

Using the Web in Religious Studies Courses

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SUMMARY. This article describes various in-class assignments and experiments using Web-based assignments conducted in religious studies courses over the past three years. The author notes both the advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet with students. While a number of advantages accrue to teachers, some concerns remain: lack of Web literacy, cost and access for students, copyright considerations, beta-testing course assignments, and grading final results. Nevertheless, students gain practical experience using the Internet, evaluating sources, reading primary source texts, and conducting research for projects. For these reasons the author plans to continue to integrate Web assignments into courses. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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It was the first day of Religious Studies 101: World Religions. We were talking about the world's religions and I said that Christianity still had more adherents than any other religion. A student piped up and said that Islam had more. I replied, not yet, but that in this century Islam probably would overtake Christianity. The student insisted that

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Islam was currently larger. The next class period I was able to report back that Christianity is still the largest, with 2 billion believers, as compared with Islam, with 1.2 billion. And I gave students the source: <<http://www.adherents.com>>.

Just as the Religious Studies students I teach rely on the Internet more and more for finding information and for conducting research, I find that I too am using it more frequently. I have immediate access to the Web from my office computer through the university server. I don't have to use a modem, my access is quick, and except for certain hours of the day, the service is rapid. I can print out e-mail messages and information I find on the department's printer. I can make changes rapidly on my homepage (<<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~remoore>>). I can toggle instantly between word-processing, Net surfing, and e-mailing, and find that I do. In fact, I probably am using Web resources more than my students are.

I have become committed to integrating Web-based resources into my syllabus, into my instruction, and into course materials. At the same time, however, I have become aware of a growing disjunction between the Web's convenience for me, and its lack of convenience for students. What I take for granted—ready access and no cost—does not exist for students. Some students pay the going rate of \$20 a month for access to a server, which is slowed down greatly by using a modem. Some students use the free computer access on campus, but this means they have to *be* on campus, they have to wait to get a terminal, and they have to pay \$.10 a copy when they print out material off the Web.

This article, therefore, reports anecdotally on two aspects of Web use in religious studies courses. First, it describes my findings as a teacher who uses the Web a great deal in a variety of instructional ways. I discuss how I integrated readings directly into a syllabus on the history of Christianity, as well as experiments in having students evaluate Web sources. Then, it describes my findings regarding student use and the disadvantages as well as advantages the Web presents for students.

USING READINGS DIRECTLY FROM THE WEB

Because I have found the Web useful, cheap, and convenient, I assumed that students would have the same experience. I decided to incorporate readings in the history of Christianity taken from the Web

into *Religious Studies 325: Christianity*. This upper division course attracts about 60 students wanting to fulfill their general education requirement in the humanities. Students who enroll also tend to have an interest in Christianity, either because of a deep religious commitment or a profound questioning of the tradition in which they were raised. I used Internet readings in primary sources to supplement Mary Jo Weaver's textbook *Introduction to Christianity*.¹ I thought that I would save the students money and time by letting them download the material at their convenience, rather than purchase a course packet and face the potential costs of copyright fees. I also thought that they would prefer Internet readings to making photocopies of readings placed on reserve in the Library. In theory, they could get the readings from any computer with Web access.

An academic searching for primary sources soon discovers a great number of *good* resources in religious studies on the Internet. Several articles in this volume call attention to these sources in greater detail than I will.² A look at the Web site for the Christianity class (<<http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~remoore/christianity.html>>) shows how I incorporated links directly to the readings from the syllabus, and also shows the type of primary sources one can find on Christianity. An obvious starting point is the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, sponsored by Wheaton College, which presents the classic, and copyright-free, *Ante-Nicene*, *Nicene*, and *Post-Nicene Fathers* translations (<<http://ccel.wheaton.edu/fathers2>>).³ Because CCEL used to take a long time to access I looked for alternatives to the same sources, and identified <<http://www.stmichael.org/search.html>>, sponsored by St. Michael the Archangel Orthodox Church as another site that has similar material from the early church. The Internet Medieval Sourcebook from Fordham University also provides material from the early church into the middle ages, at <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>>, as does New Advent, which identifies itself only as a "Catholic Web site" (<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers>>). Also at New Advent is *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, an older version of the hardcopy update, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*.⁴ Some items in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, which dates from the early twentieth century (<<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/>>), must be used with caution. The words of the Nicene Creed, or the Canons of Trent, do not change. But the interpretation of these primary texts seems incredibly archaic

at times. An entry under “Canon of the New Testament,” for example, seems light years behind contemporary biblical scholarship.

In addition to locating primary source texts from Martin Luther to Ellen Gould White, and from Mary Baker Eddy to J. Gresham Machen, one can also find journal articles that students may find more interesting than other types of primary sources. Articles from *Maryknoll Magazine*, for example (<<http://www.maryknoll.org/MEDIA/MAGAZINE/mfc.htm>>), introduced students to the modern world of missions, an interesting and provocative switch from the role missions played historically. They read about liberation theology and the contemporary church in Africa in the journal *CrossCurrents*, which posts the articles from past issues on-line (see <<http://www.crosscurrents.org/articlelist.htm>>).

In short, using primary source texts from the Internet allowed me to develop a course packet for students quickly and inexpensively. I was able to bring together classic texts and contemporary issues. I could custom design readings which related to the main text students were reading. I could avoid some copyright problems, although not all of them (see below). A drawback, of course, is that URLs do not exist in perpetuity, and as I checked them in the writing of this article I found at least one that was defunct. But I was pleased with the breadth and depth I was able to achieve in using Internet readings.

EVALUATING WEB SITES

Some teachers prohibit their students from using the Internet as an information source. By fiat, they say, “No Internet References.” There are some sound reasons for making this prohibition. The information on the Web has not undergone the scrutiny that academic publications require. No peer review process exists which could limit what is published on the Web. Moreover, most sites are commercial, and are designed to sell a product. Organizational sites are also designed to sell ideas, rather than products: they advocate a point of view. If a student went to <<http://www.mlking.org>> expecting to find impartial information about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the student would eventually discover—we hope!—that this is a hate site intended to defame the civil rights leader. Academically, therefore, it might seem to make sense to keep students away from the Internet, and to direct them toward scholarly resources that have gone through an extensive evaluation process.

Plenty of good sites—scholarly, peer-reviewed, well maintained, and organized—exist on the Internet as well, and excluding the use of the Internet may be a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. Rather than exclude Web-based resources from the pool of available information, therefore, I have decided to try to educate students in the evaluation of sources. This is not an easy task. The projects I have used to help build student awareness of information quality have had mixed results.

What I have tried to do is to provide some rudimentary instruction on search engines, the search process, and URLs and domain names. While the domain name for educational institutions, the suffix “edu,” is no guarantee of quality, it nevertheless indicates mission or motive: that is, education. A case in point is when librarians at the Love Library at San Diego State University were asked to obtain a copy of the Nuremberg Trials transcripts on medical experimentation. They learned that the library’s hard copy of the documents was missing. They turned to the Web for transcripts and found three sites:

<http://www.ushmm.org/research/doctors/Nuremberg_Code.htm>
<<http://ecco.bsee.swin.edu.au/studes/ethics/Nuremberg.html>> and
<<http://www.aches-mc.org/nurm.htm>>.

The librarians had to evaluate the three sites themselves to determine issues of authority, currency, accuracy, and bias. While the U.S. Holocaust Museum is probably fairly credible, and the Advocacy Committee for Human Experimentation Survivors & Mind Control might be credible, the librarians felt that the site sponsored by the University of Swinburn in Australia probably provided the best transcript for students in its medical school program. This was a case of “edu” actually indicating scholarly merit.

My earliest experiment was to have an Honors class in “Religion and Society” at the University of North Dakota develop a list of criteria for using the Internet. They came up with an excellent list which included issues of sponsorship (who sponsors the site? is it an official or authorized site, e.g., the *official* Oprah Winfrey fan club? is it a primary or secondary source?); credibility (authorship noted? credentials? editorial board?); access (is the site frequently updated? is the e-mail address working?); and the purpose of the site. One of the more helpful observations included: “Some clues that an Internet site is not credible are vague references, connections to sources that are

known not to be credible, and any use of Elvis and aliens in the same sentence used as scientific proof.” While the criteria the class came up with was great, the students themselves failed to follow their own instructions when asked to find a “credible” site and an “incredible” site concerning UFOs. Incredible was easy; credible was more difficult to find and to assess.

More successful projects have consisted of short Web exploration exercises, conducted after in-class instruction on evaluation. An upper-division class on the millennium which was comprised primarily of Religious Studies majors completed an open-ended assignment which required students to find one “good” Web site and one “bad” site on the millennium or the apocalypse. We discussed what we meant by “good” and “bad.” The former implied credible or accurate information about Y2K preparedness, historical facts, or some kind of academic or scientific information (for example, the Federation of American Scientists’ *Millennia Monitor* at <<http://www.fas.org/2000/about.htm>>). Students considered a site “bad” if it was alarmist, sought to sell something, spelled “millennium” incorrectly, was too sectarian, or was over the top (for example, numerology proves that Al Gore is the Beast in Revelation, <<http://www.yk.rim.or.jp/~elieshoh/666.htm>>). I did point out that a sectarian site might indeed be the best site if one wanted to study sectarianism, just as the Church of Scientology homepage (<http://www.scientology.org/scn_home.htm>) is a good place to examine what Scientologists say about themselves. But for some students, sectarian sites were good because they supported the confessional commitment the student already had. It was hard to argue with a student who found the site by *Left Behind* authors Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins good because it corresponded with her beliefs in the Rapture (<<http://www.leftbehind.com>>). These problems may not occur in science courses or even social science courses, but in religious studies students’ beliefs and commitments always come into the equation.

The students in the millennium class had difficulty completing a Web site Evaluation Guide that I had received and reproduced from librarians at the Rod Library at the University of Northern Iowa. How were they to evaluate accuracy? What if they could not locate the authority who wrote the site? It became clear that students needed more instruction in finding information on the Web site itself, such as who the sponsoring organization might be, or in locating and assessing

credentials. One student wrote that “This was a time consuming exercise for negligible gain. It was extremely frustrating and irritating.”

I simplified the Web site evaluation guide and re-wrote the assignment for a large general education class in World Religions. The first part of the assignment was closed: I asked students to identify the “best” one of three sites on Sikhism. They received instruction in how to do Web searches from Mark Stover, a librarian at San Diego State University, and got the criteria for determining what was “good” in advance. The second part was open: I asked students to find five sites on a particular world religion that they would actually be studying and which they would use in their research. Students were to identify the top two sites and explain their value in terms of the criteria Mark and I had given them.

The results were both encouraging and discouraging. On the encouraging side, most students were able to identify a personal homepage on Sikhism as being inadequate. They noted spelling errors, grammatical problems, and the fact that the site had not been recently updated. Unfortunately, they dismissed the information provided by the Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance (<<http://www.religioustolerance.org>>) because this small non-profit group had advertising on the page to support its massive educational program. Some students were able to go beyond the bells and whistles of the more polished sites to correctly identify sites that had valuable, and credible, information. Others rated sites on their design rather than their content. Some failed to see that some sites contained bias, or had least had the potential for bias. Others found scholarly sites that I could add to my personal list of useful educational Web tools.

Perhaps I am being overly critical. How often do we ask undergraduates to actually *evaluate* the sources they use? Usually we ask for a bibliography, and may ultimately criticize the bibliography, without providing instruction on judging the worth of sources. An assignment for the same World Religion course, related to the Web site evaluation, asked students to use the San Diego State University Love Library’s on-line databases to locate bibliographic information from three periodicals. Once students found three potentially useful sources, they had to actually go to the stacks to photocopy an article from a magazine and a journal, and then print out a full-text article from the database. This assignment asked students to write an abstract of the articles, and to explain why they thought the articles would be useful. While stu-

dents were able to write the abstracts, few actually discussed the value of the articles. Thus, a student who found an article on psychedelic drugs and Buddhism seemed unaware that the article actually contained virtually no information about Buddhism. Nevertheless, I think that the more that teachers ask students to make evaluative judgments, the better they will get at it, and using the Internet is a good way to give students immediate practice.

Experimentation with longer evaluation projects has produced better results. In some of my classes students may opt for an independent research project, the sole purpose of which is to find and evaluate Web sites. Some of the topics researched have included Women and Religion, Christian Reconstructionism, and Web sites on other world religions, such as Judaism, or Wicca. Part of the motivation was selfish: I was looking for Web sites on different topics and had students doing some of the legwork. In these longer projects I gave students little or no instruction on making evaluations. They were to develop and write down their own criteria for evaluating quality. One student wrote as criteria: "large content, good and useful information, good links, and good documentation." Students came up with a mixed bag of sites: some extremely scholarly and academic, such as Labyrinth (<<http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/labyrinth.home.html>> or Diotima (<http://www.uky.edu/ArtsSciences/Classics/gender.html>); others something less, such as the Religion Depot (<<http://www.edepot.com/religion.shtml>>). They did not seem able to differentiate between a site produced by a university or a scholar and one produced by an individual or a company with a point of view or product to sell. And yet, one student noted that "[a]lthough this site isn't a scholarly site, it does have articles from Marianne Williamson on the Meaning of Life and J. Richards['] translation of *Dhammapada-Sayings of the Buddha*." She was able to recognize both the lack of scholarship and the usefulness of the site at the same time.

THE DOWN SIDE OF USING THE INTERNET

Aside from the fact that students routinely cut and paste information they find on the Internet into their research papers, other considerations and problems exist with using the Internet as a teaching tool. These include Web literacy, access and cost, copyright considerations, beta-testing one's own assignments, and the amount of time spent grading Internet projects.

At some institutions teachers may assume that students had computer instruction in high school, that they used computers at home, and that they already know how to use e-mail and to search the Web. That is not the case at San Diego State University. Some students come in as freshmen entirely Web literate, and comfortable with accessing study guides posted on my homepage. Other students either missed out on computer instruction because they come from a foreign country, are older, or have a school background where computer access was limited. This raises the question of how much time a teacher is willing to devote to instructing students in the basic skills needed just to access course materials, let alone benefiting from completing Web exercises. Because class time is limited, it may be necessary to put course materials on reserve in the library to help those students who just aren't ready to jump into Internet use.

Access and cost also make using the Internet less convenient for students. I have not yet surveyed any classes as to the number of students who own computers, and who have Internet access at home. This information would vary from campus to campus: at the University of North Dakota, all of the dorms were wired into the University server. If a student lived in a dorm, access was free and easy. But not all students live in dorms, as at San Diego State University, where the majority of students live off campus and commute to school. Access through a modem can be time-consuming. Students in the Christianity course, where they were required to download Internet readings, made a variety of comments. One student complained about the cost of printing out the readings. Another said that students would have come to class better prepared, and having done the readings, if they already had the readings available in a course packet. To verify this, I surveyed the students in the Christianity class to see if they preferred a course packet or Internet readings. A slight majority favored readings from the Internet to paying \$25 or \$30 for a packet (3/5 to 2/5, from 40 respondents). If using the Internet saves students money by eliminating the need for course packets and copyright fees, then it can be a boon. And yet, the words of the young woman who said students didn't have the readings for class continues to haunt me.

Another issue involves copyright claims and fair use. I asked the sponsors of the sources I'd used in the Christianity syllabus what copyright fees, if any, were charged. Most replied that they were copyright-free, since they had long since fallen into the public domain.

The exceptions were two magazines, both of which were nevertheless willing to waive copyright fees for student use as long as we provided the appropriate copyright information at the bottom of the articles. Clearly copyright needs to be addressed on a case by case basis. A rule of thumb, however, was provided by the manager of CCEL, who said, "Most of the items are public domain—those that are not, have explicit copyright notices."

Beta-testing one's own assignments takes time, but is crucial for the success of any Internet assignment. Even testing up to the last minute is no guarantee that URLs or links will still work. Obviously one cannot plan for every contingency or disaster, but it does pay to check the URLs on the day an assignment is made to see if they still work. It is easy enough to announce a new URL, or to write it on the board, and it saves the heartache and hassle of students returning the following week without an assignment because it wasn't available. This relates to accessibility as well: if a site takes forever to load, it probably isn't going to be very useful. I found this out in a New Testament course, where I learned that the excellent Bible search engine <<http://www.bham.ac.uk/theology/goodacre/multibib.htm>> from the University of Birmingham in England was virtually inaccessible (although I was able to load it quickly while writing this article). In addition to listing "Multibible," then, I also gave students the URL for Bible Gateway, <<http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible>>, which is always accessible, but more limited in its sources.⁵

Does using the Internet actually save time? Certainly up-loading assignments and maintaining an accurate homepage take some time, although it doesn't seem much more than if one were to type up an assignment and have it photocopied for distribution. The ease of looking things up at a terminal in one's office, as opposed to running to the library to find various resources, is tremendous. In terms of grading assignments, however, I'm not convinced that the Internet necessarily saves time. In closed assignments, like the Sikhism one described above, the strengths and weaknesses of the sites are given, and evaluative papers are easy to correct. But in open assignments, the teacher should definitely check at least one or two URLs to assess their value, and to see if the student is on the right track. Having graded fifty Web assignments, with a minimum of two sites per assignment to view, I can say that this can be time-consuming and tedious, especially if one wants to make at least one constructive comment on the assignment

sheet. On the other hand, with students doing the same religions, I quickly became familiar with particular sites (such as <<http://www.lds.org>>, the homepage of the Church of Jesus Christ, Latter Day Saints, or <<http://www.iskcon.org>>, and the homepage of the Hare Krishnas). The more evaluative work that is assigned, the more thoughtful grading is needed. So using the Web may not always save time.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of these caveats and concerns—especially those involving access and cost to students—I plan to continue to use Web-based resources in my courses. I am heartened by the possibilities of using the Internet to help students gain critical thinking skills. If students can learn to judge the value of a Web site, they may be able to evaluate other print resources. If students have access to a variety of primary sources, they may be able to learn how to read difficult texts without having to buy collections of abridged readings. If students can learn that the Internet is a good tool for research, but that actually reading something takes time and effort, they may be able to transfer the skills they learn to other tasks and problems.

I have no doubt that using the Internet in courses is a two-edged sword. We may give students the impression that the quick way is the best way. Or that appearance means more than substance. Yet I would rather try to tame the beast—the Internet—than let it carry students away, which is what will happen if I step out of the picture.

ENDNOTES

1. Mary Jo Weaver, with David Brakke and Jason Bivins, *Introduction to Christianity*, 3d edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998).

2. A few hardcopy resources include the following: Jason D. Baker, *Christian cyberspace companion: A guide to the Internet and Christian online resources*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1997); Patrick Durusau, *High places in cyberspace: A guide to Biblical and religious studies, classics, and archaeological resources on the Internet*, 2d. ed. (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1998); Irving Green, *Judaism on the Web* (New York: MIS Press, 1997); and John Raymond, *Catholics on the Internet* (Rocklin CA: Prima, 1997).

3. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1969-1973); Philip Schaff, *A Select library of the Nicene and post-*

Nicene fathers of the Christian church, First series (Grand Rapids, MI: W.R. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1956); Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select library of Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church*, Second series (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1952-57).

4. Charles G. Herbermann et al., eds., *The Catholic encyclopedia: An international work of reference on the constitution, doctrine, discipline, and history of the Catholic Church* (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913-1914); *New Catholic encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill [1967-79]).

5. I would like to note that Bible Gateway is attempting to make the site more user-friendly to vision-impaired readers by providing key-stroke access in addition to mouse-based searching.