

Failing Christianity: Fifth graders in religion

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

I teach a variety of courses at Piedmont College, but “Introduction to World Religions” is my favorite. I have taught it more than 20 times now, to more than 500 students. One of them tells me how different the news from Iraq sounds now that she knows the difference between Shi’as and Sunnis. Another brings me pictures of a new Hindu temple going up in his old neighborhood, which he is able to interpret for his alarmed parents. Students who complete the class say they feel more at home in the world. They are less easily frightened by religious difference. They are more informed neighbors, better equipped to wage peace instead of war.

The only place the course backfires is in the unit on Christianity. Students who have spent every Sunday of their lives in church may be able to name the books of the Bible in order, but they rarely have any idea how those books were assembled. They know they belong to Victory Baptist Church, but they do not know that this makes them Protestants, or that the Christian tree has two other major branches more ancient than their own. Very few have heard of the Nicene Creed. Most are surprised to learn that baptism is supposed to be a one-time thing.

With only five class sessions for each religion, I cover the basics quickly: early Christian history, composition and content of the New Testament, the Great Schism, the Protestant Reformation, central Christian doctrines and common religious practices. Faced with so much new information, students often have a hard time formulating their questions.

“If Paul wasn’t one of the 12 disciples, where did he get his stuff?”

“Do Catholics really think saints answer their prayers?”

As often as I have answered such questions, my sinking feeling never goes away. The things I tell students are so different from the things they have heard in church that I can hear their brains straining against the waves. They never noticed that

Matthew and Luke tell different stories of Jesus' birth, or that Mark and John tell no such stories at all. They never imagined that the first Christians did not walk around with New Testaments in their pockets. No one ever told them about Constantine, Augustine, Benedict or Martin Luther. They never thought about what happened during the centuries between Jesus' resurrection and their own professions of faith. In their minds, they fell in line behind the disciples, picking up the proclamation of the gospel where those simple fishermen left off.

Even as they are turning in their quizzes, the students know that something has just gone badly wrong. "I think I just did the worst on my own religion," one says. Another asks me if Charlemagne was the main figure in the Protestant Reformation and slaps his forehead when I break the bad news. The only student who makes an A+ on the Christianity quiz is an orthodox Jew. Later the whole class talks about why this quiz was so hard for them, and what they think this means. A few confess that they did not study because they thought they knew plenty about Christianity. Others say that they had too many quizzes on the same day.

Soon a consensus emerges, at least to my ears: that when they tried to put what they were learning about Christianity at school into the drawers they had gotten at church, there was no room for the new information—not because the drawers were full but because they had different labels on them.

The church drawers are labeled "Favorite Bible Passages," "Personal Commitment to Jesus Christ," "Summer Mission Trips," and "What My Church Means to Me." There is nothing wrong with any of these drawers. Mostly they contain good, life-giving things. But where are you supposed to put your new insight about the role of the early churches in the formation of the New Testament? Where does your fresh curiosity about Orthodox Christians go? What happens to your church drawers once you realize there are hundreds of other churches with just that many drawers of their own?

"I couldn't hold onto what I was learning," one capable student said. "I loved it, but I couldn't make it stay in my head. It was too different from what I had already learned, so my brain just kept switching back to default."

Most of the students did fine on the final exam. They recognized the Vedas as foundational Hindu texts. They could put the Four Noble Truths into their own words. They understood kosher laws well enough to invite a Jewish friend to dinner, and

they knew that the Hajj was the Fifth Pillar of Islam.

As both they and I could have predicted, Christianity was their weak spot (no, the Trinity is not the name for the three branches of the Christian church, and there are four—not five—Gospels in the New Testament). This is the point in the semester when I figure I have failed the Christians—but not all by myself. Their churches have failed them too, by supporting them to believe things they do not know much about. College students in all other regards, they remain fifth graders in religion. How, when they meet someone who asks them intelligent questions about their faith, will they come up with equally intelligent answers? Keep your class notes, I tell them. You never know when you may need them.