

The Religious Studies Skills Book: Close Reading, Critical Thinking, and Comparison

Eugene V. Gallagher and Joanne Maguire

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Gallagher and Maguire wrote *The Religious Studies Skills Book* for undergraduate students taking religious studies courses. Recipients of the American Academy of Religion's Award for Excellence in Teaching and longtime Wabash Center affiliates, Maguire and Gallagher draw on the breadth of their experiences as scholar-teachers to craft an accessible book that covers the basics – and more.

They dispel myths, like the assumption that teaching about religions in public universities is unconstitutional, and they clarify common confusion, including the distinction between studying theology and religious studies. They also offer insights into what makes the study of religion so compelling and worthwhile:

Students of religion are in a field unlike any other. The field has interdisciplinary breadth and global and historical depth that can't be found elsewhere on campus. Many students come to the academic study of religion expecting personal spiritual development. Although that might be an accidental outcome of exposure to ideas in any course, teachers tend to be strongly interested in developing students' skills and knowledge, goals achieved in part by reading, observation, and discussion that brackets personal judgement and biases . . . If a single introductory course in religious studies teaches nothing else, it will at least show you that there are many other ways to understand the world. (69-70)

I quote this passage at length because it exemplifies one of the two most important features of this book: the authors write to and for students. They do this from the first to the last page. I never felt like they overlooked the student to speak to a colleague. Midway through, I flipped back to the title page and wrote, "How many of us write for this audience? They're taking students seriously!" It's refreshing, and it is one aspect of the book that would make me want to assign it.

The book's other great strength is how the authors model what they expect students to learn. Most chapters include explicit examples. The chapter on comparison offers lengthy examinations of how comparison works using excerpts from sacred texts (Matthew and *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*) and scholarly ones (definitions of religion). In some places, the authors anticipate students' observations, and in others, they expand their scope. For example, they note fairly obvious similarities between the gospel and *Science and Health*, and then they expand the comparison through a series of questions about authorial intent. In addition to the explicit examples, Gallagher and Maguire build an argument through the arrangement of the book's chapters and draw on evidence from scholarship on teaching and learning. The companion website provides more general information and additional exercises, too.

My main concern is how the book can reach its intended audience. Ideally, students in introductory courses would read and absorb the *Skills Book*. Realistically, the motivated majors in a third-year seminar will be carrying copies with dog-eared pages, and, years from now, graduate students learning how to teach will be lucky to find a copy with some dedicated major's marginalia.