, ethics, and traditions. Owen (2011) critiques the WRP for presenting undergraduate religion courses from a subjective and unempirical stance, categorising different manifestations of religion into predetermined categories, such as primitive, classical, living, or geographical (2011:254). Owen (2011) highlights the WRP's resistance to change, particularly in pedagogy, which is most evident in introductory religion courses, arguing that this paradigm is deeply rooted in the global history of colonialism.

Masuzawa (2005) critiques the WRP for its Eurocentric origins, arguing that its continued use in university curricula reflects the persistence of colonial structures in knowledge production. Scholars such as Roeland (2023) and Freathy and John (2018) further critique the WRP for presenting religions as static, bounded entities, reinforcing essentialist stereotypes that fail to reflect lived religious experiences. Cotter and Robertson (2016) note that the WRP has been subjected to rigorous critique in the academic study of religion. They identify three main critiques: religious studies within the WRP are modelled on Christianity, are associated with the discourses of power (Jantzen, 1998:8), and provide an unsuspecting *sui generis* model of religion. Following an analysis of these three aspects, Cotter and Robertson concur with Ramey that religion is constructed by individuals who interpret practices and texts 'in ways that relate to their particular context and the range of interests that shape them' (2014:109).

To analyse teaching approaches in RS, it is necessary to contextualise them within the broader framework of the (SoTL) (Gravett, 2016). SoTL originates from the seminal work of Ernst Boyer, who sought to redefine academic scholarship (Boyer, 1990). He identified four types of scholarship: discovery (creating new knowledge through traditional research), integration (interpreting the use of knowledge across disciplines), application (assisting society and professional fields to address problems) and teaching (studying teaching models and practices to achieve optimal learning). Boyer's international project on reflecting the academic role acknowledged the need to adapt working conditions within higher education to harness new pedagogies (Boyer et al., 1994). Under the guidance of Lee Shulman, Boyer's successor, the SoTL debate identified two critical characteristics: the necessity to disseminate knowledge (Hutchings and Shulman, 1999) and the groundwork in theory and research (Hutchings and Huber, 2008). These characteristics provide the tools to frame the analysis and evaluation of teaching practices (Fanghanel et al., 2015), particularly the 'course portfolio' (Hutchings, 1999).

Hutchings (2010) argues that teaching, like learning, is intellectual work that can be improved through systematic inquiry, critique and collaboration within a diverse community of learners. Vorster (2020:11) suggests setting up teaching and learning 'experiments' informed by scholarly literature to explore the issues at hand and record the effects of such interventions. These experiments require recognising the complex and multi-layered nature of reality within and across their disciplinary and educational contexts. Gravett (2016) notes that despite a long history of research into teaching and learning within Religious Studies, the field remains

underrepresented in broader SoTL discourse, often being overshadowed by theological pedagogies rather than recognised as a distinct area of inquiry. Cassard and Sloboda (2014) assert that integrating SoTL practice into discipline oriented pedagogical and curriculum initiatives of introductory courses could improve learning and outcomes.

Vorster (2020) argues that curricula in many disciplines emphasise knowledge and voices from the global North, which are often unfamiliar to many students and do not address contexts in the global South. She suggests that SoTL in South Africa is beginning to address the decolonisation of universities, curricula, pedagogies and research practices. Nye (2019) expands on this, stating that decolonisation must extend beyond institutional structures and actively transform how knowledge is produced and transmitted in the classroom. According to Mampane et al., (2018), for the decolonisation of education to be effective, research must explore the depth of this construct to develop teaching and curricula relevant to students' needs and life experiences.

The #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements have been instrumental in shifting the focus toward curriculum transformation in South African universities, demanding that pedagogical approaches reflect local knowledge systems rather than perpetuating Western epistemologies. Vorster (2020) contends that decolonising any discipline requires more than simply replacing Western content with African perspectives; it involves rethinking the frameworks through which religious traditions are introduced and studied. This is particularly relevant in South Africa, where some institutions house Religion Studies within theology faculties while others maintain it as an independent discipline. These structural differences shape pedagogical approaches and influence how decolonial methodologies can be applied.

As scholars seek to decolonise Religious Studies, they must also consider how introductory courses should be structured to balance content, student engagement and broader pedagogical goals. This requires a reconsideration of the course and its purpose, and the methodologies used to teach them.

8. Alternative Approaches to Teaching Religious Studies

Clingerman and O'Brien (2015) state that introductory courses could serve two distinct purposes: providing a basic introduction to a subject that serves the general requirements of higher education, such as critical thinking, or introducing a specific field of study to recruit

potential majors. They argue that introductory religion courses should highlight three learning objectives: providing content about religion relevant to the students' context to nurture intellectual growth (2015:328). Gallagher (2009) asserts that introductory modules should focus on critical thinking and interpretation rather than rote memorisation. Given South Africa's complex history and teaching in a multicultural institution, context is essential when designing the curriculum. Clingerman and O'Brien (2015) argue that introductory courses should suit the social context in which they are taught, the religious and academic background of the institution and its students, and the curricular context into which they fit (2015:330).

Killen and Gallagher (2013) argue that SoTL in Religious Studies requires an ongoing negotiation between disciplinary expectations and pedagogical strategies. The nature of Religious Studies means that students often enter classrooms with deeply ingrained perspectives shaped by their prior exposure to religious traditions. McCutcheon et al., (2016) note that students' pre-university interaction with religion may contribute to their devotional or doctrinal approaches, leading to resistance when confronted with critical or comparative methodologies. This creates a tension between student expectations and the analytical approach used in the academic study of religion. Therefore, carefully balancing content and methodology is required to facilitate meaning engagement with religious traditions without reinforcing pre-existing biases.

Smith (1988) contends that content and context alone are insufficient for an introductory module, as the comprehensive teaching of any content in any context is impossible. Instead, introductory courses should focus on developing the student's interpretive capacities, rather than addressing every detail of their religious or social contexts or comprehensively communicating content. Gallagher (2009) reiterates that introductory-level courses should be goal-driven rather than content-driven, shifting the focus from memorising facts to developing critical and comparative skills.

While Jensen & Kjeldsen (2013) argue for a didactic perspective, emphasising teaching religion as specific cultural and historical formations with their own identity and problems, I argue against this approach. Instead, I advocate teaching religion from a comparative perspective as a cross-cultural phenomenon with general themes and issues. This comparative approach is more suited to address the complex and diverse contexts of South African students, promoting critical thinking and intellectual growth over rote memorisation and pre-determined

categories. The gap in the current pedagogical approaches in RS and SoTL in South Africa highlights the need for research into practical, contextually relevant teaching strategies that align with the principles of decolonisation and higher education goals in South Africa, and it is the very lacuna which this PhD hopes to fill – at least in part.

By integrating decolonisation, SoTL and thematic approaches, this study situates itself within an ongoing scholarly effort to rethink the Religious Studies pedagogy in South Africa. The discussion above highlights the limitations of traditional approaches, the need for pedagogical reflection through SoTL, and the importance of aligning teaching approaches with decolonial objectives. This study aims to contribute to these conversations by exploring how comparative, student-centred approaches can develop intellectual engagement, critical thinking and contextual awareness among students.

9. Theoretical Framework

The study embeds itself within the constructivist approach to teaching and learning. The main reason for applying this approach is that the majority of the students who register for modules within the discipline, enter into the module with preconceived notions of what the study of religion entails based on their own religious and cultural beliefs. According to Elliot et al., constructivism is 'an approach to learning that embraces the notion that people actively construct or create their own knowledge, and that reality is determined by the individual's experience' (2000:256).

The principles of constructivism are:

That knowledge is constructed rather than innate or passively consumed. McCray (2007) asserts that this type of learning builds on the precept of the student's prior knowledge by assigning meaning to real-life practices and experiences. This knowledge influences how new knowledge is modified or constructed from new learning experiences (Phillips, 1995);

That learning is an active process. While the passive view of teaching tends to view students as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, constructivism states that students construct meaning through active engagement with the world; therefore, understanding of information comes from the connection between prior and new knowledge and the learning processes (McLeod, 2019);

That all knowledge is socially constructed. Here, learning is viewed as a social activity, done in interaction with others rather than an abstract concept (Dewey, 1938). Vygotsky (1978) believed that community played a central role in the process of meaning-making; thus, teaching and learning is a matter of sharing and negotiating socially constructed knowledge (McLeod,2019);

That all knowledge is personal. Each student has a distinct point of view that is based on their existing knowledge and values; this means that the meaning derived from each lecture may differ for individual students due to their own subjective interpretations of the content discussed. While this principle in some ways contradicts the view that knowledge is socially constructed, Fox (2001) argues that the knowledge base attached to cultural factors is constantly changing; therefore, the knowledge stored by students is not a rigid copy of a socially constructed template;

That learning exists in the mind. According to Driscoll (2000), the constructivist theory posits that knowledge can only exist in the human mind and does not have to match reality. From this principle, students will continually update their mental model of the real world to reflect new information and therefore construct their own interpretation of reality.

There are varying views of constructivism and how to put it into practice; however, the essence of how students develop meaningful knowledge remains a crucial issue (Mohammed and Kinyo, 2020). Applefield et al., (2000) state that traditionally these questions were related to discrepancies between the social constructivism of Vygotsky and Piaget's cognitive constructivism.

For Piaget (1932), knowledge is the product of an *individual* mind; this knowledge is created and made meaningful by one's personal interaction and contextual interpretation of the environment (McCray, 2007). This may be interpreted to create a realistic learning environment where students can associate new concepts with their prior knowledge (Jadallah, 2000), by the process of assimilation. This type of learning environment relies mostly on the student adopting a critical interpretive approach to new experiences and using these as the basis for the formation of new knowledge (Mohammed and Kinyo, 2020). Because cognitive constructivism is student-centred and relies on a level of individual freedom, any direct teaching is often seen as stifling the learning exploration process. In this sense, social discourse is only intended to validate or disprove the student's understanding.

In contrast, Vygotsky emphasised that to develop an understanding of normative social values and to facilitate learning, it is necessary to engage in discourse, share knowledge, and compare beliefs with others. In essence, the social constructivist theory underpins an array of student-centred methods, in contrast to the traditional method where knowledge is passively transmitted from teacher to student.

In attempting to examine whether the current approach to RS at UKZN is sufficient to develop student competencies to engage on contextually relevant issues, the study takes up Cornbleth's (1990) argument that the contextual dynamics, as well as socially constructed relationships, are vital for curriculum development. Grundy (1987) reiterates that the specific social context in which curriculum knowledge is constructed is also important. Roux (2007) asserts that teaching and learning in religion must be grounded in what she calls the social-constructivist curriculum theory. For Roux, the impact and influence of the social environment on the development of curriculum models and strategies make it necessary for academics in RS to deconstruct the constructed, intrinsic, religious knowledge held by students (*Piagetian perspective*) in order to reconstruct (*Vygotsky's social construct*) the relationship between the student's interpretation and meaning of the knowledge or content.

9.1 Constructivism, Decoloniality and Thematic Pedagogy

This thesis is grounded in constructivist learning theory while also incorporating decolonial perspectives and thematic pedagogy to critically engage with the limitations of constructivism. Constructivism provides an important pedagogical approach for Religious Studies at UKZN, allowing students to actively engage with religious traditions rather than passively receiving knowledge. However, critiques of constructivism highlight its potential to reinforce epistemic silos and lack of structure. By integrating decolonial theory and thematic pedagogy, this study provides a more contextually relevant and inclusive framework for teaching Religious Studies.

Constructivism is based on three key principles: learning as an active process, the role of social interaction and the importance of prior knowledge. These principles underpin the pedagogical approaches that prioritise student engagement and critical inquiry. However, critics caution that:

The reliance on students' prior knowledge may lead to epistemic silos, where they struggle to engage with unfamiliar perspectives (Phillips, 1995; Engler, 2005). Additionally, while socially constructed knowledge can be empowering, it may inadvertently reproduce dominant

narratives if not critically integrated, highlighting the need for critical engagement to promote a more nuanced understanding of diverse perspectives (Young & Muller, 2013). Furthermore, the absence of explicit content structure can disadvantage students unfamiliar with academic discourse, particularly in disciplines such as Religious Studies that require cross-traditional engagement (McCutcheon, 2018).

While Piaget and Vygotsky offer valuable insights into constructivism, their perspectives also reveal some critical tensions. Piaget's model has been critiqued for its lack of structural knowledge transmission, making it difficult for students to systematically engage with complex disciplinary content (Soudien & Chisholm, 2021). Vygotsky's approach, while addressing this through guided learning, also raises concerns about whose knowledge is prioritised in structured learning environments, potentially limited epistemic diversity (McCutcheon, 2018).

In promoting active learning, constructivism often overlooks the challenge of Western epistemic dominance. The #MustFall movements demonstrated the necessity of not only engaging with knowledge but actively questioning inherited frameworks. Decolonial theory contributes by interrogating the Eurocentric bias of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), ensuring that Indigenous and non-Western epistemologies are valued alongside dominant knowledge systems, and reconceptualising Religious Studies to empower students as agents of knowledge production rather than passive recipients of fixed curricula.

South Africa's post-apartheid educational reforms embraced constructivist principles mainly through the student-centred approach of Curriculum 2005. However, its implementation revealed key challenges. The lack of sufficient structure led to difficulties in knowledge acquisition, disproportionately affecting students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Soudien & Chisholm, 2021). In Religious Studies, an overtly constructivist approach risks reinforcing students' existing knowledge without sufficiently exposing them to alternative worldviews (Engler, 2005).

Given these critiques, a balance between constructivist engagement and structured content delivery is paramount. Thematic pedagogy offers a viable solution, focusing on core themes such as sacred spaces, religious ethics, and ritual practices. This approach ensures that students actively construct knowledge while engaging critically with the structured content. Additionally, exposure to diverse traditions prevents epistemic silos and challenges dominant

narratives. A decolonial framework further ensures that indigenous epistemologies are not marginalised while avoiding the replication of Western-centric paradigms (Roux, 2007).

10. Application of Articles in the Thesis

Since this is a PhD by publication, the selection of journals was intentional in ensuring engagement with diverse academic audiences. The chosen journals provided platforms that aligned with the scope and objectives of each article – one addressing an international readership in higher education pedagogy, another engaging directly with critical debates within the discipline of Religious Studies, and a third speaking to the theoretical framework underpinning the study. This strategic dissemination ensured that the research contributed meaningfully to global and context-specific scholarly discussion. Each article applied the theoretical framework in distinct ways.

- Paper 1: **Decolonising Religious Studies through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)** situates these debates with SoTL and decolonial transformation. It emphasises the need for pedagogical approaches that empower students to critically engage with religious diversity, while taking cognisance of their existing knowledge yet maintaining academic rigour.

Conceived for *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)*: This article was developed in response to the limited engagement with SoTL in Religious Studies in South Africa. While SoTL has transformed higher education pedagogy globally, its application to Religious Studies – particularly in South Africa – remains underdeveloped. This article aligns with CriSTaL's emphasis on critically examining teaching and learning practices and contributes to its commitment to addressing relevant challenges in South African higher education, particularly curriculum transformation and decolonisation.

- Paper 2: **The Big Five – Why Context Matters in Religious Studies** critiques the WRP's Eurocentrism and argues for context-sensitive pedagogical reforms. It highlights the social constructivist approach but calls for decolonial perspectives to reshape the curriculum.

Published in *Critical Research on Religion (CRR)*: This article critically examines the dominance of the WRP in Religious Studies and its implications for curriculum transformation. The WRP marginalises non-Christian, non-Western, and non-white perspectives, an issue that is particularly relevant in South Africa. This article's critique of these power dynamics, situated with decolonial discourse, makes it well-suited for the CRR which specialises in applying

critical theoretical frameworks to the study of religion. By advocating for a more inclusive and locally relevant approach, the article aligns with the journal's focus on religion, colonial legacies and social justice.

- Paper 3: **Re-imagining Religion: Towards a Thematic Approach to Religious Studies at UKZN** proposes a thematic alternative to the WRP. It builds on constructivist learning but acknowledges critiques, incorporating structured thematic content to ensure epistemic diversity.

Published in the *Journal for the Study of Religion (JSR)*: This article emerged from an analysis of the RELG 101: Introduction to Religion module at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The study critiques the WRP's continued influence and proposes a thematic syllabus that enhances religious literacy through contemporary themes. The article aligns with JSR's focus on phenomenological and comparative approaches to religion, particularly within the Southern African context. By advocating for a curriculum that better reflects the students' lived experiences and contextual realities, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on evolving pedagogical and methodological perspectives in Religious Studies.

11. Research Methodology

Having selected the format of the PhD, I needed to decide on a research methodology. This research has employed a mixed methods research design, encompassing surveys with students and interviews with fellow academics. It is also an autoethnographic account of my own experiences. Autoethnography involves personal narrative and self-reflection to explore social, cultural, and educational contexts. It aligns with the scholarship of teaching and learning by systematically investigating personal teaching experiences, and linking them to broader educational theories and practices (Hutchings and Shulman, 1999). According to Ellis et al., (2011), this method highlights how individual experiences can inform and contribute to a broader understanding of teaching and learning. Killen and Gallagher (2013), state that reflection on one's teaching becomes a valid method of scholarship, not because it is systematic and sustained, but instead when it addresses the particularity of specific teaching contexts, practices and situations that may interest wider audiences.

The study combines qualitative and quantitative research methods and is therefore, a mixed methods approach (Liamputtong, 2013) which is often used to understand a research problem more effectively (Creswell, 2002). This approach is based on the rationale that neither

qualitative nor quantitative methods can provide adequate information to answer the research questions. However, when combined, qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other and allow for a complete analysis. According to Flyvberg (2011), research is problem-driven, not methodology-driven, meaning that the research methods employed should be well-suited to answer the research questions at hand.

The target population for this study was first-year students registered for the Introduction to Religion module at the Howard College Campus at UKZN. Students who typically register for this module come from diverse socio-economic, cultural and religious backgrounds, reflecting the broader South African context. Many are from public high schools where exposure to religious studies varies – some have engaged primarily with a single religious tradition, while others navigated multiple religious identities in their communities. In terms of demographics, students are generally:

- Predominantly Black (African), with smaller proportions of Indian, White and other racial identities.
- A mix of first-generation university students and from low to middle-income households. As the surveys were anonymised, no individual demographic data was collected.

In 2021, the student cohort consisted of twenty-seven students; in 2022, there were thirty-two students. The impact of COVID-19 saw a significant drop in student numbers which influenced classroom dynamics and engagement. The diversity of the students also meant that discussions on religious identity, belief systems, and worldviews were approached from multiple perspectives, enriching the classroom experience and presenting pedagogical challenges to encourage inclusive dialogue.

Qualitatively, the study analysed the literature on teaching approaches and course content currently employed locally and globally in religious studies. Thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical approach. A thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative research method for identifying and reporting patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). It allows for a rich, detailed and interpretative examination of student responses, classroom interactions and interview data. Vaismoradi et al., (2013) highlight that thematic analysis is particularly useful in studies that seek to explore meaning, experience and perspectives. The flexibility of this approach made it well suited for examining the way in

which students engaged with Religious Studies, how their prior knowledge shaped their learning and how teaching methodologies influenced their academic development.

In addition to surveying the students, I also conducted interviews with colleagues who taught religious studies modules at various South African universities. These discussions provided insights into how other academics navigated similar challenges in religious studies classrooms, particularly in addressing student diversity, prior knowledge and engagement with course material.

11.1 Participant Selection and Recruitment

Given the relatively small size of the discipline in the country, participants were selected based on their experience in teaching introductory religious studies modules at higher education institutions. Calls for participation were initially sent to the heads of departments at six institutions across South Africa and Botswana, requesting them to identify suitable academics for participation. Four institutions responded positively, providing access to academics who met the study's criteria.

Religious Studies is not widely offered as an independent discipline in South African higher education. Many institutions house it within Theology faculties or integrate it into the broader Humanities or Social Science programmes. However, the institutions selected for this study offer religious studies as a distinct academic discipline, making them relevant to this research. These institutions also maintain healthy student cohorts in Religious Studies, ensuring that participants have substantial experience in teaching and curriculum development at the introductory level.

In addition to reaching out to South African institutions, efforts were made to engage international scholars teaching similar modules. However, these invitations did not yield responses, limiting the study's scope to local institutions.

The final sample comprised five academics from four institutions: the University of South Africa (UNISA), the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of Johannesburg (UJ), and the University of Pretoria (UP). While some participants preferred pseudonyms, these institutions represent diverse teaching environments where religious studies function as a discipline separate from theology.

11.2 Academic Background of the Participants

The participants held various academic positions during data collection, including two associate professors, one lecturer, and two respondents whose positions were unspecified. Their teaching experience in religious studies varied significantly, with one participant having over thirty years of experience, another with more than twenty years, one with eleven years, and early-career academics each with five years of teaching experience.

This diversity in academic rank and teaching experience provided a well-rounded perspective on the challenges and opportunities in teaching introductory religious studies modules, particularly in relation to curriculum design, student engagement and institutional structures.

12. Interview Findings

The findings from these interviews are discussed below:

The interviews began with participants being asked to rank student learning objectives in order of importance using the Likert scale.

1: Demonstrating the basic knowledge and understanding of religion and the importance of world religions

Three participants rated this objective as very important, while two others rated it fairly important. Participant One (P1) noted the hegemonic connotation of the term 'world religions' suggesting a need for more inclusive language. P3 emphasised the significance of this objective by stating, 'that's actually the main goal of the module' This indicated that while foundational knowledge of religion was valued, the terminology used to describe this knowledge was equally important.

2: Understanding the importance of beliefs and practices within each religious tradition

The rankings for this expectation varied, with one participant rating it as very important, one as important, two as fairly important, and one as slightly important. P 2 explained, 'It is important, but it is not the main focus' highlighting a secondary but significant role for this objective within the curriculum. The spread of rankings suggested diverse opinions on the significance of understanding specific beliefs and practices. The variability might reflect different teaching philosophies or experiences with student engagement.

3: Recognising the purpose and meaning of religion in society

This expectation received the highest consensus on its importance, with four participants ranking it as very important and one as fairly important. The strong agreement highlighted a shared belief in the significance of understanding the societal role of religions. This finding suggested that the curriculum should strongly emphasise how societal dynamics shaped religion. Recognising the purpose and meaning of religion in society appeared to be a central learning objective resonating across different perspectives.

4: Describing the basic theories developed in the study of religion

One participant rated this expectation as very important, while four rated it fairly important. P1 explained that the relevance of basic theories might depend on the student's academic level, suggesting that these theories were less critical for first-year undergraduates, but gained importance as students advanced in their studies. This insight indicates that while understanding basic theories was important, their introduction and emphasis should align with the student's academic progression. Designing the curriculum to introduce theories gradually could ensure that students built a solid foundation in the study of religion before engaging with more complex theoretical frameworks.

The interview then investigated the approaches to teaching religious studies being employed.

The participants provided diverse perspectives on their current teaching approaches which reflected the use of both thematic and World Religions Paradigm (WRP) methodologies. Their responses highlighted various strategies used to navigate the complexities of teaching religion in their respective universities' current social contexts.

Table 1: Approaches to Teaching Religion: Participant Perspectives

Participant	Approach	Overview
P1	Socially based perspective	Emphasises religion as a human phenomenon deeply embedded in society and culture, rejecting the sui generis view of religion. Critiques WRP for its hegemonic connotation and limited focus on a few so-called world religions, which marginalises numerous other religious groups.
P2	Hybrid, thematic discussion	Begins with a broad orientation of religion in a social context, then moves to specific topics. Highlights thematic modules on issues such as health and gender in ancient religions.
P3	Predominantly WRP with critique	Acknowledges the limitations of WRP but uses it for introductory purposes. Engages students with assignments that critique WRP, encouraging exploration of its problems and alternatives.
P4	Thematic approach	Structures courses according to relevant themes rather than adhering to WRP, allowing for a more integrated and context specific exploration of religious topics.
P5	Structured mix of WRP and thematic	Uses WRP for initial broad introduction in the first and second year, then shifts to thematic approaches in later years. Examples include focusing on Christianity's impact on society and vice versa in a first-year course.

Compilation by Author 30 June 2024

A number of commonalities and divergences were identified from the responses. First, in terms of a critique of the WRP, two participants (P1, P3) recognised the limitations and hegemonic nature of WRP. P1 rejected it entirely, while P3 used it but actively problematised it through assessments. Second, P2, P4, and P5 incorporated thematic approaches, focusing on specific

issues such as health, gender and the social impact of religion. Third, there are hybrid approaches – P2 combined broad social orientations with thematic discussions, while P5 blended WRP with thematic approaches, transitioning from a broad introduction to more focused thematic studies in advanced years. Fourth, pertaining to student needs, P3 and P5 underscored the need to cater to diverse student backgrounds, including those taking religious studies as elective fillers. They stressed the importance of providing foundational knowledge that is accessible and relevant to all students.

The responses reflected a shift away from traditional WRP towards more inclusive and contextually relevant teaching methods. While WRP is still used for introductory purposes, its limitations are finally being acknowledged. Participants highlighted the importance of addressing the hegemonic implications of the WRP and incorporating thematic approaches that explored the intersections of religion with social issues.

Question 6 in the interview probed the teaching approaches employed in the current social context.

The analysis below evaluates the suitability of the teaching approaches (mentioned in the previous response) employed by the participants concerning the religious and cultural context of their university. This includes understanding the integration of socioeconomic and historical issues, challenges with traditional and online learning environments, and the responsiveness of these approaches to the decolonisation and relevance of these social goals in education.

Participant 1: Integrating Socioeconomic and Historical Contexts

The first-year course offers an overview of basic teachings and practices while relating them to socioeconomic and historical issues relevant to the student's context. Students appreciate this approach, finding it illuminating and encouraging critical thinking about their society, and the impact of the course is significant enough that various students have changed their curriculum to major in religious studies.

Participant 2: Challenges of Traditional and Online Learning Environment

The teaching methods are under constant review and revision, with the intention of improving student engagement, particularly in 2021. Traditional lecture halls are not conducive to

interactive discussions, and the online environment during COVID-19 has posed challenges for student participation.

Challenges: Traditional lecture setups favour monologues, while online learning limits communal interaction.

Participant 3: Addressing Student Engagement and the World Religions Paradigm

This approach aims to teach students basic knowledge of the major religions while encouraging critical thinking. Students are introduced to phenomenology and critical theory early on and later engage in thematic studies, such as the position of women and religious perspectives on Palestine.

Challenges: Many students, predominantly Christian, assume they know their religion well and evade its study, which hampers comprehensive learning.

Despite the effectiveness of the WRP, there is an acknowledgement of its limitations in the face of increasing religious syncretism. 'World Religion still works for us. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that it will not work forever in the next generation of religious studies that we will have to think of something else'" (P3).

Participant 4: Relating Religion to Personal Experience

The course is structured to explore various religious traditions and their entanglement with societal issues, reflecting the university's recognition of religious diversity. This method enhances the students' understanding of how religions affect society and their everyday experiences.

Participant 5: Emphasising Social Relations and Justice

Since 2017, the first-year course on Christianity has been restructured to focus on the mutual influence of Christianity and society, including topics such as colonialism and Christianity's resistance movements in African-initiated churches. This approach aligns with the university's emphasis on decolonisation and social relevance, encouraging students to use their experiential knowledge and engage critically with the content.

Overall, while the participants employ varied approaches that integrate socioeconomic and historical contexts, address challenges with student engagement, and focus on social relevance, they all commit to improving students' understanding and critical thinking within their particular religious and cultural university environments. However, the persistent challenges with traditional and online learning environments, coupled with the limitations of the World Religions Paradigm, indicate a need for continuous innovation and adaptation to meet the evolving educational needs and decolonisation goals adequately.

Because a central concern of the PhD project was whether the teaching approach used adequately develops students' competencies to engage critically with social issues found across religious traditions, it was important to consider what this meant TO my colleagues.

13. Common Themes

The common themes arising from this question are as follows:

Integration of Critical Perspectives

The approach of P1 integrated basic teaching of various religions with socioeconomic and historical contexts. The course not only imparted foundational knowledge but also sparked active engagement among the students on societal issues.

Challenges of Online Learning and Student Participation

P2 suggested that the shift to online teaching due to COVID-19 presented unique challenges, where communal interaction was limited compared to face-to-face settings. The online environment provided access to study materials and recorded lectures but lacked the communal interaction necessary for critical engagement. Face-to-face teaching allowed for more effective participation and discussion, which was necessary for developing critical thinking skills.

Development of Critical Skills through Case Studies

P3 began with foundation knowledge and gradually introduced critical theories, using case studies and thematic issues to apply these theories in practical contexts. This approach starts with phenomenology and critical theory, incorporating themes such as the position of women and perspectives on Palestine across Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, in later years of study. The emphasis on case studies involving complex issues such as gender roles and political perspectives enhance the students ability to compare and contrast different religious traditions critically.

Relating Religion to Personal and Community Experiences

P4 related religious teachings to the students' personal experiences and community contexts, thereby offering critical perspectives on the entanglement of religions within society.

Christianity as a Gateway to Critical Engagement

P5 focused on Christianity as an entry point, leveraging its relevance to most South Africans to prepare students for critical engagement with other religions.

The course on Christianity served as an entry point for critical engagement with other religions. This approach not only contextualised religious teachings within the students' lived experiences, but also encourages them to critically examine Christianity's historical and contemporary implications.

Question 8 in the interview examined the influence of students' existing knowledge on the way they understood the comparative approach used in a religious study module.

Participant 1 acknowledged that students often enter the course with preconceived notions influenced by their existing knowledge of their religions. Initially, this lens shaped their approach to understanding other religions. However, as the course progresses and they engaged more deeply with comparative analysis, these preconceptions tended to diminish.

Participant 2 noted that students often brought personal opinions about religions to the classroom, whether they had a spiritual orientation or not. This spiritual awareness influences their receptivity to discussing and understanding other religious traditions.

Participant 3 highlighted the challenges when students approached religious studies through the lens of their own religious backgrounds, particularly when these perspectives dominated their initial responses. Christian students, for example, may struggle to adopt a phenomenological stance when discussing African religions, often defaulting to interpreting unfamiliar religions through a Christian worldview. This presents a pedagogical challenge in encouraging a more objective, comparative analysis.

Participant 4 observed that the students' knowledge of religion often centred on religious practices and basic moral values. This foundational understanding influences their participation in class discussions and their critiques of religious practices.

Participant 5 discussed how the students' personal convictions, especially among Christians, initially shaped their reactions to the course content, which challenged their beliefs. However, as they engage with the material and participated in class discussions, they adopt a more academic approach, separating their personal faith from academic inquiry.

All the participants acknowledged that the students' prior knowledge and lived experiences significantly influenced their initial understanding of the comparative approach in religious studies. While these preconceptions can pose challenges, such as prejudices and difficulties when adopting an objective stance, they also provide a valuable foundation for more in-depth participation and critical thinking. As the students progress through the course, their prior knowledge and personal experiences improve their ability to understand and analyse diverse religious traditions, ultimately enhancing their scholarly investigation and comprehension.

While the insights from the participants were indeed helpful, a brief analysis of the course outlines from each of the universities represented in this study shows that three of the five cases still reveal a subtle inclination towards the WRP, with religious traditions still being taught as separate entities: that is, there are distinct sections on African Religions, Asian Religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and New Religious Movements, to name but a few. While we all teach Religious Studies in a politically and contextually charged environment, we should consider the varying religious, socioeconomic and educational perspectives of our students. It becomes imperative for us to reconsider how we approach the discipline of religion going forward. The goal should be to develop critical thinkers who are not only well-rounded in their intellectual capacities, but students who are also active participants in shaping the South African context as insiders.

14. Conclusion

In situating this PhD, titled *Religion as Agency: The Impact of Curriculum Structure and Teaching Approaches on Student Learning in Introductory Religion Modules* within my personal journey, and applying my own agency as an academic, the thesis is further structured as follows:

Chapter Two details the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) within the current South African context. This chapter or article in its current format is to be submitted to the journal *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CRiSTaL)* for publication.

Chapter Three offers a critique of the World Religions Paradigm, highlighting the need to consider contextual dynamics when structuring the content of an introductory religious studies module. This paper has been published in the journal *Critical Research in Religion* in its April 2024 issue.

Chapter Four proposes a conceptual framework, using a thematic approach to restructure the said module, by carefully considering the competencies required by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) for a module at this level. This paper has been published in the *Journal for the Study of Religion* in its July 2024 issue.

Chapter Five discusses the limitations of the study and contributions made by each article in addressing the research questions, and offers reflections on areas for further research.

CHAPTER 2: Decolonising Religious Studies through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A South African Perspective

1. Abstract

This article reports on a pilot study that explored how the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) can inform the teaching of Religious Studies in South African higher education. While SoTL research is extensive and has contributed immensely to improving teaching practices, its application within the context of Religious Studies, particularly in South Africa, remains limited. SoTL is grounded in principles that emphasise inquiry into teaching and learning practices, the systematic collection of evidence, and the public sharing of insights to enhance educational outcomes. These principles encourage reflective and evidence-based approaches, ensuring that teaching methods are critically evaluated and continuously improved.

This preliminary investigation compares two consecutive cohorts of students enrolled in an introductory Religious Studies module (2021 and 2022) at a South African public university: the 2021 cohort (n=27) was taught using the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), and the 2022 cohort (n=32) was taught using a thematic approach. Guided by SoTL's focus on student learning and engagement, the research examined how these different pedagogical approaches influenced students' understanding of religion. The findings suggest that transitioning from a WRP to a thematic approach aligns with SoTL's disciplinary focus, which provides insight into how different teaching methodologies might support or hinder the decolonisation of an academic subject – in this case, Religious Studies. The findings indicate potential value in adopting a constructivist pedagogy that empowers students to actively participate in discussions about religion, drawing on their lived experiences. While the sample size limits generalisability, this pilot comparison offers valuable methodological insights for future larger-scale studies examining how student empowerment through constructivist pedagogy might support the decolonisation agenda in higher education.

2. SoTL in South Africa – Academic Development and Challenges in Religious Studies

The transformation of Religious Studies pedagogy in South African higher education presents unique challenges and opportunities, shaped by the enduring legacies of apartheid-era educational policies and the urgent need for decolonised education. This pilot study compares traditional and thematic teaching approaches from this complex historical context where the

need for decolonised education intersects with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

The apartheid era's Bantu Education Act of 1953, which enforced racially segregated schooling and dramatically limited education opportunities for Black South Africans, created an enduring legacy of education disparities. This Act mandated a substandard curriculum for Black students, aimed at confining them to menial labour roles and effectively denying them access to full citizenship. The apartheid regime further extended its segregationist policy across the education sector, with separate systems imposed on Coloured and Indian populations, creating a racially tiered hierarchy in education that served to reinforce class and cultural divisions.

Against this backdrop, SoTL emerged in South Africa, beginning in the 1980s, as part of broader academic development initiatives aimed at dismantling these inequities. In this context, SoTL was not primarily about enhancing teaching practices but became a vital tool for addressing pervasive educational inequalities. According to Chng et al. (2020), SoTL's early trajectory in South Africa was characterised by an explicit commitment to social justice, focusing on bridging racial divides and promoting equity within higher education.

The urgency for pedagogical innovation intensified with the 2015 #MustFall and decolonisation movements, which called for urgent changes in higher education. These movements emerged in response to high failure and dropout rates, escalating student debt, and limited job prospects. The resulting push for curriculum transformation brought SoTL to the fore as academics across disciplines sought new ways to integrate student voices and lived experiences into their teaching practices.

3. Research Context and Objectives

This comparative pilot study explores the challenges facing Religious Studies education, particularly in South Africa, where the need for decolonial educational approaches is critical. This research compares the World Religions Paradigm approach with a thematic teaching methodology, seeking to:

- Evaluate how the transition from the World Religions Paradigm to thematic teaching approaches influences student engagement with religious concepts.
- Examine how a constructivist pedagogy supports decolonial objectives within Religious Studies.

- Investigate the role of students' prior knowledge and experiences in shaping their engagement with different teaching approaches.
- Provide insight for future curriculum development, specifically in South African higher education, to better address decolonisation goals.

4. Institutional Support for SoTL and Curriculum Transformation

Institutional support has played a pivotal role in the growth of SoTL in South Africa. For example, the University of KwaZulu-Natal has institutionalised SoTL by establishing a strategic leadership position dedicated to teaching and learning, reflecting a commitment to curriculum transformation to enhance student success (Vithal, 2018). Similarly, the University of Cape Town (UCT) promotes a culture of inquiry among faculty through its Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT), which facilitates workshops and collaborative research aimed at improving student learning outcomes. This approach is akin to the resilience and agency exhibited by visual arts students during the COVID-19 pandemic at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) (Berman, 2022). According to Chng, Leibowitz & Mårtensson (2020), South African institutions recognise SoTL as a valuable method for improving teaching practices amid the pressures of productivity and corporatisation. They see it as essential for engaging academics in reflective teaching practices and pedagogical innovation. Rather than conforming to rigid teaching methodologies that can stifle student engagement and motivation, these institutions leverage SoTL to develop adaptable teaching strategies and remain responsive to academic and institutional challenges.

5. Challenges in Applying SoTL to Religious Studies

Religious Studies (RS) is a prime example of a discipline that has been gradually shifting towards transformation, although the pace has been slow. The curriculum has historically leaned on the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) – a framework primarily shaped by Western perspectives. While some changes have been made to address decolonial objectives, progress has been incremental. This pace reflects the broader challenges of reimagining RS within a South African context still grappling with colonial legacies.

This article explores how SoTL principles can inform the teaching of RS, particularly in the context of an introductory module at a South African public university. Drawing on survey data from 2021 and 2022, it highlights the diversity of students' religious identities and prior knowledge and examines how constructivist learning and teaching methods can enhance

engagement and understanding. The article contributes to the broader discourse on improving teaching practices in Religious Studies through SoTL by focusing on students' lived experiences and encouraging active participation.

6. Literature Review

Limits to applying SoTL to Religious Studies have been recognised for at least a decade. For example, Gravett's (2016) foundational study on SoTL in Religious Studies explores the historical development of SoTL and the challenges of defining it as a scholarly practice. The historical trajectory of SoTL has been marked by efforts to recognise and elevate the status of teaching within academia. Challenges to these efforts include definitional ambiguity, leading to varied interpretations among academics and the historical undervaluation of teaching. Additionally, concerns about methodological rigour arise due to the academics' varying research training. Adapting SoTL to disciplinary practices such as Religious Studies requires careful integration while maintaining scholarly standards. The integration of SoTL into Religious Studies presents unique pedagogical opportunities, as students of diverse religious backgrounds actively shape classroom dynamics.

Although Gravett claims significant research has been done in SoTL in Religious Studies (Gravett, 2016), this research often serves as an addendum to theology or research on Christian-based modules. The broader research on the SoTL in Religious Studies is limited, underscoring the need for detailed examinations and concrete examples of successful SoTL implementations within the field. Despite the involvement of international academics in SoTL and their contributions to the academic discourse on teaching and learning, Religious Studies is often overlooked in SoTL-specific compendia and general educational literature. This oversight indicates that the discipline does not always receive the recognition it deserves within broader education scholarship (Chick et al. 2012; Gravett 2016; Haynie et al. 2009; Huber and Morreale 2002). The focus on SoTL in Religious Studies in Sub-Saharan Africa is minimal. This gap becomes particularly significant in light of broader transformation imperatives in higher education. As Reddy (2018) demonstrates in her analysis of curriculum transformation, there are ongoing calls for decolonisation and inclusive curriculum redesign. These imperatives make developing comprehensive pedagogical strategies in Religious Studies more pressing. While the region has seen an increase in SoTL activities generally, there is a lack of comprehensive research and application in Religious Studies. This highlights a significant lacuna that needs to be addressed to enhance the teaching practices and outcomes in this area.

In addition to the broader challenges of applying SoTL to Religious Studies, academics must also navigate the complexities of student expectations, which significantly shape teaching practices and learning outcomes. Academics such as Killen and Gallagher (2013) and Gravett (2016), having explored SoTL, argue that teaching in Religious Studies presents unique difficulties regarding student expectations, their interpretation of materials, and implicit theological assumptions. They contend that students who take introductory modules in religion and theology view their participation in the module as an opportunity to grow spiritually or religiously (Killen & Gallagher, 2013). However, students' expectations in religious studies are more diverse than those in theology, complicating course design and teaching approaches. This diversity requires academics to navigate politically and ideologically sensitive materials that can provoke debates based on personal beliefs or societal issues related to religion. Moreover, academics in Religious Studies must navigate implicit theological assumptions inherent in their discipline, which influence how religious concepts, texts, and practices are understood and interpreted from a student's perspective.

Killen and Gallagher (2013) and Gravett (2016) advocate for reflective teaching practices and underscore the importance of academics critically evaluating teaching methods such as comparative Religious Studies and contributing to pedagogical scholarship. Addressing the lacunae in SoTL discourse specific to Religious Studies, they stress the significance of context, including cultural and historical dimensions inherent in the field. These dimensions include the influence of cultural backgrounds on interpretations and how historical contexts shape the understanding of religious concepts and practices over time. This contextual understanding enhances teaching efficacy and allows for a deeper appreciation of diverse student perspectives, thus promoting continuous pedagogical improvement within the discipline.

Gallagher and Maguire (2020) argue for reconsidering how religion is taught to undergraduates, particularly in introductory modules, critiquing the traditional approaches that focus primarily on content coverage or academic induction. They highlight the importance of moving beyond a narrow focus on preparing students for advanced study in the discipline. Instead, they emphasise the need to consider the students' interests, societal and economic factors, and institutional mission statements. Aligning course objectives with institutional mission statements demonstrates the value and relevance of the academic study of religion. This alignment ensures that course content engages with and connects Religious Studies to the

broader institutional and societal educational aims. Supporting this view, Fink (2003) underscores the importance of thoughtful course design in promoting learning and adapting to the transforming landscape of higher education. Gallagher and Maguire advocate for modules that cultivate knowledge and skills relevant beyond academia, promoting critical thinking and addressing contemporary issues such as power, gender and conflict. By engaging with topics prevalent in and relevant to society, students can develop a greater awareness of global challenges and the role of religion in shaping national and international dynamics. This approach also allows students to realise the practical applications of studying religion.

In challenging the traditional approach of presenting world religions in introductory modules, Gallagher and Maguire (2020) advocate for thematic modules focusing on specific topics such as religion and the media, religion and gender, religion and politics (for example). This shift reflects a move towards a deeper exploration and analysis of religious themes and issues rather than a broad overview of multiple traditions. McCutcheon et al. (2016:86) also imply that the students' levels of exposure to religious education or socialisation before enrolling at universities may vary, depending on their backgrounds and experiences. They argue that recognising this diversity is indispensable when designing modules accommodating a wide range of students. McCutcheon et al. (2016) and Gallagher and Maguire (2020:12) note the pedagogical challenges related to student expectations, which often clash with the academic study of religion, as opposed to their familiarity with religious teachings and practices. Gallagher and Maguire (2020) argue that students enter university with varying levels of familiarity with religious teachings based on their upbringing and personal beliefs. They further contend that this knowledge may be misleading, contributing to the challenges they highlight. While some students enrolled in introductory religion modules may want to explore and cultivate their spiritual and religious lives, there is a growing trend of students identifying as spiritual but not religious and others disengaging from organised religion or traditional religious institutions, which can impact their engagement with the academic study of religion. For these students, their expectations of a 'world religions' class often revolve around acquiring factual knowledge about various religious traditions. However, Gallagher and Maguire suggest that the focus should be on engaging with the complexities and exploring the multiple interpretations of religious phenomena. This approach encourages critical thinking and intellectual humility, guiding students in enhancing their willingness to listen, learn and consider alternative viewpoints without arrogance or defensiveness.

7. Educational Disparities and Decolonisation

In South Africa, SoTL has been especially important in addressing the country's unique post-apartheid challenges in higher education, including the need for equitable access and culturally responsive pedagogy. Mampane et al. (2018) highlight the growing global dissatisfaction with education, particularly in emerging economies. The need for education relevant to the students' socio-cultural contexts is expressed in many of these regions. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are under increasing pressure to offer transformed, industry-relevant education and knowledge suitable to the 21st-century labour market. This transformation necessitates developing curricula in formerly colonised territories that integrate global best practices while addressing local contexts (Wingfield, 2017). According to Foucault, knowledge is not neutral but shaped by power relations embedded in societal structures, meaning the dominance of Western educational models reflects historical and contemporary power struggles (Sharma, 2018). Thus, the call to reassess Western understandings of disciplines, often disconnected from lived experiences, can be seen as challenging the power dynamics that maintain ways of knowing (Foucault, 1980).

South Africa's schooling system, structured around a quintile framework, inherently perpetuates inequalities that significantly affect student's academic preparedness and success at the university level. Quintiles 1–3 are non-fee-paying schools that serve the poorer communities and receive more government financial support to offset lower parental contributions. Quintiles 4–5 are fee-paying schools and generally serve the more affluent communities, with funding supplemented by school fees paid by parents. As Murray (2016) highlights, the disparities resulting from this framework lead students from lower quintiles to face substantial challenges in engaging with university-level learning. The university in which this research was conducted admits students primarily from quintiles 1–3, illuminating the urgent need for context-specific pedagogical approaches informed by constructivist and decolonial frameworks (Cullinan Cook, 2020).

Socio-economic barriers further complicate students' academic experiences, necessitating inclusive teaching strategies that acknowledge diverse epistemological backgrounds. Traditional lecture-based methods often reinforce existing inequalities, while interactive, discussion-based, problem-solving approaches empower students to actively construct knowledge from their lived experiences. Drawing on Murray's insights, creating an equitable educational environment that values diverse contributions to knowledge creation is imperative

for addressing the disparities these students face. Recognising and responding to the unique challenges faced by students from lower quintile backgrounds is essential for advancing higher education in ways that promote inclusivity.

These broader educational disparities manifest particularly in Religious Studies, where the traditional WRP has historically privileged Western approaches to understanding religion. The impact of the quintile-based educational inequalities becomes significantly pronounced when students encounter religious concepts and frameworks that may be disconnected from their lived experiences and cultural contexts. This disconnect underscores the need for pedagogical approaches to bridge these gaps while supporting the decolonial agenda.

The Humanities Access Programme at this university addresses these inequalities by supporting disadvantaged students in developing the academic and social skills necessary for university success. Following the academic literacy modules in the first semester of the access programmes, students register for one of the faculty's four main modules: political science, psychology, sociology and anthropology. While these subjects provide a foundation for the humanities curriculum, the absence of an access course addressing religion and other underrepresented subjects is concerning. As an academic responsible for teaching the Religious Studies module, I have observed first-hand that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often enter the university underprepared and struggle to engage with foundational concepts in Religious Studies. For example, one of the challenges students face is the difficulty in defining religion as a concept, which is often complex and multifaceted.

Additionally, many students struggle to understand the theistic vs non-theistic nature of religions, which is fundamental in differentiating the belief systems such as Islam and Buddhism. This is compounded by the limitations of the Life Orientation subject at secondary schools, which does not adequately equip students with the specific knowledge needed for university-level Religious Studies. As a result, students are often disadvantaged when engaging with the Religious Studies curriculum, limiting their ability to fully explore intellectual, cultural and religious concepts. While the Humanities Access Programme focuses on developing general academic and social skills, excluding religion modules and other related fields from the curriculum neglects the opportunity to foster critical thinking, empathy and intercultural competence among students.

The absence of Religious Studies from the university's Access Programme reflects broader challenges to the field: how to make religious studies more accessible and relevant to students from diverse educational backgrounds. This gap is particularly significant given that many students entering university from quintile 1-3 schools may have limited exposure to formal religious education beyond their personal religious experiences. This context directly influenced the decision to explore alternative pedagogical approaches that could better serve the student's needs.

This article explores the contribution of the SoTL to Religious Studies. Highlighting the active engagement with SoTL amidst the socio-economic and cultural challenges students face in South Africa, including the #FeesMustFall and decolonisation movements, this article advocates for a constructivist approach to teaching Religious Studies. It argues that integrating the students' lived experiences into the Religious Studies curriculum enhances the co-construction of knowledge. This transformation converts the lecture hall into a dynamic space where knowledge is actively shaped by the students' diverse perspectives, rendering the study of religion more relevant and engaging to them.

The decolonisation of Religious Studies in South Africa highlights the urgent need for curricula that reflect local socio-cultural realities while challenging the dominance of Western paradigms. This aligns with the global critiques of education systems that marginalise Indigenous knowledge and stresses the transformative potential of SoTL in developing inclusive, contextually relevant pedagogies.

8. Fallism Movements

The #MustFall movements, which emerged in South Africa in March 2015, represented a multifaceted challenge to the legacies of colonialism and Apartheid. As Miller (2021) notes, these movements created "epistemic ruptures" questioning the foundations of knowledge production and dissemination within higher education institutions. The demands for renaming buildings and removing colonial statues, as Martinerie (2021) argues, reflected a desire to recover lost territories, identities and freedoms by challenging the entrenched power structures and privileges. Students reclaimed physical and intellectual spaces asserting historically marginalised or suppressed cultural, linguistic and political territories. This challenged the dominance of Western knowledge systems. Foucault's concept of knowledge and power helps illuminate how this resistance not only contested material conditions like tuition fees and

outsourcing of staff but also redefined the very nature of valuable knowledge. Through student-led initiatives on personal and collective relevance topics, the movements encouraged new forms of political agency, breaking down traditional hierarchies and foregrounding marginalised knowledge systems. This underscores the urgency of decolonising higher education institutions to address historical injustices and the ongoing marginalisation of African knowledge systems.

Within Religious Studies, the #MustFall movement's broader call for decolonised education highlighted the need to critically examine traditional teaching approaches. While students were not explicitly demanding changes to the Religious Studies pedagogy, the movement's emphasis on contextual relevance and local knowledge systems prompted pedagogical reflection. This reflection led to a research-driven initiative to explore more effective teaching methods in Religious Studies. The shift from the traditional WRP to a more thematic and locally contextualised teaching method was designed to enhance student understanding by creating meaningful connections between academic content and students' lived experiences.

The #MustFall movements expanded beyond symbolic challenges to focus on broader decolonisation issues in higher education, culminating in the #FeesMustFall phase from October 2015 to October 2017. This phase emphasised financial exclusion and called for a 'free decolonial education', a promise rooted in the national liberation movements' visions of accessible and equitable education (Martinerie, 2021:278). The movement also critiqued broader issues seen as alienating and reinforcing legacies of racism and colonialism (Badat, 2016). While some universities began their decolonisation processes, Greeff et al. (2021) note that students' financial constraints and resource shortages became more visible, underscoring the need for continued decolonisation efforts.

Despite some institutional progress, Waghid and Davids (2022) contend that policy reform alone cannot address the more profound inequities within South African higher education. They stress that democratic initiatives, while transformative in discourse, have not fully succeeded in addressing lived experiences to date (Waghid and Davids, 2022). More focused attention should be placed on the needs of the students as outlined in the relevant discourses, as the slow pace of reform continues to perpetuate existing educational inequalities.

According to Nye (2019), decolonisation extends beyond the classroom, calling for educational practices to respond to socio-political shifts that demand change. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) views decoloniality as a political and epistemological movement aimed at liberating formerly colonised peoples from the ongoing impacts of coloniality. This view critiques the dominance of Euro-North American paradigms, which often fail to address African students' specific realities and needs. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) advocates for curricula that respond to students' lived experiences, emphasising the integration of African epistemologies as a critical aspect of decolonised education.

Mampane et al. (2018) argue that effective decolonisation requires thorough research into decolonial concepts to align curricula with the diverse needs of students. This aligns with Mignolo's (2007) argument for understanding the genealogy of decolonial thought as foundational for curricula that reflect students' lived experiences. As Vorster (2020) points out, SoTL in South Africa is beginning to address the decolonisation of curricula, pedagogies, and research practices. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2015) call for the democratisation of knowledge echoes this, advocating for the recognition of diverse epistemologies, particularly those rooted in African contexts, as essential for decolonised curricula.

Decolonising the curriculum requires a critical examination of the historical development of academic disciplines and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems (Chirikure, 2016). Dei (2000) cautions against constructing a false dichotomy between 'good' indigenous knowledge and 'bad' Western knowledge. Instead, decolonised curricula should validate and incorporate indigenous African knowledge alongside other global systems. Wa Thiong'o (1986, cited in Constandius et al., 2018) argues that African curricula should centre Africa, not relegate it to an appendage of Europe and the West. Decolonisation thus addresses critical issues of student alienation, allowing students to see themselves reflected in their learning.

Incorporating diverse knowledge systems into the curriculum challenges colonial narratives and addresses the unique needs of South African students. As Vorster (2020) notes, the massification and diversification of higher education in South Africa have brought to light significant disparities in student backgrounds, particularly concerning financial status and social class. These disparities underscore the need for targeted interventions to support student success, especially given South African universities' high dropout and failure rates. Studies

show that many students leave without completing their studies, often due to a lack of preparation for the academic demands of higher education (Muswede, 2017; Scott et al., 2007). Decolonising curricula, therefore, becomes an essential step in addressing these educational disparities. SoTL can play a critical role by promoting reflective practices and evidence-based teaching strategies that cater to diverse student needs. By incorporating inclusive pedagogical approaches, institutions can help bridge the gap between high school and university education, ensuring that all students are supported in their academic journeys and that their knowledge systems are valued alongside global epistemologies.

In light of these reflections, it is clear that decolonising Religious Studies is not merely about removing colonial symbols or revising curricula but about fundamentally reshaping how knowledge is produced, taught, and valued in South African higher education institutions.

9. Constructivism and Student-centred Learning

Constructivism, particularly its social dimension as emphasised by Vygotsky, foregrounds the importance of social interaction and cultural context in learning, contrasting with Piaget's focus on individual cognitive processes (Mohammed and Kinyo, 2020). This is especially relevant in the Religious Studies module at this particular university, where students come from diverse religious, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. The constructivist approach allows students to actively engage with religious concepts by drawing on their experiences.

In the context of Religious Studies at this particular university, constructivist pedagogy offers a promising framework for addressing the challenges of decolonial education. When students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds actively engage with religious concepts through their lived experiences, they become co-creators of knowledge rather than passive recipients of Western religious paradigms. The approach directly challenges the traditional WRP's tendency to present religions as fixed, discrete systems.

Understanding constructivist theories is crucial for shaping curriculum design and educational practices, highlighting the dynamic interaction between theory and application (Roux, 2007), a crucial factor in the chosen research methodology. Constructivism posits that knowledge is actively constructed with reality shaped by personal experience (Elliot et al., 2000; Mcleod, 2019). This idea is essential in Religious Studies, where students' religious experiences and prior knowledge play a significant role in interpreting new concepts. The module's focus on

real-life religious experiences, rather than abstract theoretical approaches, allows students to relate classroom discussions to their own lives and broader social contents, which is key in a pluralistic society like South Africa.

The social constructivist emphasis on cultural context and social interaction is relevant to the pilot study's comparison of pedagogical approaches. While the WRP used with the 2021 cohort presented religions as discrete systems to be studied comparatively, the thematic approach adopted with the 2022 cohort deliberately leveraged students' diverse religious experiences as resources for learning. This shift aligned with constructivist principles by acknowledging how students' prior knowledge and cultural contexts shape their understanding of religious phenomena.

Constructivism emphasises that knowledge is actively constructed rather than innately or passively consumed. This process involves students assigning personal meaning to real-life experiences and prior knowledge, shaping how they interpret and assimilate new knowledge (McCray, 2007; Phillips, 1995; McLeod, 2019). Furthermore, constructivism recognises the personal nature of knowledge, acknowledging that each student's perspective is unique, based on their existing knowledge and values. While knowledge is socially constructed – meaning knowledge is created and understood through social interactions, collective experiences and shared cultural contexts – it is continually evolving and personalised, shaped by cultural factors and individual interpretations (Fox, 2001). Additionally, constructivism views learning as an internal process where the mind actively updates and reorganises information to incorporate new experiences. This dynamic process of mental construction allows students to develop their interpretation of reality (Driscoll, 2000). In a broader context, social constructivism builds on these ideas by highlighting how cultural and social dynamics influence knowledge formation and dissemination, particularly in the context of religious beliefs and practices.

The core of constructivist pedagogy is students' engagement as active participants in the learning process, where their prior knowledge and lived experiences inform the co-construction of knowledge. This study was designed to assess the degree to which students' prior knowledge of religious traditions influences classroom discussions and their ability to construct new understandings within a religious studies context. Drawing on the student's experiences, this study aligns with SoTL's student-centred and constructivist approaches, which advocate for creating learning environments that build upon students' existing knowledge, making the

learning process more relevant, engaging, and inclusive. Through the data gathered, the research aimed to inform pedagogical strategies that encourage reflective practices and enhance religious literacy. Dressler's (2018) emphasis on social constructivism in the academic study of religion further grounds the discussion that social and cultural contexts shape religious knowledge. This perspective illustrates how religious realities emerge through the expressions of beliefs and practices by individuals, becoming established as widely recognised norms and internalised within social interactions. African religions, for example, transmit rituals orally across generations, embedding these practices as cultural norms and sacred traditions, thus shaping the individual's worldview. Similarly, in Hinduism, the Vedas – initially transmitted orally by the sages – were later codified into written texts and continue to influence contemporary rituals. Social constructivism acknowledges the dynamic interplay between individual agency and societal structures, offering insights into how religious knowledge evolves and persists (Dressler, 2018). This perspective contrasts with other viewpoints that might prioritise how individuals and their beliefs are shaped entirely by external influences and /or social structures. These theoretical insights provide a valuable lens for understanding how students at this university engage with religious knowledge in diverse settings.

Applying constructivist teaching and learning approaches in Religious Studies classrooms can contribute significant advantages across diverse educational contexts. Constructivism enables students to engage empathetically with religious traditions, facilitating a more personal and interpersonal exploration of the subject. This pedagogical approach encourages students to connect their experiences with the content being studied, enhancing their understanding of religious concepts and practices. Constructivist methods empower students to explore religious ideas independently and through social interaction with their peers, allowing them to ask questions based on their prior knowledge and resources beyond class notes. However, while constructivism promotes independent thinking, students should be able to critically evaluate the reliability and biases of their sources to ensure academic rigour in their interpretations. Moreover, constructivism encourages lively debates by creating zones of proximal development (Goldburg, 2007), where students learn from peers who are more knowledgeable about the subject due to their adherence to the religious tradition being studied. The teaching environment facilitates the critical examination of religious knowledge and language, although academics should be aware of biases when guiding discussions to avoid reinforcing misconceptions. While constructivist methodologies offer several advantages, it is crucial to critically examine the frameworks and paradigms often employed in Religious Studies

education, such as the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), to address inherent limitations and biases.

10. Critiques and Challenges in Religious Studies Education

To address the challenges mentioned above, it is important to consider the appropriateness of paradigms such as the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), which categorises and studies religions as discrete entities, primarily focusing on major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. This paradigm has been widely criticised for oversimplifying the diversity and complexity of religious traditions, thereby essentialising cultures and reinforcing power dynamics that privilege certain religions over others (King, 1999; Masuzawa, 2005).

The limitations of the WRP become increasingly evident when viewed through a constructivist lens. While the WRP's systematic categorisation of religions might offer clarity, it often fails to capture the realities of religious practice, especially in the South African context, where religious identities are often fluid and syncretic. The paradigm's tendency to present religions as bounded, discrete entities contradicts both constructivist learning principles and the actual experiences of many South African students.

The researcher's experience with the 2021 cohort highlighted these limitations, as students often struggled to reconcile the WRP's neat categorisations with their own complex religious experiences and understandings. This observation and the calls for decolonised education emerging from the #MustFall movements motivated the shift to a more thematic, constructivist approach with the 2022 cohort. This shift in pedagogy aimed to cultivate a space where students critically examined how religious knowledge is shaped and transmitted, moving beyond abstract theory to engage with their personal and social realities. From a SoTL perspective, this approach aligns with the need to move beyond static, content-heavy teaching and towards reflective practices that allow students and academics to critically assess how religious identities evolve and intersect with power, identity, and social justice issues.

From a SoTL perspective, effective teaching requires moving beyond static content-heavy approaches and encouraging reflective practices that allow students and academics to critically assess how religious identities evolve and intersect with power, identity and social justice issues. Reducing religious traditions to essentialist stereotypes, the categorisation in the WRP

can lead to misunderstandings and limited perspectives among students, particularly those who lack a foundational understanding of the broader context and complexities of religious practices (Murphy, 2010; Nye, 2019). The WRP's rigid categorisation prevents this level of critical engagement, resulting in misunderstandings and limited perspectives, particularly among students who lack foundational knowledge of the broader complexities of religious practices. Addressing the tendency to oversimplify Religious Studies involves challenging paradigms such as the WRP and advocating for educational frameworks that encompass the complexities within religious traditions.

11. Research Design and Methodology

11.1 Context and Research Design

This pilot study emerged from a convergence of three key contexts discussed in previous sections: the ongoing calls for decolonisation in South African higher education catalysed by the #MustFall movements, the limitations of the WRP in addressing local educational needs, and the potential of constructivist pedagogy to create more inclusive learning environments. The study specifically examined how two different pedagogical approaches might better serve the goals of decolonial education in Religious Studies at a South African public university.

The study addressed three primary research questions:

1. How does the transition from WRP to thematic teaching approaches affect student engagement with religious concepts?
2. To what extent does a constructivist pedagogy support decolonial objectives in Religious Studies?
3. How do students' prior knowledge and experiences influence their engagement with different teaching approaches?

12. Theoretical Framing

The research is grounded in critical pedagogical theory, which provides a framework for understanding how knowledge is socially constructed and contextually situated. This theoretical foundation acknowledges that educational processes involve inherent power dynamics and positions learning as a transformative dialogical experience. Such a framework aligns with the aim of the research to examine how different pedagogical approaches influence student engagement with religious concepts and support decolonial objectives.

12.1 Comparative Framework

12.1 (a) 2021 Cohort – World Religions Paradigm Approach

The first phase of the study (n=27) utilised the traditional WRP approach, which:

- Structured content around major world religions as discrete categories
- Followed a systematic examination of beliefs, practices, and traditions
- Presented religions through established taxonomies
- Emphasised comparative analysis of different religious systems

12.1 (b) 2022 Cohort – Thematic Approach

The second phase (n=32) employed a thematic approach that:

- Organised content around contemporary themes and issues (e.g. gender and religion and digital religion)
- Examined how different religions engaged with similar themes
- Emphasised intersectionality and lived experiences
- Focused on local contexts and applications

13. Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected through surveys administered to both cohorts mid-semester during their respective academic years (2021 and 2022). This timing was strategically chosen to allow students sufficient engagement with the course material while ensuring their perspectives were still fresh and evolving. The data collection process focused on four key areas: capturing the diversity of student backgrounds and religious diversity, assessing expectations and perceptions of the religious studies module, evaluating the impact of teaching approaches on student learning and understanding shifts in student perceptions and critical thinking.

14. Survey Instrument

The survey instrument remained consistent across both years to support comparative validity. The survey collected data about students' religious identification and background, prior knowledge of religious traditions, self-reported religiosity, course expectations and demographic information. This systematic approach allowed the researcher to track cohort changes and patterns while maintaining methodological rigour.

15. Participatory Action Research Framework

The study utilised the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework to involve students as co-researchers (McTaggart, 1997) actively. This approach was chosen for its

- emphasis on collaborative knowledge creation;
- alignment with decolonial objectives;
- capacity to make the curriculum more relevant to student's lived realities and
- the ability to accommodate remote learning during COVID-19 while preserving participant engagement.

The researcher's analytical approach employed quantitative methods to examine four primary dimensions: knowledge of religious traditions, influence of societal and cultural background, perceptions of religious studies and the impact of teaching approaches on student learning. The analysis revealed several key metrics that informed the understanding of student engagement: prior religious knowledge showed a slight decline from 62.9% in 2021 to 56.2% in 2022, religious identification shifted from 40.7% to 34.4%, and self-reported religiosity decreased from 51.9% to 46.9%.

16. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted under the ethical approval of the university's ethics committee, with careful attention to the sensitive nature of religious identity and practice. Specific measures were implemented to protect participant privacy and ensure ethical data handling. These included obtaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining strict confidentiality and anonymity protocols, and securing all data storage and handling processes.

17. Findings and Discussion

17.1 Impact of Transitioning from WRP to Thematic Approaches

The shift from WRP to thematic teaching approaches significantly influenced student engagement with religious concepts. The comparative analysis revealed that while the WRP approach in 2021 achieved basic religious literacy goals, the thematic approach in 2022 allowed students to engage more deeply with the module content. Although there was a slight decrease in students who reported that RELG 101 helped them recognise the purpose and meaning of religion in society, from 96.2% in 2021 to 93.7% in 2022. More significantly, the percentage of students who demonstrated critical engagement with religious concepts increased from 37% to 46.9%. This substantial increase in critical engagement suggests that a

thematic approach better facilitates analytical thinking and deeper understanding, even as overall comprehension remains strong.

17.2 Constructivist Pedagogy and Decolonial Objectives

The implementation of constructivist pedagogy showed promising results in supporting decolonial objectives. The most striking evidence comes from the increase in students recognising the importance of understanding various religions and cultures, rising from 92.6% in 2021 to 100% in 2022. This shift suggests that constructivist approaches better enable students to appreciate diverse perspectives and challenge Western-centric narratives. The data also reveals that students in the 2022 cohort were more likely to question established religious paradigms and consider local contexts, with 63.7% reporting that the course challenged their views about religion. This aligns with the decolonial objectives of dismantling Western epistemologies and validating diverse ways of knowing. As noted earlier, the increase in critical engagement also indicates that students are developing the tools to question dominant narratives and consider alternative epistemologies.

17.3 Influence of Prior Knowledge and Student Experiences

The analysis of student religious backgrounds reveals important patterns in religious identification and engagement over the two-year period. While religious identification remained relatively stable, with only a slight increase from 77.7% in 2021 to 78.2% in 2022, notable changes were observed in other areas. Prior knowledge of religious traditions showed a modest decline from 62.9% to 56.2%, suggesting potential shifts in how students engage with religious knowledge before registering for the module. Similarly, self-reported religiosity decreased from 51.9% to 46.9%, indicating changing relationships with religious practice among the student population.

17.4 Critical Analysis of Teaching Approaches

The findings highlight significant limitations in traditional approaches to religious education, particularly the World Religions Paradigm (WRP). This traditional framework, while historically (and currently) dominant, tends to present religions as static, homogenous entities, often reinforcing stereotypes and oversimplifying the lived experiences of religious adherents. In contrast, the data from this study suggests that a thematic approach yields more positive outcomes in student engagement and understanding. This is evident in the increased recognition of religious literacy importance, which rose from 92.6% in 2021 to 100% in 2022,

and higher rates of critical engagement, with agreement rates rising from 37% in 2021 to 46.9% in 2022.

18. Theoretical Implications

The study's findings contribute to contemporary scholarship on Religious Studies pedagogy, particularly in decolonial contexts. These results strongly support Goldberg's (2007) critique of the 'glossary approach', which reduces complex religious systems into a banking approach of rote memorisation. This reductive method often fails to capture the nature of religions and their practices in non-Western contexts. The data also reinforces Kreber's (2013) argument that the scholarship of teaching and learning must extend beyond mere effectiveness to address broader issues of social justice and power dynamics in education. This alignment between the survey findings and established frameworks suggests important directions for the evolution of religious studies pedagogy.

19. Recommendations

Based on the findings, this article proposes several key recommendations for enhancing Religious Studies education. First, interactive teaching methods should be prioritised to encourage critical reflection and facilitate meaningful peer discussions. These methods should integrate students' lived experiences while challenging their preconceptions about religious traditions. Second, a thematic approach focusing on contemporary issues and examining intersections with culture and society proves more effective than traditional paradigms. Finally, critical engagement should be encouraged through carefully designed learning activities that challenge assumptions and biases while promoting an understanding of religious diversity.

These recommendations aim to transform the lecture hall into a space for meaningful intellectual exchange while preparing students for engagement with religious diversity in South Africa's pluralistic society. The evidence suggests that this approach enhances learning and better serves the broader goals of decolonial education in the South African context.

20. COVID-19 Impact and Limitations

Acknowledging the study's limitations, particularly the low student enrolment numbers during the pandemic, which reduced the sample size, is important. This limitation means the findings cannot be generalised to the broader student population. However, the insights gained remain valuable, as they offer a snapshot of the student's prior knowledge and its potential to inform the co-construction of knowledge. The data reflects the experiences of students at this

particular HEI, where the student body is diverse in terms of religious, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, making these insights particularly relevant to discussions around inclusivity and equity in the curriculum.

21. Conclusion

This pilot study highlights the transformative potential of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in reshaping Religious Studies pedagogy within South African higher education. The comparative analysis of two teaching approaches – the World Religions Paradigm and a thematic approach – reveals promising directions for decolonial education. The shift to thematic teaching, supported by constructivist pedagogy, demonstrated measurable improvements in student engagement and critical thinking, with the percentage of students demonstrating critical engagement increasing from 37% to 46.9%. Additionally, recognition of religious literacy as an essential skill increased from 92.6% to 100% between the two cohorts, emphasising the impact of pedagogical restructuring on student learning.

While SoTL has gained global traction, its interpretation and implementation vary significantly depending on local contexts. In South Africa, a country shaped by a unique historical and socio-political landscape, there has been a pressing need to reassess Western educational paradigms and integrate local, indigenous knowledge systems with the curriculum. The #MustFall movements further highlighted these demands, pushing higher education institutions towards curriculum transformations to redress historical injustices. However, structural challenges – including persistent educational inequalities and resource disparities - continue to hinder the full realisation of SoTL's potential, contributing to high student dropouts and failure rates.

These findings reinforce the argument that moving beyond traditional Western paradigms is necessary to create inclusive and contextually relevant learning environments. Integrating students' lived experiences and prior knowledge into the curriculum enhances engagement and deepens their understanding of religious diversity. Roeland (2023) critiques the oversimplification of Religious Studies, particularly the reduction of religious traditions to static categories that obscure their fluidity and complexity. This study's findings support that critique, demonstrating how thematic teaching mitigates essentialist stereotypes by encouraging students to critically engage with religious traditions in ways that reflect the hybridity and contested nature of contemporary belief systems.

Effective decolonisation requires more than content revision – it demands a fundamental shift in how knowledge is co-constructed and shared in the lecture hall. The success of the thematic approach in nurturing deeper engagement with religious concepts while supporting decolonial objectives highlights its potential for broader implementation. Insights from student surveys suggest that many enrolled in introductory Religious Studies modules identify with a particular religion and bring varying levels of prior knowledge about other traditions. Their understanding of religion includes not only doctrinal aspects but also lived experiences of religious diversity, contestation, and engagement – insights that shape how they construct meaning in the classroom. This underscores the value of a constructivist pedagogy that validates student knowledge and positions them as co-creators of learning rather than passive recipients of information.

Looking ahead, this research calls for adopting constructivist, student-centred approaches in Religious Studies education. Such approaches strengthen academic engagement and address historical inequities in South African higher education, as the #MustFall movements emphasised. By valuing diverse knowledge systems and positioning students as active participants in knowledge construction, Religious Studies can move beyond the constraints to a more inclusive and socially just educational environment.

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CHAPTER 3: The Big Five – Why Context Matters in Religious Studies³

1. Abstract

The World Religions Paradigm (WRP) has long served as the predominant framework for teaching Religious Studies globally and in South Africa. However, criticisms of the WRP highlight its tendency to marginalize non-Christian, non-Western and non-white perspectives. This article examines these critiques in the context of South Africa, particularly in light of the events of 2015–2016, when the #MustFall movement sought to raise and address issues of decolonization. This paper will argue that South Africa provides a pertinent example of the need to re-evaluate pedagogical choices in Religious Studies education by emphasizing the importance of context in re-shaping the curriculum.

Keywords: religious studies education, world religions paradigm, decolonization, South Africa

2. Introduction

Teaching religion requires a systematic approach that allows students to gain a coherent insight into the complex nature of religions, both historically and contextually (Havlíček, 2018). While the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) has traditionally provided a classification framework for organizing religious material, it has faced criticism for its exclusionary nature, particularly regarding non-Christian, non-Western and non-white perspectives. In this paper, I will argue that the WRP's taxonomic approach is not suitable for the first-year introductory Religious Studies module at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, specifically in light of South Africa's unique historical and social context as highlighted by the #MustFall movement in 2015–2016. The paper emphasizes the importance of considering the context in shaping the Religious Studies curricula.

3. World Religions Paradigm

The WRP holds a significant position in the ongoing debate about the so-called correct pedagogical approach within the Religious Studies programs, both locally and globally, and the discipline of religion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal is no exception. The concept of the paradigm encompasses a distinct set of assumptions, concepts or thought patterns which provide a theoretical framework that determines what is considered legitimate contributions to religious studies. Over several decades, this model has been widely employed in teaching religious studies modules.

³ This chapter has already been published; hence it is in the format of the journal. Vencatsamy, B. (2024). The world religions paradigm: Why context matters in religious studies. *Critical Research on Religion*, 12(1), 12-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20503032241226966>

One of the fundamental aspects of the WRP is its essentialized approach to the study of religion, which aims to distinguish the most prominent and widespread world religions, often referred to as the 'Big Five,' namely Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These traditions are presented in an Abraham-centric order and are considered to have attained substantial support and followers, rendering them formidable forces that have played a crucial role in shaping global history in various ways (Smith, 1998, p. 280).

Attributed to Ninian Smart, the emergence of the WRP in the 1960s took place against the backdrop of "the context of colonial discourses" in the United Kingdom (UK) (Bleisch & Schwab, 2021, p. 1). During this period, narratives and opinions about the religion and religious traditions of colonized societies were predominantly communicated from the perspective of the colonizers, resulting in the paradigm developing as a means to divide religions into an East-West, us-them binary, reinforcing colonial hierarchies and power dynamics (Masuzawa, 2005). While the original intention behind the WRP was to broaden the study of religion beyond its Christian focus and encompass other prominent religious traditions worldwide, the term 'world religions' was initially misinterpreted to refer exclusively to the world's major religions (Fujiwara, 2016). For instance, in England's religious education sector, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Sikhism were embraced as the religions imported by immigrant communities, credited to religious pluralism and included in the religious education curriculum during this period. However, minor religions, particularly those lacking in sacred texts, were excluded.

The WRP has heavily influenced the structure of the Religious Studies curricula, with religion courses often classified based on central beliefs, historical developments, scriptures and founders, categorizing religions into discrete traditions with supposedly "global" significance (Cotter & Robertson, 2016, p. vii). Despite its prevalence in the academic study of religion, the WRP has been subjected to rigorous criticism over the years (Cotter & Robertson, 2016). Scholars such as Smith (1978), Masuzawa (2005), Owen (2011), Fujiwara (2016), and Alberts (2017) have extensively critiqued the WRP, offering objections in three key areas of contention. Firstly, the paradigm has been accused of modeling Religious Studies on Christianity, touting it as the ultimate truth while designating other faiths as having a lesser value. This approach inherently upholds a Christian-centric view, influencing how other religious traditions are perceived within the framework.

Secondly, the close association of the WRP with discourses of power stems from its historical context in colonialism, impacting on the academic study of religion (Owen, 2011). The paradigm accentuates hierarchical categorizations, prioritizing Christianity and the 'Big Five' world religions, while often asserting their superiority over other traditions (Havlíček, 2018). Lopez (1998) highlights the contrast between Christianity's link with political power and lesser-known religions that claim universality beyond their geographical boundaries.

Moreover, the WRP's essentialized and ahistorical perspective provides an "unsuspecting sui generis model of religion," treating religions as distinct, independent entities devoid of historical contexts (Cotter & Robertson, 2016, p. 7). This oversimplification fails to recognize the dynamic and contextual nature of religious traditions. The paradigm's construction of religions, using terms like 'faith' and 'holy scriptures' in an essentialized manner, further disregards historical and cultural contexts (Bleisch & Schwab, 2021). Non-Christian religions are evaluated based on Christian standards, where beliefs played a central role.

According to Cotter and Robertson (2016), the knowledge gained from colonial ventures employed to exercise control and power is echoed in the WRP. The association between Christianity and political authority facilitated the export of these beliefs across the Globe, making belief the benchmark by which all religions were judged (Lopez, 1998). Two decades earlier, Smith (1978) asserted that from the perspective of the WRP, other religious traditions could only be classified as religions if they conformed to the Western criteria of Christianity. This monopoly on power reflected the underlying political and economic debates on how the world's populace was divided into adherents of the Big Five (Cotter & Robertson, 2016) and the lesser species (Havlíček, 2018) of religions.

As a pedagogical tool for introducing undergraduate students to various religions, the shortcomings of the WRP have become more apparent over time as highlighted by Bell (2006). One of the paradigm's significant drawbacks is its selective nature in determining which religions are included and which are left out. This selectiveness runs the risk of perpetuating the idea that some religions hold greater significance or are more globally relevant compared to others (Bell, 2006, p. 34). Such an exclusive stance could inadvertently suggest that specific religious traditions do not meet the criteria for being labeled as world religions, potentially marginalizing a wide array of spiritual expressions.

Moreover, Chidester (2018) highlights the flaws of the WRP when applied to South African religious studies during the Apartheid and post-apartheid periods. The classification of world religions, with its arbitrary construction, where certain religious traditions were selected for inclusion without clear and objective criteria, has led to an uneven representation of religious diversity and has marginalized certain belief systems, particularly those of indigenous and non-Western cultures. Chidester further argues that this classification has been historically influenced by Eurocentric perspectives and colonial ideologies, where European colonial powers often imposed their own religious categories and interpretations onto indigenous cultures, disregarding the unique practices and spiritualities of these cultures. These biases perpetuated historical injustices and the paradigm's exclusionary stance opposed religious practices of colonized people, particularly the African religions (Chidester, 2018).

While historically the division of the world into world religions served the imperialist project, enabling conceptual control over religious diversity, during apartheid, the South African government controlled educational institutions to maintain cultural and racial dominance, leading to a focus on a limited number of world religions conveniently bypassing the religious practices of non-white ethnic groups (Chidester, 2018).

In response to the WRP's shortcomings, this paper argues for a more inclusive and contextually sensitive approach to religious studies in South Africa. This approach recognizes the agency of individuals in shaping religious practices and meaning and seeks to move beyond the paradigm's eurocentric perspective.

The various classifications of religions within the WRP create the impression that religion itself has agency and hence social control over how the subject is taught and is independent of human agency. This augments the ability of the students to determine and make meaning based on their contexts – which encapsulates the *sui generis* model mentioned by Cotter and Robertson (2016). In agreement with Ramey (2016), they argue that religion is not inherently endowed with the agency to dictate how it is taught. Rather, it is portrayed by those who teach it as

possessing agency. Furthermore, the construction of religion occurs through these presentations, rather than being merely reconstructed and reinterpreted.

However, this approach has faced criticism for misrepresenting the lived experiences of religious believers and has led to a pillarization of religions, often presenting them as monolithic entities (Cooling, 2021). Pillarization, described as the division of society into distinct groups based on religion and their corresponding political beliefs, becomes evident through this perspective (Molendijk, 2022). Such a colonizing approach ultimately fails to reflect the complexities and diversities of the broader religious landscape (Owen, 2011).

In light of these critiques, it is essential for scholars and educators in Religious Studies to critically engage with the WRP and explore alternative approaches that promote inclusivity, contextual sensitivity and an authentic representation of religious beliefs and practices. Embracing perspectives such as the lived religion approach, postcolonial theories and intersectionality may offer more comprehensive and nuanced insights into religious traditions globally. By acknowledging the historical context and shortcomings of the WRP, the University of KwaZulu-Natal and other institutions can lead the way toward a more reflexive and culturally sensitive study of religion within their academic programs.

4. Religion Education in South Africa: A Brief History

To argue against the WRP's method of introducing first-year students to the study of religion through compartmentalization at the said institution, it is necessary to delve into the history of religion education in South Africa. Against the backdrop of the historical context, Van den Heever (1994) argues that any theoretical reflection on religion and the study thereof cannot be undertaken without examining the political landscape of South Africa.

The onset of colonialism with the arrival of the Dutch in South Africa in 1652, was the beginning of centuries of religious flagrances that have had a lasting effect on the country. The doctrine of Christianity was employed in South Africa to justify the European colonial expansion from the 16th to the 19th century, and facilitated racial and religious segregation by underpinning the religious motives in government policies. However, the religious monopoly was one-sided where the purveyors of power were found solely within the Reformed Protestant Church. This one form of Christianity was hallowed to the exclusion of other denominations and other religions. As a result, the reformed church played a significant role in shaping a Christian South Africa and was closely involved in implementing the racial segregation that governed the country (Van Den Heever, 2004).

The arrival of the missionaries towards the end of the 18th century coincided with Britain's first occupation of the Cape, which meant that along with the superior position that Christianity already held in the country, the denigration of the African customs as barbaric and primitive was further enabled. The core focus of the missionaries and their mission stations was for the African people to eradicate their worldviews and adopt the culture and customs of the European settlers. The self-proclaimed sources of literacy meant that many African people were educated within the contexts of the mission stations. While religious education had been present in schools from the time of the arrival of the first (foreign) settlers, this was limited to instruction

in the Christian faith (Summers, 1992). In contrast, as inferred by Rose and Tunmer (1975), the missionary approach was a Calvinistic attempt to either convert non-Christian students or nurture the faith of those who claimed to be Christians, rather than a genuine effort to teach and promote religious education.

When the National Party assumed power in 1948, one of the critical development initiatives was implementing a new educational system in South Africa, further emphasizing Christianity as the religion of the Afrikaner populace. Although this regime did not establish Religious Studies in South Africa, the Christian National Education (CNE) policy sought to instill in children a particular brand of Christianity that mostly criticized other religions by highlighting its authority and a traditional Christian view of morality and reality, while simultaneously discouraging individualism and difference. Designed to protect the identity of the Afrikaner nation (Summers, 1992), the education system sought to close the social and economic divide between the Afrikaans and English-speaking populations established during British Colonial rule (Damon, 2016). The CNE was premised on a distorted interpretation of Christianity that erroneously endorsed racial discrimination and Apartheid policies.

Fuelled by their quest for 'separateness' and superiority, the Afrikaners considered themselves God's chosen people with an ordained mission, the nationalist government further reinforcing this. This ideology not only formed the cornerstone of Apartheid, but the already flawed education system became a primary vehicle for propagating the government's agenda. An underlying principle of the Apartheid rule was to enforce strict separation among languages, cultures, races and especially religion (Marquard, 1959, p. 4). As a result, South African society and its institutions were forcibly segregated along cultural lines (Amin, 2005).

The then prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd's opening address to parliament in 1953, which stated that the black population should only be educated based on the Christian faith, indicated the nationalist ambition to exert even stricter administrative control over Black schools. This was evidenced in the introduction of the Bantu Education Act 47 of 1953. This Act ensured the transfer of control of Black education from the church and mission schools to the state. Verwoerd's address not only saw the segregation of universities in 1959, but the establishment of a separate education system in 1963 for the Coloured (mixed-race) populace, with education Acts passed for the Indians in 1964 and the Whites in 1967. As argued by Naidu (2011), the apartheid education system promoted race, class, cultural and gender divisions, which emphasised separateness rather than citizenship and nationhood. Even though the nationalist government sought to separate the running of the education departments according to race, the teaching of religion remained mandatory, occupying a pivotal place in the teaching curriculum. Religion, from this perspective, meant Christian and reformed, and Christianity became the *de facto* religion taught at state schools and institutions of higher learning.

The 1980s heralded a surge of political action, social unrest and anti-apartheid resistance led by various individuals and groups, including students, academics and religious leaders, which contributed to changing views and contexts on religion in education and higher education. The apartheid system was in force at the time and the government's policies and actions significantly impacted on the educational environment, particularly religious education.

There was a growing realization of the need to confront the dominant character of the CNE and encourage a more inclusive and varied approach to religious education. Scholars, educators and

activists engaged in critical dialogues and debates, investigating alternate views and criticizing the system's inherent biases and exclusions. All of these interactions took place in the context of South Africa's quest for democracy, equality, justice and social transformation.

According to Van den Heever (1994), religious communities in the 1990s attempted to insulate themselves against political change in the country. By considering religion as ahistorical and monolithic, Christianity was regarded as the truth, distinguishing it from falsehood (other faiths). As a result, any interreligious syncretism had to be denied, as any contact with foreign traditions would taint one's own traditions.

Until the early 1990s and despite the separateness that defined the schooling communities, the teaching of religious education was homogenous. During this time, there were numerous debates on the suitability of religious education in the school curriculum due to its association with Apartheid and the history of white dominance that shaped the country. Bible education was a compulsory yet non-examinable subject in all public schools for all Grade 1–12 students. On the contrary Biblical Studies functioned as an examinable elective similar to subjects like math, geography and biology from Grades 9–12. The Dutch Reformed Church and Christian National Education policy determined the curricula and “dogma” for these subjects (Louw, 2014, p. 175). The inclusion of Bible Education and Biblical Studies in Bantu Education served an ideological agenda, reinforcing the cultural hegemony of the Apartheid Government by shaping the minds of citizens who could be politically and culturally controlled (Smit & Chetty, 2016).

The African National Congress (ANC) won South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, formally ending Apartheid and the era of white minority rule. With the political changes came classroom changes, with students of different linguistic, religious, cultural, and racial backgrounds sharing the same space. All children were given the right to a foundational education under the nation's new constitution. This initiated the country's lengthy restructuring of the curricula and the education system. The role of religion in public education was extensively debated from 1996 to 2003. While discussions and transformation within the context of education in general continued, the matter of religion was held in abeyance until 2003 (Van der Walt, 2011) when Kader Asmal, the education minister at the time, announced the enactment of the National Policy on Religion in Education (2003).

Within this framework, the new policy for teaching and learning religion was inclusive (Chidester, 2003), allowing pupils to investigate their own religious identities within the country's diverse settings. Abandoning the enforced Christian education of the apartheid era, the policy on religion in education proposed teaching and learning outcomes centred on religious diversity that promoted an empathetic understanding of religion, thus allowing students to reflect critically on religious identity and diversity. The National Policy on Religion in Education, under the umbrella of the South Africa Schools Act (Act 27 of 1996), forbade confessional and denominational religion from being taught in state schools (Van der Walt, 2011). The implementation of the policy prepared the way for two new examinable subjects, namely Religion Studies (Grades 10–12) and the teaching of religion education in Life Orientation (Grades R–12) (National Policy on Religion in Education, 2003, p.14).

5. The Changing Trajectory in Higher Education

Prior to 1994, the study of religion in South Africa was primarily situated within the broader field of theology. However, with the advent of a democratic state in 1994, there was a significant shift in the positioning of Religious Studies as a discipline within higher education. As the country embraced democracy, Religious Studies gained increasing autonomy and had to redefine its role and place within the academic landscape. The political changes allowed Religious Studies to break free from its previous alignment with theology and establish itself as an independent and distinct academic discipline. Prior to the change in the political dispensation, specific departments were tasked with specific religious studies education. That is, the departments of Islamic Studies focused on Islam, Hindu studies on Hinduism, and Jewish Studies departments on Judaism. At this point, Religious Studies departments at universities were viewed as a solid alternative to theology, which pre-1994 had been well positioned within the education sector. Before the merger leading to the formation of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) stood as a constituent institution, holding a prominent position in the field of religious studies with an array of religion specific departments. During 1997–1999 the Centre for Religious Studies underwent minor curriculum changes. One significant area of discussion was the terminology used to refer to African Religions. The preference shifted from African Traditional Religions to African Religions. The argument was that using the former term, African Traditional Religions, contributed to the derogatory nuances placed on it by scholars worldwide and relegated it to a secondary category of religion, while its contextual relevance was crucial to South Africa's transition.

In 2015–2016 new voices began to emerge among students and academics in South Africa, calling for the decolonization and transformation of the curriculum. Having gained significant momentum, the movement challenged the academy to deal with the lingering effects of colonialism and Apartheid that continued to shape the country's education system. By fostering inclusion, diversity and a deeper understanding of the African knowledge systems, the movement sought to elevate marginalized voices. The emergence of the #MustFall movement saw students calling for the decolonization of the university and for symbols, spaces and curricula (Behari-Leak & Mokou, 2019) to be more relevant to the experiences and contexts of all South African students. Spurred on by the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2015, which saw the defacing of the statue of imperialist Cecil John Rhodes, a series of protests took place across universities in the country. The removal of the Rhodes statue at UCT was not only a victory for the student body but was the beginning of increased efforts to decolonize South African universities, which also resulted in the #FeesMustFall movement at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) in October 2015 (Martineri, 2021). According to Martineri (2021), the #MustFall movement was a new platform for expressing the voices of the marginalized who sought the socioeconomic inclusion promised in 1994 but which had never materialized. This series of protests led to a reverberation of unrest worldwide, with students expressing similar isolation and alienation in higher education in the UK, India, and the United States of America (Behari-Leak & Mokou, 2019).

Some of the key objectives of the decolonization movement within the South African context involved the call to include African and indigenous knowledge systems into the curriculum to recognize their value and contributions to various sectors. While the WRP, in its traditional stance, did not include religions such as African Religions within its structure, at UKZN, the

section on Buddhism, which formed the fifth component of the Big Five, was replaced by African Religions. However, it begged the question whether this was sufficient recourse. Acknowledging African Religions as valid yet complex religious systems with their own beliefs, rituals and customs was a way of overcoming the historical marginalization of the tradition. This recognition required not only an appreciation of the cultural contexts of the religion, but also the diverse way in which they shaped African societies. Western knowledge was prioritized by challenging the epistemic injustices perpetuating unequal power dynamics, leading to the marginalization or dismissal of African knowledge. In challenging the Eurocentric biases that traditionally dominated the education systems in South Africa, the decolonization movement argued that the existing curricula reflected the ideologies, values and power dynamics from the colonial era by excluding cultural and historical narratives.

Student demonstrations, curriculum reform requests and the formation of student-led organizations campaigning for decolonized education have all resulted from the movement. It has also spurred debates and conversations in academic institutions and society on the need for an educational revolution by challenging traditional teaching methods and calling for a more participatory and inclusive pedagogic approach. This includes encouraging students to engage in debate, critical thinking and collaborative learning to empower them and create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. In response to the movement, South African universities have launched decolonization programs, including modifying course material, creating new courses, integrating local languages, sponsoring research on African knowledge systems and providing spaces for African voices to be heard.

Considering the historical context of South Africa up until 2015, it is not surprising that the WRP prevailed as the framework for religious studies, even if in a nuanced manner. The legacy of colonization, the impact of Apartheid and the emergence of religious studies in the post-apartheid era with a more significant focus on comparative religion, reinforced the use of the paradigm. However, in light of the decolonization movement that emerged in 2015/2016, there is a compelling need to reconsider and reshape how religious studies are currently taught. The goal is to move beyond the historical biases and limitations imposed by the WRP and embrace a more inclusive, diverse and culturally sensitive approach to the study of religion that encompasses indigenous knowledge systems, marginalized perspectives and diverse religious voices within the South African context.

6. Why Context Matters

According to Corrywright (2016), pedagogy is often not about what is taught, but rather, how it is taught, a crucial aspect when defining and classifying religious concepts and phenomena.

Thus, any attempt to rethink the pedagogical approach of Religious Studies must also consider the need to produce critically engaged students knowledgeable about the different ideologies embedded in the various religions – an essential learning outcome in the Religious Studies curriculum. Owen (2011) further claims that the WRP is most resistant to changes in pedagogy, particularly in introductory religion courses. This resistance occurs for two reasons. In her own experience, Owen argues that students first expect to be taught from the WRP framework. Second, although many international Religious Studies disciplines claim to reject the world religions framework, many courses are still organised according to Eastern and Western

traditions, perpetuating the influence of the WRP as an underlying subtext within these courses (Tite, 2015).

When designing introductory religion courses in South Africa, it is essential to consider their distinctive purpose. Clingerman and O'Brien (2015) identify two primary objectives: introducing a field of study to potential majors and providing a fundamental understanding of a subject that fosters critical thinking, one of the universal prerequisites of higher education. Given the complexity of South Africa's history and the multicultural context in which courses are taught, context becomes a crucial factor in curriculum design.

Clingerman and O'Brien (2015) further argue that course design should align with the social context in which it is taught, considering the varied educational and religious background of the students and the relevant curricular context. Given the dynamics of the student population across South African institutions and the country's historical background, the focus on context becomes particularly significant. While comprehensive content coverage is not feasible at first-year level, Smith (1988) suggests that introductory courses should extend beyond descriptive levels, including rote memorization. Instead, they should prioritize building skills that will assist students to distinguish and analyze how society and the study of religion are contextually interlinked and constructed.

7. The Way Forward - The WRP and its limitations in South African religious studies

In their publication, *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, Cotter and Robertson (2016) offer various scenarios on how the WRP has been adapted at different institutions by contributing authors, but in a somewhat subversive manner: rather than eschewing the model entirely, a critique of the WRP forms a crucial part of the curricula. They argue that the WRP is a culturally constructed tool manipulated to categorise human behaviour (both virtuous and immoral) into religious categories. Martin (2016) reiterates how the fundamental beliefs of tradition have been manipulated, used, re-used and recycled throughout the past few decades in various historical and geographic contexts.

In light of the calls for decolonization and curriculum diversification, it has become crucial to rethink the religious studies curriculum at introductory level at South African tertiary institutions. The country boasts a rich diversity of indigenous religions that have evolved over the centuries and hold significant importance in many people's lives. These religions are often characterized by complex belief systems, practices and rituals, making it challenging to fit them neatly into the compartmentalized boxes determined by the WRP. As a method used to classify religions into distinct and separate categories, the WRP has become unsuitable as a benchmark for teaching a first-year religious studies module within the South African context.

By categorizing indigenous religions as the 'Other' or disregarding these altogether, the WRP is deliberately ignoring their distinct cultural and, most importantly, their spiritual heritage. This disregard poses a problem because decolonization in the context of religion calls for recognizing and valuing other religions and ways of being. Such recognition should encompass aspects that may not have been extensively documented or adhered to the history typically

associated with Christianity or Western religion. These may include but are not restricted to the kinds of knowledgeable wealth and dogma usually associated with Western religion.

South Africa's tumultuous history of colonization, Apartheid and migration has fostered a unique blend of cultural mixing and syncretism, resulting in numerous hybrid religions. These syncretic belief systems often amalgamate elements of various religious traditions, intertwining African indigenous religions with Christianity and/or Islam. In this complex tapestry of religion, the systematic application of the WRP poses significant challenges when teaching religious studies in South Africa. As discussed earlier, one of the main issues is the pervasive influence of Christianity, which acts as the yardstick for comparing and understanding other religions. As the dominant religion in the country's historical landscape, Christianity shaped the perspectives of the majority of South African students. Consequently, when using the WRPs written sources and a Christian-based framework as a reference point, religions such as African Religions, transmitted through an oral tradition, are unfairly undervalued. This perpetuates an epistemic injustice that emerges when decolonizing the curriculum and seeking to give due recognition to a multifarious religious heritage.

Moreover, the WRP fails to adequately create space for crucial aspects of African religion, such as ancestral veneration, which holds immense significance in the spiritual lives of its adherents. Additionally, the social and political dimensions of the African Independent Churches, intimately linked to the anti-apartheid struggle, are marginalized within the WRP's confines. This overlooks religion's profound role in shaping South Africa's socio-political landscape. Religion in South Africa is strongly intertwined with identity, intersecting across race, class, and ethnicity. However, the WRP tends to oversimplify the construction of religious identities in the country, disregarding the intricate web of cultural influences and lived experiences that shape religious beliefs and practices. While efforts have been made at institutions such as UKZN to appreciate African Religions within the broader World Religions Paradigm, the inherent prejudices persist.

8. The Oversimplification of the WRP

Barrett (2020) asserts that Christianity, along with its privilege and power, greatly influenced the study of religion on multiple fronts. In an attempt to teach a world religion course with greater nuance, Ramey (2006) argues that it is imperative to challenge the idealised image of religions influenced by the Christian prototype. This necessity arises due to the negative stereotyping of other religions, such as portraying Hinduism as idolatry and Islam as inherently violent, which results in students enrolling in religion courses harbouring misconceptions. This stereotyping indicates a significant problem in how religion is presented as an academic field of study as argued by Corrywright (2016). The student's capacity to distinguish the differences and recognise similarities between and within religions is further hindered by stereotypical presentations. Ramey (2006) also draws attention to how colonialism's power dynamics are inextricably linked to the traditional discourses on world religions. Asad (1993) further highlights that scholars of religion often draw on the Western assumptions of religion when evaluating non-Western religions without fully comprehending the practices of the non-Western communities. McCutcheon (2018) also notes the importance of critically examining and questioning the underlying biases that might influence the study of religion, particularly in the context of non-Western traditions — emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive

understanding of non-Western practices and beliefs to avoid perpetuating Western-centric perspectives in religious studies.

A notable example of such bias can be observed in the South African context, where the rituals of African religions are often referred to as forms of witchcraft. The portrayal of these traditions in numerous textbooks following the WRP suggests a solid adherence to the same fundamental principles within a particular religion. Ramey (2006) argues against accepting these purported orthodox constructions of religion and urges recent scholarship to focus on recognizing the boundaries and heterogeneity within each religious tradition. Furthermore, this scholarship must emphasize the agency of religious believers and students, an aspect consistently ignored by such constructs.

10. Contextual Dynamics

Reflection on the Introduction to the Religion (RELG101) course at UKZN reveals critical questions surrounding the teaching of first-year students and the potential perpetuation of biases associated with the continued use of the WRP. The current structure of these courses often poses challenges as students approach it with a pre-existing apologetic, faith-based understanding of religion, leading them to defend the stated religious doctrine. Additionally, relying on the WRP, underpinned by Christianity as the basis of comparison, hinders the students' ability to comprehend relevant religious concepts and analyze diverse forms of religious expression.

Teaching a comparative module encompassing five religions, with each presented in isolation, raises concerns about effectiveness, particularly when some traditions lack the standard features previously used for classification, for example African Religions, which is an oral tradition. While providing a basic knowledge of the various traditions is essential for deeper reflection, it remains a complex task in a diverse classroom.

Introductory courses offer an ideal environment for addressing the current contexts of the students through pedagogical approaches centred on diversity and cross-cultural encounters. Given the diverse student population at UKZN, it becomes critical to acknowledge diversity across each religion, creating a platform for students to consider their religious experiences as valid (Loewen, 2014). This approach calls for a revision of teaching practices to accommodate the global realities that influence students' experiences and futures.

The RELG101 class at UKZN reveals the students' understanding of the course content as heavily influenced by prior knowledge and historical contexts. Although scholars recognize that the WRP is no longer a natural formula for categorizing religion, the students' basis for comparison continues to be shaped by elements of Christianity. This influence can limit their ability to critically engage with other traditions fully.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to address the contextual dynamic and socially constructed relationships in curriculum development (Cornbleth, 1990). The WRP approach tends to overlook a vast range of religious systems, previously categorized as 'the Other,' resulting in challenging explanations, mainly since English is the second language for most UKZN students. This matter is compounded by the students' hesitancy to critically examine their own belief systems within their familial environments, adding to the complexity of the situation.

The fact that English is a second language for most UKZN students raises significant concerns about the adequacy and accessibility of the current approach to Religious Studies. The continued reliance on the WRP as a framework for teaching the introductory course ignores the students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This omission marginalizes non-Western religious systems and perpetuates linguistic and cultural hierarchies within the discipline. While efforts are underway to translate critical concepts into isiZulu at UKZN, the current curriculum unintentionally alienates students who might have a deeper understanding of religious traditions in their native languages. While the reluctance to critically engage with their beliefs may not be solely attributed to their language proficiency, it could reflect a disconnection between the curriculum's emphasis on Western academic discourse and the student's cultural and religious experiences. This disconnection further perpetuates a sense of marginalization and disempowerment in the learning process.

To address the issues above and create a more contextually sensitive approach, it is imperative for UKZN to explore an alternative pedagogical approach, allowing students to explore the complexities and nuances of religious traditions beyond the traditional WRP categories. This shift in focus will encourage critical thinking and help students move away from a comparative mindset solely based on Christian standards.

11. Conclusion

This paper critiques the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) as an inappropriate framework for the introductory Religious Studies course in the current South African student context. The WRP continues to assertively rely on Eurocentric assumptions, perpetuating colonial mindsets and overlooking the rich diversity and complexity of non-Christian, non-Western and non-white religious traditions. As a result, students are ill-prepared for higher education and struggle to make genuine comparisons among religions. The WRP's dominance in the curriculum stifles critical thinking and intercultural understanding while cementing Christianity as the benchmark for religious assessments. To address these issues, a pedagogical revolution is needed – one that embraces diversity, inclusivity and decolonization. The education landscape can be transformed by challenging the dominant narratives, confronting biases and empowering students to engage with religion on their terms. This approach will liberate students from the shackles of colonial relics and enable them to navigate the complexities of religion with curiosity and genuine appreciation for the richness of human spiritual expression. Developing the Religious Studies curricula should acknowledge the social, economic, and political factors shaping students' lives. Thoughtlessly applying Western-centric paradigms like the WRP disregards these unique demands, perpetuating an oppressive status quo and marginalizing non-Western religious practices. To foster intellectual and spiritual freedom, it is essential to dismantle the archaic and harmful paradigm and embrace an education approach that truly respects diversity and promotes critical thinking. Embracing contextual dynamics in the curriculum will pave the way for a transformative education experience that respects and complements the richness of religious expressions and experiences in the South African context.

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CHAPTER 4: Re-imagining Religion: Towards a Thematic Approach to Religious Studies at UKZN⁴

1. Abstract

Examining the Introduction to Religion (RELG 101) module, offered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), 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

2. 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 emphasizing 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 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

⁴ This article has already been published, and is in the format of the journal. Vencatsamy, B. Re-imagining Religion: Towards a Thematic Approach to Religious Studies at UKZN to Religious Studies at UKZN. (2024). *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 37(1). <https://doi.org/10.17159/2413-3027/2024/v37n1a4>

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 (RELG 101) module 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.

3. 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.

4. 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 matter 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 employ 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 developing a comprehensive understanding of religious concepts, providing cultural context 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 the 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 (2015a: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 2015a: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 (2015b:2pars) 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 (2015b, as quoted in Gray-Hildenbrand and 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 propose an alternative for the Introduction to Religion module at UKZN, considering the necessity for a more comprehensive and goal-oriented approach to studying religion.

5. 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' (Nthonto & 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 ten-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.

6. Religious Landscape in South Africa and KwaZulu-Natal

Exploring KwaZulu-Natal's religious demographics is pivotal to shaping 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 KwaZulu-Natal 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 KwaZulu-Natal 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.

7. Religion at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

7.1 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 schools⁵, signifying their backgrounds in socially and educationally disadvantaged environments (UKZN 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated declining enrolment 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.

7.2 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 hours⁶ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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 (2016:154155) 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.

8. 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 veneration 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 analyses 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 Campus⁷ 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 inherent 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

⁷ 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.

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 (2004, as 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 Albert's 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. 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 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, 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 were 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.

9. 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.

10. 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.

11. 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 KwaZulu-Natal. 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.

12. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the changing landscape in HE in South Africa challenges the way we teach religion (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 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 inclusivity 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.

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CHAPTER 5: Conclusion

'It was made by us. We built it. That means we have the tools to take it apart and to try again'.

– Kathryn Lofton (2017:242)

1. Challenging the WRP: Towards a Contextually Relevant Religious Studies Curriculum

This PhD by publication aimed to interrogate the inadequacies of the WRP in Religious Studies and explore alternative pedagogical frameworks that prioritises student engagement, contextual relevance and intellectual growth. The research has demonstrated and confirmed that the WRP failed to equip students with the critical tools necessary to engage with religious diversity meaningfully.

Each article in this PhD contributes uniquely to this broader argument:

Article 1: SoTL and Pedagogical Transformation

Since the 1990s, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has reshaped pedagogical practices by recognising teaching as a scholarly pursuit and promoting research-informed approaches to enhance teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Despite its impact across disciplines, the application of SoTL within Religious Studies in South Africa remains limited, highlighting a gap in how teaching practices are critically assessed and improved. This article explores the potential of SoTL to address these challenges through a constructivist lens, advocating for student-centred learning that draws on the students' diverse backgrounds and prior knowledge. By encouraging active engagement with religious traditions, this approach not only enriches the students' understanding but also aligns with broader educational goals, such as decolonisation and curriculum transformation in higher education. The article argues that integrating SoTL principles into Religious Studies creates a dynamic, inclusive and critically engaging learning environment that empowers students to navigate complex religious landscapes with confidence.

Article 2: Critiquing the WRP and its Colonial Legacies

The World Religions Paradigm (WRP) has long dominated Religious Studies education, privileging a select group of major religions while marginalising non-Christian, non-Western, and non-White perspectives. This Eurocentric framework reinforces colonial narratives by

presenting religious traditions in rigid, hierarchical and stale categories that overlook the complexities of lived religious experiences. In the South African context – characterised by its religious and cultural diversity – the limitations of the WRP are particularly pronounced, necessitating a critical assessment of how Religious Studies curricula are structured. This article examines the historical and theoretical foundations of the WRP and evaluates its continued influence on South African higher education, particularly in light of the #MustFall movement of 2015-2016, which called for a decolonised and contextually relevant curricula. Arguing for an inclusive and reflexive approach to Religious Studies, this article contends that moving beyond the WRP is essential for developing a curriculum that is representative, critically engaging and sensitive to the realities of students' lived experiences.

Article 3: Thematic Pedagogy as an Alternative

The Introduction to Religion module (RELG101) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal adheres to the WRP, structuring its content around rigid, tradition-based categories that limit comparative engagement and critical inquiry. This article examines the shortcomings of this model, arguing that it does not adequately equip students with the necessary knowledge to engage meaningfully with religious diversity in contemporary society. Drawing on Clingerman and O'Brien's assertion that introductory religion courses should be contextually relevant and facilitate intellectual growth, this article proposes a shift toward thematic pedagogy. By centring instruction on key themes – such as rituals, ethics and religious identity – rather than isolated traditions, a thematic approach allows for deeper comparative analysis, enhances religious literacy, and encourages critical thinking. This model empowers students by allowing them to contextualise their personal experiences within broader historical and intellectual frameworks. Ultimately, the article proposes a curriculum that moves beyond the constraints of the WRP, making Religious Studies more engaging, accessible and relevant to students in diverse education settings.

Taken together, these articles advocates that the WRP is no longer an appropriate and effective model for structuring Religious Studies curricula due to its limitations and embedded biases. Through a mixed-methods approach and a constructivist framework, the research demonstrates that a thematic approach offers a more inclusive and pedagogically effective alternative for introductory RS courses. This approach not only challenges the epistemic foundations of the WRP but also aligns with contemporary calls for curriculum transformation, ensuring the

students develop and ultimately engage with a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of religion.

2. Addressing the Research Questions

This study set out to answer three key research questions:

Research Question 1: Which SoTL approach/es could be implemented to enhance the students' knowledge and critical thinking within the discipline of RS in the context of UKZN?

This question is addressed in **Article 1**, which explores the application of SoTL methodologies to improve RS teaching at UKZN. It specifically discusses how a constructivist framework within SoTL can encourage critical thinking and deeper knowledge among students, particularly within the socio-historical and educational challenges unique to the South African context. The article argues that integrating these approaches will improve student engagement and learning outcomes while aligning with broader decolonial and inclusive education objectives.

Research Question 2: What are the current approaches used to teach Religious Studies at UKZN in comparison with national and international methods?

This question is explored in **Article 2**, which critiques the reliance of UKZN on the WRP and compares it with broader pedagogical trends in South Africa and internationally. The article highlights the disconnect between global methodologies and local contexts, emphasising the need for a more decolonised and relevant RS curriculum. It further examines how current teaching approaches impact student engagement and argues for pedagogical shifts that is reflective of the lived experiences of students.

Research Question 3: What competencies are students who register for religious studies modules expected to develop?

Article 3 addresses research question 3 by examining the competencies RS students at UKZN are expected to develop. It evaluates the competencies in relation to the RS curriculum and student perceptions of the learning outcomes. The article investigates the alignment or misalignment between the expected competencies and actual student experiences, identifying areas for improvement. The article offers insight into how well the curriculum prepares students for critical engagement, comparative analysis and participation in a multicultural society by including student perspectives.

3. Demonstrating the Findings in the Thesis

Article 1 demonstrates that students engage more effectively when pedagogy aligns with their lived experiences and cognitive development, moving beyond rote learning into meaning-making. The study compared two student cohorts—one taught using the WRP (2021) and another using a thematic approach (2022) — to assess engagement and comprehension of the module content. Using quantitative methods such as surveys, the study examined students' religious backgrounds, prior knowledge and levels of engagement. The findings suggest that thematic pedagogy, informed by constructivist principles (Vygotsky, 1978; Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020), promotes greater student agency and intellectual engagement by enabling students to draw on their lived experiences. This directly supports decolonial objectives by challenging Western-centric curricular structures and integrating diverse epistemologies into RS (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; Vorster, 2020). The article thus highlights the transformative potential of SoTL in reshaping RS pedagogy for greater inclusivity and fresh relevance in South Africa.

Article 2 critiques the persistent reliance on the WRP in teaching religion, arguing that it lags behind global pedagogical shifts toward student-centred learning and comparative engagement. By critiquing the essentialist approach of the WRPs, the article demonstrates how this paradigm fails to account for the lived and evolving nature of religious traditions (Bleisch & Schwab, 2021) thus marginalising indigenous and non-Western religions (Chidester, 2018). Linking this critique to the broader #MustFall movements of 2015-2016 (Martinerie, 2021; Badat, 2016), the article illustrates how student activism in South Africa insists on a decolonised curriculum. It argues for a pedagogical framework that reflects local realities and histories rather than imposed Eurocentric classification. The article also draws parallels with shifts in the US and UK, where institutions increasingly incorporate postcolonial and lived religion approaches to account for students' diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. Recognising religious traditions are embedded in cultural, political and social realities reinforces the need for RS curricula that transcend static classifications.

Article 3 examines how thematic pedagogy offers an effective alternative for critical literacy and comparative understanding, preparing students for broader academic and civic engagement. Drawing on the framework of Clingerman and O'Brien (2015), the article

presents student perspectives to demonstrate how the current approach privileges Christianity as a benchmark for understanding other traditions (Frahm-Arp, 2021; Clasquin, 2005). Citing the work of Moore (2015) on religious literacy and Parker's (2020) discussion on religious engagement, the article argues that a thematic approach provides a more effective pedagogical model. This shift from traditional taxonomic frameworks enhances critical thinking (Gallagher, 2009) and prepares students for civic participation (Prothero, 2007), ensuring the continual relevance of RS in a rapidly changing academic and social landscape. Overall, the article advocates for a transformative approach to RS that resonates with UKZN's socio-cultural context.

4. The Role of Prior Knowledge and Lived Experiences in Religious Studies

A core finding of this research is the importance of acknowledging the students' prior knowledge shaped by their lived experiences in teaching Religious Studies. Constructivist learning theory suggests that students do not enter the classroom as blank slates; instead, they have pre-existing religious, cultural and social understandings that influence how they engage with new knowledge. However, the WRP largely ignores this reality by presenting religious traditions in isolation, detached from the lived realities of the students.

Each article in this study reveals different ways in which prior knowledge interacts with the learning experiences of the students. These three articles collectively address the key research questions posed in this study:

Article 1, by drawing on student survey data, assesses how students perceive their own learning experiences within the Religious Studies module; the data clearly illustrating the disconnect between student prior knowledge and the WRP framework. This assessment of the student data in turn addresses the question of how Religious Studies is currently taught at UKZN, and how it compares to national and international methods.

Article 2 critiques the Eurocentric biases of the WRP, demonstrating how its reductive categorisation of religions fails to equip students with critical thinking skills, thereby responding to the question of what competencies students should develop in Religious Studies.

Article 3, through its exploration of thematic pedagogy, provides a structured alternative that fosters comparative engagement, religious literacy, and critical inquiry, offering a concrete

response to the question of which pedagogical approaches could enhance students' learning and critical thinking.

Together, these articles demonstrate that the limitations of the WRP are not merely theoretical but have direct pedagogical consequences. A reliance on rigid, Eurocentric frameworks fails to account for the diverse and lived experiences of students, whereas a thematic, constructivist approach creates space for students to critically engage with religion in meaningful ways.

5. Evolution and Advocacy in Pedagogical Approaches: Integrating SoTL and Constructivist Pedagogy in Religious Studies

Reflecting on my experience and interaction with students, I have witnessed first-hand how the evolution of SoTL revealed its varied history across different contexts. Shulman's (1987) category of pedagogical content knowledge integrated what academics knew about their subjects with how to teach them effectively, that is, by taking cognisance of the specific environment in which they taught. By critiquing the separation of teaching and learning activities, Boyer's framework emphasised adapting pedagogical approaches to classroom dynamics to achieve improved learning outcomes. This approach prepared the way for discourse on using creative teaching methods in undergraduate education. However, the ambiguity in defining SoTL as a framework integrating research and teaching activities prevailed, reflecting the diverse methodologies academics employed to understand the complexities of teaching and learning across the disciplines and contexts.

In examining the various learning theories, my focus has been on the role of constructivism, where students and academics collaborate to construct an understanding of the world, thus challenging the didactic teaching methods. From a constructivist perspective, students become active participants in their knowledge creation. Acknowledging their lived experiences and prior knowledge brought to the learning environment is imperative, particularly in the context of South Africa, this becoming even more important, given its rich religious and cultural heritage. In exposing the lacuna in SoTL literature and Religious Studies, this study cautions against the WRP approach that reduces content to simple categories, limiting the students' ability to engage with the subject.

Advocating for a constructivist approach enables religious realities to emerge through the students' expressions of their own beliefs and practices, highlighting the interaction between

their agency and societal structures in shaping religious knowledge. Connecting their lived experiences with module content and knowledge from their peers enable students to critically evaluate the validity of the information. However, adapting teaching methodologies to a constructivist approach warrants careful consideration when it pertains to religious studies, given the politically and ideologically charged nature of this subject. Course designs should aim to extend beyond the necessary skills required to pass the module, and should contribute to a greater awareness of how religion influences society.

While student expectations differ, course designs should pay particular attention to the complexities and divergent interpretations of religious phenomena. Although SoTL in South Africa is expansive, it is important to note the specific narratives regarding the under-preparedness of students juxtaposed against the socioeconomic disparities that shape the education system in the country. Educational disparities in resources and systemic inequalities continue to disadvantage marginalised students, challenging the advancement of SoTL in the country. Protest movements and calls for decolonisation of curriculums persist, yet student numbers continue to decline. Current structures in place to assist students in transitioning from secondary school to university fail to adequately address the basic skills students require to survive in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Evidence suggests that despite the students' socioeconomic backgrounds, those students who enrol in the introductory religion modules do have some prior knowledge of religious traditions. Whether they enrol in the module to major in Religious Studies or to ensure easy credits, is irrelevant. As academics, we are responsible for nurturing the intellectual curiosity of the students to successfully navigate their way through the varying levels of their academic careers and lives. This cannot be achieved if the content of the introductory module is presented as attenuated categories where each religion is taught in isolation, using generic, dichotomous categories that fail to focus on the nuances across all religious traditions. In advocating for a constructivist pedagogy, it is important to take note of the various intersections of race, class, gender and religion that students bring with them, as informed by their lived experiences.

The journey of questioning the validity of the WRPs was fraught with obstacles and self-doubt: Did I have the right to disrupt the status quo when my placement in this position was purely incidental, unlike other scholars in the field who made a conscious decision to pursue an academic career. However, my disillusionment with the reductive approach of the WRP and

its tendency to categorise complex, religious traditions into simplistic frameworks that failed to capture the multifaceted nature of the students' identities and experiences, persisted.

Despite my reservations, I felt it would be difficult, if not impossible, to overcome the restrictions of institutional norms and curriculum frameworks. It was a period of internal conflict – believing that reform was necessary, but unsure how to effect change within the constraints of the existing status quo. However, as I engaged with the students' perspectives, SoTL literature and alternative pedagogies, my doubts ultimately shifted toward the conviction that a transformed approach was necessary. This realisation led me to centre student experiences in this research, as their voices would provide crucial insight into the limitations of the WRP and the potential thematic pedagogy.

6. Reclaiming the student voice: learning as lived experience

Throughout this research, the student voice has been central to understanding the limitations of the WRP and the potential thematic pedagogy. My interactions with students through classroom observations and survey responses signified the disconnect between the WRP and the students' lived experiences.

One student reflected on how the course deepened their understanding beyond inherited beliefs:

“It has assisted me to comprehend and not judge religious beliefs that I do not follow.”

This reflection emphasises how exposure to diverse religious traditions in a critical, comparative framework assisted students to reach beyond their assumptions and engage more openly with the differences evidenced.

Many students began the course with strong, preconceived notions of religion shaped by personal belief systems, prior schooling and the historical dominance of Christianity in South African education. The thematic approach allowed them to question these assumptions rather than reinforcing them critically.

One student acknowledged this shift, stating:

“RELG101 has challenged some of my views about religion.”

These reflections confirm that pedagogy matters – how we structure Religious Studies directly influences how students engage with religious traditions, shaping their ability to navigate religious diversity critically.

“If not by us, then, by whom? If not now, then, when?” (Kathryn Lofton, 2014:542)

Undertaking this study has been a cathartic journey in many ways. It has provided academic rigour, confidence and evidence to substantiate my reservations with the WRP. Through rigorous research and engagement with scholarship in the field of Religious Studies and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, I have been able to articulate and substantiate my concerns that the WRP is inadequate for nurturing the students’ intellectual curiosity informed by their lived experience and prior knowledge, but also for developing their ability to become critical thinkers. This journey has been transformative, not only academically but also personally. It has confirmed my belief in the necessity of reimagining the Religious Studies pedagogy to more effectively facilitate student learning outcomes.

One of the most transformative aspects of this research has been realising the essential role of prior knowledge in shaping student engagement with Religious Studies. Initially, I viewed prior knowledge as something that needed to be unlearned – particularly when students entered the module with preconceived notions on religious beliefs shaped by a dominant Christian framework. However, through engaging with constructivist pedagogy, student feedback and thematic learning, I realised that prior knowledge is not a limitation, but a foundation upon which critical engagement can be successfully constructed.

When students are given structured opportunities to question their inherited perspectives, they move from passive learning to active participation in knowledge production. This shift is essential for decolonising Religious Studies – not by erasing prior religious frameworks, but by placing them in conversation with diverse traditions, experiences and analytical tools. Going forward, I perceive my role as an academic not as dispensing knowledge, but as facilitating intellectual encounters where students can engage with what they already know and what they have yet to learn.

7. Debating the World Religions Paradigm: Contextual Critiques and Educational Reform in Religious Studies

Comparing the current teaching approaches at UKZN with national and international methods, critiques of the WRP come to the fore. Ongoing debates on the use of this paradigm as a legitimate framework for structuring the content of the Religious Studies modules abound. Most scholars argue the approach not only limits world religions to what this study has termed the 'Big Five' – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism – but also relies on a distinct set of assumptions to define these.

Critiquing the stance of the WRP as arbitrary in the African context, the central argument is that these classifications were undeniably influenced by colonial ideologies and excluded religious traditions that did not fit neatly into predefined categories. Acknowledging the decontextualised stance of the paradigm, a brief overview of how Christianity was manipulated as a religion of influence was provided. Christianity not only shaped the power dynamics in the country but also impinged on the education system. Historically, from the colonial expansion of Christianity to its entrenchment as the stated religion of the Apartheid regime, the Christian National Education policy strategically safeguarded Christianity as the embedded authoritarian religion within the education system. Its enforced embeddedness across various communities and race groups in South Africa implied that its legacy in undermining the beliefs and practices of all other religious traditions persisted. This is evidenced when students continually compare non-Christian religions to Christian benchmarks created by the WRP and colonialism, often to the detriment of their own lived experiences.

Along with democracy came changes in the education sector and extensive debates on the role of religion within it. The formalisation of Religion Education in 2003 paved the way for a more inclusive approach. However, religious studies in schools were given a holding space within the Life Orientation subject, therefore limiting the comprehensive engagement with religious traditions. Changes also occurred in the HEIs, resulting in the merging of Religious Studies and Theology disciplines at some universities, and the separation of these disciplines at others. The decolonisation movements some twenty years after democracy, saw various campaigns for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems across university curricula.

While Religious Studies at UKZN has also been inclusive in this regard, African religions and its counterparts are still taught as separate sections, albeit within the same modules. These

movements further challenged the traditional teaching approaches, calling for a more participatory approach.

While critiques of the WRP are rife and still taught in various contexts, , the oversimplification of religious concepts continues to lead to misconceptions of religions that do not suit the Western assumptions of religion.

8. Towards a Transformative Pedagogy: Thematic Curriculum Design in Religious Studies for Critical Engagement and Intellectual Growth,

Exploring the possibility of a new curriculum design structured around thematic teaching the final section of this study drew on Clingerman and O'Brien's approach to teaching introductory modules, linking content, context and intellectual growth. This method offered a cohesive way to facilitate the critical thinking skills necessary in religious studies. Reflecting on my own experience as an academic. I realised that teaching a comparative module through the lens of the WRP often resulted in rote learning and a specious understanding. The constantly changing landscape in South African higher education challenges traditional approaches to teaching religion, specifically RELG 101 at UKZN, where the focus on producing critically engaged students conversant in religious literacy has now become crucial.

By advocating for a goal-driven approach, the thematic teaching approach emphasises religious literacy and engagement with religious concepts beyond the mere dissemination of knowledge. This approach calls for teaching methods that enable students to compare religious traditions and engage in meaningful conversations and debates on religion beyond the classroom. The article critically examines the adherence of RELG 101 to the WRP and proposes a thematic approach rooted in the objectives of Clingerman and O'Brien, for intellectual growth and contextual relevance. Focusing on contextual and comparative analyses, the thematic approach aligns with the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), fostering critical thinking, religious literacy, contextual awareness, intellectual growth and comparative analysis.

9. The Limitations of the Study

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities were required to revise and adapt their teaching and research methods, impacting on the data collection process in the study in two significant ways. First, due to the declining student enrolment the student survey could only gather limited responses electronically. Second, the interview phase was also affected as face-

to-face interviews were conducted with only two of the five participants. The remaining three participants opted to have the questionnaire sent to them, which had to be adapted. This hindered the ability to ask follow-up questions that would have elicited deeper insights from the participants. This methodological shift also raised concerns about potential biases to provide socially desirable responses.

It is important to consider the scope and generalisability of the findings. The students' surveys were confined to UKZN due to ethical constraints, preventing a broader representation of the South African educational landscape. That said, UKZN offers a particularly unique context that adds significant value to this study; the university is home to a diverse and traditional student population, many of whom come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as indicated by the quintile system. This diversity, coupled with specific socio-economic challenges faced by these students, makes UKZN a feasible case study. While these findings may not be universally applicable, they provide important insights into the subtleties of religious studies education within a unique context, highlighting the potential impact of these factors on teaching and learning in South Africa.

However, one significant limitation of this publication format was the theoretical overlap across all three papers in framing the arguments. Another constraint was the varying word count requirements stipulated by the different journals where the articles were submitted. Adhering to these limits posed a challenge in consistently structuring and presenting the research findings across the publications. The occurrence of high similarity indexes from already published papers is also possible.

One final reflective limitation or hindrance is the notable lack of guidance and institutional information from the UKZN research office on the structure of a PhD by Publication. There is no formal policy guiding the format of a thesis by publication, which creates significant challenges for students, supervisors and examiners alike. The thesis is often sent to examiners without clear policy guidelines, leading to confusion and inconsistency in evaluation. While the university encourages students to pursue a PhD through publication, there is a lack of structured support to assist with this process. This leaves all parties involved in a awkward position, trying to navigate the expectations and requirements without a solid framework, which hinders the effectiveness and clarity of the examination process.

10. Charting the Way Forward: Implications for Curriculum and Pedagogy

While this study critiques the WRP, it also recognises the need for institutional transformation to implement a more inclusive Religious Studies pedagogy. The challenges of the WRP dominance, the need for comparative methodologies and the role of thematic pedagogy extend beyond UKZN and are relevant to South African universities and global Religious Studies curricula.

Moving forward, several key steps should be taken:

10.1 Implementing Thematic pedagogy in RELG 101 at UKZN

A structured transition from the WRP model to a thematic framework should be piloted with introductory Religious Studies modules at UKZN. This transition requires carefully mapping existing content against thematic clusters that facilitate cross-religious comparison while maintaining academic rigour. Teaching methods should include interactive discussions, comparative case studies and student-led inquiry to promote critical engagement. These approaches should be supported by diverse assessment strategies that evaluate the students' ability to analyse religious phenomena across traditions rather than merely describing isolated religious systems.

10.2 Institutional Support for Curriculum Reform

University curriculum committees should actively engage with SoTL research to assess the pedagogical effectiveness of existing Religious Studies frameworks. This engagement should include regular curriculum reviews that incorporate student feedback and contemporary scholarship on religious diversity. Faculty workshops on constructivist and decolonial pedagogies should be developed to equip academics with alternative teaching strategies. These workshops need to be supplemented with mentorship programmes that provide ongoing support for implementing new pedagogical approaches and overcoming resistance to change.

10.3 Broader Research and Cross-Institutional Collaboration

Future research should assess how thematic pedagogy functions in different institutional and cultural contexts, determining whether it can expand comparative engagement at universities where colonial frameworks still shape religious education. Such research should employ

mixed-methods approaches that document quantitative learning outcomes and qualitative shifts in student engagement with diverse religious traditions.

Pedagogical experiments beyond the introductory level should explore whether a thematic model can be expanded to advanced Religious Studies modules. These experiments should consider how thematic approaches might interface with specialised methodological training required for advanced scholarship (in light of decolonisation initiatives) while still maintaining the essence of a comparative religion module.

Cross-institutional collaboration with scholars in Religious Studies, SoTL, and curriculum reform is essential to ensure that thematic pedagogy is not viewed as a mere alternative but rather as a new standard for comparative and critical religious education. This collaboration could be formalised through research networks, academic associations, joint publications and shared digital repositories of teaching resources and case studies.

Collaboration among South African universities could provide comparative insights into national Religious Studies curricula, creating pedagogical spaces for decolonial, comparative and student-centred learning. Such national collaboration could also strengthen advocacy for curriculum reform at policy levels, potentially influencing educational standards across the higher education sector.

This research lays the groundwork for sustained transformation in the discipline by challenging long-standing paradigms and developing innovative approaches. The way forward requires not only a theoretical reimagining, but also practical implementation strategies that can navigate institutional constraints while advancing the goal of a truly comparative religious studies education.

11. Recommendations for Future Research

By analysing the extensive literature on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in South Africa, this study offers a glimpse into a potentially rich contribution to the field, particularly within the discipline of Religious Studies – an area overshadowed by theology centric research. Despite the emergence of the #MustFall movements and calls for discussions on decolonisation, these initiatives have not translated into practical changes, mainly as decolonisation projects are often led by scholars from the global North, perpetuating the very

ideologies these movements critique. As highlighted by the participants, traditional university spaces structured around lecture halls, favour monologue-driven teaching rather than lively debates. However, a critical question persists – in the thirty years since democracy, what conclusive steps have been taken to date, to depoliticise colonial legacies and humanise the academic environments to facilitate teaching and learning for all?

It is my intention to contribute further articles to this PhD discourse. SoTL is fundamentally about experimenting with and improving teaching practices. My research which has been informed by my teaching experiences, will continue to shape and enhance my pedagogical approaches. This iterative process will ensure that my teaching is continuously evolving and always informed by up-to-date academic research and practical insights.

12. Beyond the WRP – Reimagining Religious Studies

This research began with a personal exasperation of the rigid, Eurocentric categorisation of religious traditions that the WRP imposed. This academic exploration has evolved into a broader call for transformation, informed by pedagogical theory, student experiences, and engagement.

This study challenges longstanding assumptions about how religion should be taught in higher education by integrating constructivist learning, thematic pedagogy, and decolonial critique. The findings reaffirm that Religious Studies should move beyond static paradigms to enhance intellectual engagement and ensure that students are equipped to navigate and critically engage with religious diversity in meaningful ways.

Ultimately, the process of rethinking Religious Studies pedagogy is ongoing. As academics, we are intellectually bound to question inherited structures, refine our approaches, and remain responsive to student experiences and societal shifts. I believe that this research will contribute to both theoretical debates and practical pedagogical reform, ensuring that Religious Studies becomes a discipline that fosters critical inquiry, comparative understanding and student agency

13. Final Remarks

In conclusion, this research has endeavoured to challenge and reconstruct the fundamental frameworks for teaching religious studies at UKZN. By critiquing the limitations of the WRP and arguing for a thematic approach rooted in the principles foregrounded by Clingerman and O'Brien, this study has highlighted the need for a transformative learning environment. Through a focus on critical thinking, religious literacy, and contextual understanding, the proposed curriculum design seeks to empower students to engage meaningfully with religious traditions beyond traditional boundaries. By encouraging the students' agency in learning, my goal is that this study will contribute to reshaping pedagogical practices in RELG101, paving the way for more inclusive and intellectually rigorous educational experiences.

Teaching Religious Studies using the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), while at the same time grappling with its inadequacies has been a challenging experience. The WRP gained its power in the context of colonial discourse, but has, in my view, remained restrictive, biased and has failed to do justice to the notion of comparative religions. Teaching a diverse study body, and the only comparisons of religious teachings and concepts they could make was with Christianity, was perturbing. It is my hope that this PhD will not only provide me with the necessary support to initiate a welcome change to the curriculum, but also give me the confidence to do so.

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APPENDIX 1: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



18 September 2021

Miss Beverly Vencatsamy (9703364)
School Of Rel Phil & Classics
Howard College

Dear Miss Vencatsamy,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00002948/2021

Project title: Religion as Agency: The Impact of Curriculum Structure and Teaching Approaches on Student Learning in Introductory Religion Modules

Degree: PhD

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 15 June 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. **PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.**

This approval is valid until 18 September 2022.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 250 8350/1557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research/Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 2: GATEKEEPERS LETTER TO ENGAGE WITH STUDENTS



14 June 2021

Miss Beverly Vencatsamy (SN 9703364)
School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics
College of Humanities
Howard College Campus UKZN
Email: vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za matisonnh@ukzn.ac.za

Dear Miss Vencatsamy

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), towards your postgraduate degree, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

"Religion as Agency: The Impact of Curriculum Structure and Teaching Approaches on Student Learning in Introductory Religion Modules."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting focus group discussion with students registered for the module in the 2021 and 2022 academic years (Taking in account the regulations imposed during lockdown ie restrictions on gatherings, travel, social distancing etc. Zoom, Skype or telephone interviews recommended) on the Howard Campus.

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely



DR KE CLELAND: REGISTRAR

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: 27 (0)31 200 7971 Email: registrar@ukzn.ac.za Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 3: STUDENT SURVEY – 2021 & 2022

Student Evaluations 101

RELG 101: Student Evaluations

1. I identify with a particular religion.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly disagree

2. I consider myself a religious person.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly disagree

3. I have strong views about religion.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly disagree

4. I believe religion plays a valuable in a society like South Africa.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
 Agree
 Neutral
 Disagree
 Strongly disagree

5. I think that as a member of a multicultural society like South Africa, it is important to know about the various religions and cultures.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. I knew about other religious traditions before taking RELG 101.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

7. RELG101 has enabled me to recognise the purpose and meaning of religion in society.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

8. RELG 101 has helped me understand the importance of beliefs and practices within each religious tradition.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

9. RELG 101 has challenged some of my views about religion.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

10. I feel confident that having taken RELG101, I can now describe the basic theories developed in the study of religion.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

11. I feel confident that having taking RELG101, I have acquired skills that will help me cope after obtaining my degree.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

12. I would recommend RELG101 to other students.

Mark only one oval.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13. Please feel free to add any other comments:

APPENDIX 4: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Dear

Re: Invitation to consider participating in research study entitled “Religion as Agency: The Impact of Curriculum Structure and Teaching Approaches on Student Learning in Introductory Religion Modules”

My name is Beverly Vencatsamy, and I work as a lecturer and researcher in the School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Tel: 031 260 3120, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Email: vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za)

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on the current teaching methods used in comparative religion modules. The aim and purpose of this research is to determine whether the current curriculum structure and teaching approach to Religious Studies locally and internationally are able to develop student competencies to engage critically across religious traditions on contextually relevant issues. The study is expected to enrol approximately 20 scholars of religion worldwide. Colleagues who choose to participate in the study will be invited to participate in the following ways:

- **Agree to be interviewed either personally, telephonically or complete the interview schedule electronically**
- Provide consent for the researcher to use your comments in the study

Participating in the study is not designed to benefit you but may offer you the opportunity to reflect on your current teaching approaches within the discipline of Religious Studies.

Your participation in the study will be of benefit to the religion discipline that prioritise effective teaching practices to develop the students critical thinking skills. The findings from the study could be used to inform the curriculum development of religious studies modules.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate, or stop participating in the research at any given point. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation, you will not incur any penalty for taking such action.

The information that you will provide will be used for scholarly research only. Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously.

Your confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Neither your name or identity will be disclosed in any form in the study. The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and supervisor. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (provisional approval number: HSSREC/00002948/2021).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at email: 031 260 3120, [REDACTED], vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za -----

CONSENT

I have been informed about the study entitled “Religion as Agency: The Impact of Curriculum Structure and Teaching Approaches on Student Learning in Introductory Religion Modules” by Beverly Vencatsamy.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answered to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any treatment or care that I would usually be entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at 031 260 3120, [REDACTED], vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za
Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion if applicable YES / NO

_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Date
_____	_____
Signature of Witness (Where applicable)	Date
_____	_____
Signature of Translator (Where applicable)	Date

APPENDIX 5: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE – FACE-TO-FACE

APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (RELIGIOUS STUDIES SCHOLARS)

The aim and purpose of this research is to analyse how the curriculum content in introductory religious studies modules are structured both locally and internationally.

Method may be adapted to suit current regulations around Covid-19. Interview schedule may be adapted and sent via email for participants to respond

Time	Theme	Questions/Line of Inquiry
10 mins	Consent and Rapport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review information on study and sign informed consent for individual interviews - Consent for audio recording sought - Do you have any objections to your name being used in this study? - YES - NO - Would prefer if a pseudonym is used <p>To begin: Respond to questions about the study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How long have you been teaching RS? - Do you have a qualification specifically in RS?
30 mins	Current teaching approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What modules do you currently teach? - Please rank the following learning objectives for students in order of importance. With 1 being not important and 4 being very important <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate the basic knowledge and understanding of religion and the importance of world religions • Understand the importance of beliefs and practices within each religious tradition • Recognise the purpose and meaning of religion in society • Describe the basic theories developed in the study of religion - How do you order the content of the introductory RS module? - What teaching perspective do you use? The WRP or a thematic perspective. - Why do you think that this approach is suitable for the current social context (religious and cultural) of your university? - How effective is this approach in effectively developing the students' competencies to engage critically with social issues found across religious traditions? - In your opinion, how do the students' existing knowledge of religion/s influence the way they understand the comparative analysis used in a religious study module. You may use examples.
10 mins	Close	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review content of the interview with the participant, seeking clarity on any unresolved areas of questioning - Invite participants to ask questions about the interview, content of what was discussed, and the research study - Thank the participant for their time, contribution to the study, and end the interview

APPENDIX 6: AMENDED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE - ELECTRONIC

Questionnaire

Description: The aim and purpose of this research is to analyse the current teaching approaches used in Religious Studies globally.

Name & Surname _____

Institution _____

Position _____

1. Do you have any objections to your name being used in this study? Mark with an **X**

Yes	No	Would prefer if a pseudonym is used?
-----	----	---

2. How long have you been teaching in religious studies?

3. What religious studies courses do you currently teach and at what level?

4. Please rank the following student expectations in order of importance, with 1 being not important and 5 being very important. Please mark with an **X**

	Not Important 1	Slightly Important 2	Important 3	Fairly Important 4	Very Important 5
Demonstrate the basic knowledge and understanding of religion and the importance of world religions					

Understand the importance of beliefs and practices within each religious tradition					
Recognise the purpose and meaning of religion in society					
Describe the basic theories developed in the study of religion					

5. How would you describe your current teaching approaches, i.e., do you teach from the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) perspective or a thematic approach? Please elaborate

6. Do you think your teaching approach is suitable for the current social context (religious and cultural) of your university? Please explain

7. Does the approach adequately develop students' competencies to engage critically with social issues found across religious traditions?

8. In your opinion, how do the students' existing knowledge of religion/s influence the way they understand the comparative analysis used in a religious study module. You may use examples.

APPENDIX 7: FRONT PAGE: PUBLICATION 1



Article

The world religions paradigm: Why context matters in religious studies

Beverly Vencatsamy

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Critical Research in Religion
2024, Vol. 12(1) 12–25
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Abstract

The World Religions Paradigm (WRP) has long served as the predominant framework for teaching Religious Studies globally and in South Africa. However, criticisms of the WRP highlight its tendency to marginalize non-Christian, non-Western, and non-white perspectives. This article examines these critiques in the context of South Africa, particularly in light of the events of 2015–2016, when the #MustFall movement sought to raise and address issues of decolonization. This article will argue that South Africa provides a pertinent example of the need to re-evaluate pedagogical choices in Religious Studies education by emphasizing the importance of context in re-shaping the curriculum.

Keywords

Religious Studies education, world religions paradigm, decolonization, South Africa

Introduction

Teaching religion requires a systematic approach that allows students to gain a coherent insight into the complex nature of religions, both historically and contextually (Havlíček 2018). While the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) has traditionally provided a classification framework for organizing religious material, it has faced criticism for its exclusionary nature, particularly regarding non-Christian, non-Western, and non-white perspectives. In this article, I will argue that the WRP's taxonomic approach is not suitable for the first-year introductory Religious Studies module at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), specifically in light of South Africa's unique historical and social context as highlighted by the #MustFall movement in 2015–2016. This article reports on a project which explores pedagogical approaches in a particular context, aiming to develop a more inclusive and contextually relevant curriculum for the first-year introductory Religious Studies module at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Corresponding author:

Beverly Vencatsamy, Department of Religion, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 3rd Floor Memorial Tower, Building, Durban 4068, South Africa.

Email: Vencatsamyb@ukzn.ac.za

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.

APPENDIX 9: TURNITIN REPORT

Turnitin Originality Report

Processed on: 18-Jul-2024 6:11 PM CAT
 ID: 2295510262
 Word Count: 42502
 Submitted: 6

RELIGION AS AGENCY: THE IMPACT OF
 CURRICULUM STRUCTURE AND TEACHING
 APPROACHES ON STUDENT LEARNING IN
 INTRODUCTORY RELIGION MODULES By Beverly
 Vencatsamy

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