



Jeffrey Brackett teaches Asian religions at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. His main research is about contemporary conceptions of the “monkey-god” Maruti (a.k.a. Hanuman) in Maharashtra. Some recent essays include “The Upwardly Mobile Monkey-God: Village and Urban Mārutīs in Maharashtra” in Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus (eds.), Speaking Truth to Power: Religion Caste, and the Subaltern Question in India, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 78–91; and (with Vijaya Dev) “Hanumān at the Center of Maharashtrian Village Life: A Translation of Vyankatesh Madgulkar’s Marathi Story, ‘Temple,’” in Journal of Vaishnava Studies 12 (2) 2004: 105–116. Brackett has participated in several intensive pedagogy seminars and workshops through the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. He has forthcoming essays related to his teaching of ethnography in Teaching Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies (Rebecca Todd Peters and Bernadette McNary-Zak, eds., Oxford University Press) and Studying Hinduism in Practice (Hillary Rodrigues, ed., Routledge Press).

Background and Rationale

The first day of my upper-level class entitled “Ethnography of Religion” someone said, “I don’t have any idea what ethnography is, but I need a 400-level course to complete my religious studies degree.” Seven weeks later, several students said the same thing either aloud, or in their journal assignments. Yet, at that point, they actually had learned a great deal about ethnography itself. Their frustration was related to the realization that there was no single way of doing ethnography, let alone defining it. Each week led to further complications related to the elusiveness of strictly defining the discipline. Meanwhile, they had been *doing* ethnography for nearly two months. When I shared this information with a colleague who teaches a similar course, he said that it often takes *twelve* weeks for everything to begin to gel in a course! It turned out that he was only off by one week: by week thirteen the whole class “got it.”

A central feature of this course is getting students out of the classroom in order to study religion in practice. My preference for the study of religion in practice is related to my graduate education. Although I was trained in religious studies, I had anthropology faculty members on my dissertation committee, and every committee member had spent numerous years “in the field.” Further, my wife and I had lived in India for several years as part of our graduate training. I am, therefore, fortunate to have the chance to bring my passion for field experience to bear on my teaching. An important lesson one learns in doing field research is that one’s topic takes shape — in many unanticipated ways — on the ground, so to speak. In teaching ethnography of religion, I have built into the course room for modification not just of student work, but of our learning as a community of co-learners. This notion of co-learners enables students more say in their learning experience. Rather than having an expert tell them what it is they ought to know, we begin by acknowledging what we each bring to the discussion. One very useful way to create such a community of co-learners is through the use of reflective journal writing.

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