

Teaching in the Modern Age

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Dr. Ronald J. Brown, currently an adjunct professor with the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) at the Manhattan, NYC campus, is now in his fourth decade of teaching and his fifteenth year at UTS.

NEW YORK - Whether instructing a large class of Orthodox Jewish students, a smaller, more intimate class of diverse seminary students, or leading a group on a tour of New York City, Dr. Ronald Brown can be counted on to enlighten and entertain his audience with his vast experience and knowledge of the world, and the world's religions.

A world traveler with a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Geneva, Switzerland and an M.T.S. in World Religions from Harvard Divinity School, Brown has studied and taught in such diverse places as Israel, Russia, Hungary, France, Switzerland and Mexico, with stops in China, Indonesia, Senegal, Cameroon, Peru, Egypt and Haiti. As recently as last summer, Brown spent time in a large Amish and Mennonite community of 25,000 in Paraguay, where he did research for a 30-page article he wrote on Utopian societies: Paraguay as a Holy Land: From the Guarani Indians to Reverend Sun Myung Moon in the 2015 issue of the *Journal of Unification Studies*.

"I love to learn," he explained, "I'm always reading about history, politics, world religion, architecture... all the things I love. Last year I spent a month in Paris and took a crash course in irregular verbs. I speak fluent French, but you can always improve."

Brown currently teaches a course on World Religions and Global Conflict to a diverse group at UTS, including students from the Philippines, Mali, the Ivory Coast, India, Japan and the U.S.A., representing countries with either Muslim, Christian and Hindu traditions - or a combination of these and other traditions. The course allows Dr. Brown to compare and contrast the evolution of these ancient cultures and practices while exploring the modern conflicts between these religions.

With the command of four languages - English, French, Modern Hebrew and German - and a voracious appetite for learning, Brown often reads texts in their original language and deepens his experience by living in the country where the religions are practiced, as he did for five years in Israel and seven years in Switzerland. During the time he spent in Paraguay with the Amish and Mennonite communities doing research for the article, he was able to speak with them in German, the language they continue to use.

He found the same purpose and motivation when he began teaching at UTS in 2002 on an invitation from Dr. Frank Kaufman who, because of work overload, was unable to teach a course on world religions and recommended that Brown take over the class. Despite not knowing much about UTS or its founder, he jumped at the chance.

“When I started teaching here I found it fascinating to see what was going on,” explained Brown. “It was like a case study. It was a chance to immerse myself and learn about the Unification Movement from the inside. It is what I like to do. When I lived in Israel I studied Judaism and Zionism; when I lived in Switzerland I did Calvinism; when I was in Paraguay I did the article on Utopian movements. So whenever I'm in a certain place I throw myself into the language and into the culture.”

Understanding the language and culture firsthand also gives Brown a deeper insight into today's modern conflicts, such as the rise of ISIS, the ongoing Arab/Israeli conflict in the Middle East, the resurgence of Confucianism in China, and the cries of evangelicals in the United States for a return to its Christian roots while putting a moratorium on foreign and Muslim immigration.

“ISIS, for example,” notes Brown, “doesn't recruit people by saying ‘we are going to go out and kill people,’ but by telling them ‘we're going to return Islam to the Golden Age when Mohammed was alive and people lived their faith fully;’ in Israel, they want to restore the age of David and Solomon. It is the same with Christians in America, it's a return to the past and a previous ‘golden age.’”

While lecturing recently on Samuel P. Huntington's “The Clash of Civilizations,” Brown explained that, “Huntington's thesis is that the nation-state is on the decline and the religion-based civilizations, such as Western Christian (Catholic and Protestant), Eastern Orthodox Europe, the Islamic World, Latin America, and the Sinic (Confucianist) civilizations will be the principal global actors in the future.

“As Huntington argues, we are moving into a period right now where there is a clash between American Protestantism and Islamic civilization, the rise of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and the abandonment of the secular state in India, and the rise of Confucianism in China, which is gradually replacing Communism as the state ideology.”

Although his students are not able to immerse themselves in the language and culture the way Brown has over the course of his life, he does try to bring as much of his knowledge and experience into the classroom as possible.

“Basically, I take a bunch of students and try to let them experience and see what other religions are about,” explains Brown. “When you talk about a Muslim it's not just a Methodist with a funny head scarf; or, when you talk about an Israeli it's not some Presbyterian living in the Middle East. They don't have the same way of looking at the world as we do.”

In the end, however, a common ground does exist between all religions, notes Brown. “Religion plays a determining role in our world, and it has from the very beginning. The goal of all religions is to create a perfect human society. I think that is the great contribution religion makes to human history. Don't be satisfied with your little plot of land, a few chickens and a cow, you are part of something greater.”