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The Human Quest for God: An Overview of World Religions

Joseph Stoutzenberger
Twenty-Third Publications, 2006
\$24.95, 268 pages

Reviewed by Dennis Feltwell

Some of *Catholic Education's* readers have likely used one or more of Stoutzenberger's high school religion texts like *Morality: A Response to God's Love* (2003) and *Celebrating Sacraments* (2000) in their classrooms. I now offer a review of his introduction to world religions on three points of consideration: its particular helpfulness to readers already familiar with the Roman Catholic tradition, its general usefulness to students studying world religions for the first time, and its classroom value for instructors seeking texts consistent with their schools' Catholic mission statements.

First, Stoutzenberger's text is accessible for upper-level high school students as well as 100-level college courses, particularly for Catholic colleges and universities. He expresses the merits of studying the world's religions in his introductory chapter, where he orients readers to the academic discipline of comparative religion and connects the various faith traditions with their respective geographic birthplaces. In doing so, however, he seems to have a predominantly Catholic audience in mind, as he peppers his first chapter with quotations from the Second Vatican Council, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and other Catholic writers. Stoutzenberger's own words likewise indicate that he undertakes this study of the world's religions as a member of the Christian community. He writes:

The study of world religions helps us understand ourselves better. For instance, Catholics can better appreciate the uniqueness of the Mass when they learn about what most Protestant Sunday services are like. Christians can understand Jesus better when they compare and contrast him with Muhammad, Gautama the Buddha, or the Hindu notion of God. Christians can also come to a greater realization of the roots of their religion by studying Judaism. In other words, by stepping outside of our religious world, entering into another's and then returning to our own, we grow in awareness and understanding of our own faith and beliefs. (p.15)

Written explicitly from within a Catholic perspective, then, Stoutzenberger's

text invites students to deepen their spiritual lives even within an academic pursuit of religion. Toward that end, he inserts two prayers into the book—one at the end of the first chapter and one on the last page.

Next, Stoutzenberger's method in laying out his eight chapters is helpful especially to students with a Catholic education. He begins the comparative portion of his book by navigating the more familiar ground of Judeo-Christian tradition. By contrast, world religions textbooks more commonly begin with Hinduism, the oldest among the world's major religions (e.g., Mary Pat Fisher's *Living Religions* and Huston Smith's classic work, *The World's Religions*). Furthermore, his final chapter concludes with a consideration of religious movements that have emerged from within the American context. Here again, Stoutzenberger begins with movements that have a closer affinity with mainstream Christianity, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and Jehovah's Witnesses, before moving to less Christocentric religions like Scientology and the new age movement. This approach thereby allows Catholic readers to wade more easily from this Judeo-Christian point of departure into the different worldviews, beliefs, and practices of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and a few tribal religions. In this sense, Stoutzenberger's text is truly comparative in scope, since it frequently returns to Christian concepts to help explain unfamiliar terms and concepts for other religions.

To some, it may appear somewhat off-putting to emphasize the Catholic tradition to such a degree in a study of world religions. After all, Catholic schools often have a number of non-Catholic and non-Christian students. At appropriate points, though, Stoutzenberger employs this Catholic focus to highlight the positive relationship and inter-religious dialogue between the Church and non-Christian religions through excerpts from the Second Vatican Council and other Church documents. For instance, he cites the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in his discussion of the Church's roots from Judaism. The author is also particularly sensitive to meditate on the horrors of the Holocaust, using words from the Church's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. In his introduction to Islam, he quotes the Vatican Council II's *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, which esteems Muslim beliefs held in common with Church teaching. Even when contrasting Catholic and Taoist understandings of nature, the author points to the natural law tradition in order to foster constructive dialogue. While natural law tradition differs in Christian practices from Taoist ones (particularly with respect to ethics), natural law itself is immutable in a way analogous to the Tao.

Thus, in spite of heavy emphasis on Roman Catholic tradition, his respectful tone toward Taoism is emblematic of Stoutzenberger's attitude toward all of the religions covered in his text.

Of course, in addition to these recommendations peculiar to a Roman Catholic context, Stoutzenberger offers readers a worthy study of the world's major religions. Each chapter fleshes out the specific ways that each religion conceives of and celebrates ultimate mystery and reality, citing their sacred texts and other primary sources. He also attends to their socio-historical contexts. For example, one activity discusses the relationship between Islam and Arab public life. It asks readers whether or not religion and politics ought to be kept separate, contrasting the political life of the Middle East with Western notions of separation of church and state. Moreover, Stoutzenberger is careful to focus part of the chapters on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam with respect to the experience of women, who, historically, have not held public leadership roles in their communities.

Pedagogically, Stoutzenberger's text is concise and reader friendly. Each chapter begins with an overview of its sections and a boxed-off activity entitled "Before we begin..." Each chapter section ends with review questions that check for understanding of key concepts. Every chapter contains numerous information boxes that hold pertinent vocabulary, concept charts, historical notes, current events, and other helpful content.

As an educator and scholar, Stoutzenberger also seems to have constructed this text with an eye toward its day-to-day use in the classroom. The book is chock-full of classroom and individual activities that lend themselves toward helping students understand the diverse beliefs and practices of the world's religions. Instructors at schools that encourage writing across the curriculum will find frequent opportunities for expository and persuasive writings using Stoutzenberger's book. Some activities require research; others encourage thoughtful reflection. For instance, one activity in chapter 5 asks the reader to compare Hinduism's perspectives on physical/sensual pleasures with those of his or her own religion. At the same time, the reader is asked to describe the difference between pleasure and joy. Another activity in chapter 3 encourages readers to think creatively: "Write an essay describing sin as a disease. Include a prescription for how one might cure this particular disease" (p. 96).

On a cautionary note, *The Human Quest for God* might appear a bit stark to readers used to bright color photos and graphics. Instead, it is short on photographs and drawings; there are a total of 30 images throughout the entire book. In addition, it contains only illustrative citations from Scriptures, with

no extended readings from the world's sacred texts. Stoutzenberger also limits his study of certain religions. Emerging traditions like Wicca and ancient ones like Zoroastrianism are simply not discussed. Some information boxes offer very brief glimpses into other religions like Jainism, Sikhism, and Shinto. It is also unfortunate that the author underemphasizes the phenomenon of syncretism in the world's religions, since so much of his text accentuates similarities in the religions rather than their differences.

However, the text's apparent austerity yields a threefold advantage with regard to cost, course planning, and portability. First, by allowing instructors to use their preferred Scripture translations, the book remains more affordable. New copies of other standard world religions textbooks, especially those that contain large sections of Scripture readings from each religion, can cost as much as \$90. Second, in a typical one-semester, three-credit world religions course, there is usually enough time to cover six or seven religions in adequate detail. Much of the content in costlier, more comprehensive textbooks goes to waste simply because there is insufficient time to cover its material effectively. Finally, at less than 300 pages, the text is roughly the length and width of past printed issues of *Catholic Education*.

In conclusion, Stoutzenberger delivers what is promised in the subtitle of his book: an accessible overview of the world's religions. Stoutzenberger's keen ability as a Catholic educator is exemplified in *The Human Quest for God*. So, with the caveat that his text maintains an explicitly Roman Catholic point of reference throughout, I recommend it to such Catholic institutions for their introductory world religions courses.

Dennis Feltwell is a visiting professor of religious studies at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, and adjunct lecturer in religious studies at Holy Family University in Philadelphia. He has also taught in several elementary and high schools in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.