A half century after the U. S. Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Abington v. Schempp*, which banned school-led devotional Bible reading in American public schools while encouraging the academic study of religion, there is a broad consensus among scholars, educators, policy makers, and religious leaders that the study of religion must be a significant component of American public education. Of course, not all Americans are aware of this consensus—a 2010 survey found that 64% of us mistakenly believe it is unconstitutional for public schools to offer comparative religion courses.¹ And one could hardly say that the study of religion is thriving in our public schools.² Nevertheless, most educators agree that an adequate education must include some understanding of religion. Indeed, many have advocated the academic study of religion as a way to bridge the sometimes bitter divides among religious and secular Americans. The study of religious diversity, they argue, is essential to the functioning of our multicultural democracy.³

Yet despite this invaluable—and hard-won—consensus, a number of fundamental questions remain. What do American students need to know about religion? And how is it best taught? Though there are a wide range of approaches to the academic study of religion, most secondary school religious studies curricula are still structured by the “world religions” model of conceptualizing religious diversity that was dominant in American universities in the mid-twentieth century. And unfortunately, I would argue, this pedagogic model too often promotes a superficial form of religious literacy, rather than a serious engagement with religious diversity—substituting a decontextualized knowledge of dates and doctrines for an empathic understanding of religious lives. In this essay, I will draw on current scholarship in religious studies to argue instead for a focus on “lived religion” in secondary school religious studies curricula. This approach to the academic study of religion is well grounded in the everyday life of our pluralistic society.

Following a brief discussion of these two pedagogic models, I will explore specific strategies for teaching about lived religion. Although my own work at the Interfaith Center of New York has focused on community-based, experiential forms of religious diversity education, I will focus here on the study of religion through literature, as exemplified in a discussion of James Baldwin’s classic novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. For teachers who may not be comfortable with community-based education, the study of religion through literature (as well as film, and other media) allows students to engage with the depth and complexity of religious life without leaving the relative comfort of the classroom.

Whether in a full-year course or week-long unit, the vast majority of secondary school religious studies curricula are framed as discussions of “world religions.” This pedagogic model tends to describe global religious diversity in terms of a fixed set of six
or eight “major” traditions, each of which is defined by a fixed set of four or five characteristics: (1) its core doctrines or beliefs; (2) the life history of its founder or founders, if any; (3) its geographic origin and diffusion; (4) its sacred texts, if any; and in some cases (5) its major holidays or ritual practices. Islam, for example, may be taught fairly easily through a discussion of the Five Pillars, an account of the life of Muhammad and rapid growth of his movement, a map and timeline to illustrate its global expansion from the Arabian Peninsula, a few brief selections from the Qur’an, and perhaps a discussion of the customs surrounding Ramadan. Similarly, Buddhism can be encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths and Eight-Fold Path, the life story of the historical Buddha, the diffusion of his teachings throughout East Asia, excerpts from a sutra or two, and perhaps a discussion of meditation. And so on for a number of other traditions, each of which is assumed to fit—or remade to fit—the conceptual template of a world religion.

This “dates and doctrines” approach to the study of religion may give students the answers to factual questions about a number of significant faith traditions, but it fails to prepare them for participation in the civic life of their religiously diverse society. By defining each religion in terms of a single, static body of doctrine, ritual, and text, the world religions model offers students little or no understanding of the far more flexible forms of popular belief, practice, and interpretation that make up the fabric of religious life. The Ten Commandments stand in for the broad spectrum of Jewish faith, doubt, and identity; the Four Gospels for the countless ways that Christians work to bring them to life; the Five Pillars for the kaleidoscopic diversity of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims; the Eight-Fold Path for the personal journeys of immigrant and American-born Buddhists.

Recognizing these limitations of the world religions model, many scholars of religion have shifted, in recent years, towards a focus on what is often called lived religion. The study of lived religion is grounded in everyday religious life, rather than canonical doctrines or texts. Scholars of lived religion explore how doctrines, rituals, and texts may shape—and be shaped by—the practical concerns and political aspirations of historically specific, local communities. They often question the boundaries of established religions, as well as the definition of “religion” as such. And they pay close attention to the racial, ethnic, gendered, and doctrinal diversity within every single religious community. In short, the study of lived religion takes the analysis of religious diversity out of the rarified realm of doctrine and text, and places it instead within the give-and-take of a multicultural public sphere.

This, I would argue, is the most appropriate model of religious diversity education for American secondary schools. Our students certainly do need to learn about the histories and beliefs of diverse religious traditions, but much more than that, they need to learn about the religious lives of their diverse neighbors. They need an academically grounded engagement with the social realities of contemporary faith communities. They need to know how their own experiences of American society may be radically different—and not so different at all—from the experiences of their peers living in different religious worlds. These are the fundamental goals of a lived religion pedagogy.

But beyond these broad principles, how do you do it? How do you incorporate discussions of everyday religious life into a secondary school social studies curriculum? There is no single right answer to this question.

With my colleagues at the Interfaith Center of New York, I have developed programs for both teachers and students structured around panel discussions with local religious leaders and site visits to local houses of worship—programs that introduce New Yorkers and others to religious diversity by introducing them to their diverse neighbors. But many teachers are understandably reluctant to invite religious leaders to speak with their students, or take students to visit a house of worship. This is especially true in American public schools, where a community-based religious diversity program that
goes awry can raise very serious First Amendment concerns. I will therefore focus here on classroom strategies for teaching about lived religion, and, in particular, on the study of religion through literature. I hope to demonstrate the richness of this approach by showing what students may learn about Christianity in reading James Baldwin’s classic novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain.*

Baldwin’s semi-autobiographical novel explores the conflicted personal and spiritual awakening of fourteen year-old John Grimes, as well as the lives of his family and other community members at an African-American Pentecostal church in Harlem in the 1930s. Set over the course of a single day—and a long prayer service—the novel uses extended flashbacks to trace the painful saga of the Grimes family, and the broader contours of African-American history in the early twentieth century. In this short essay, I cannot discuss the complex details of Baldwin’s narrative, but suffice it to say that the story of the Grimes family is tied to a series of moving, detailed, ethnographically and psychologically nuanced portraits of African-American Christian life.

Classroom discussions of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* can help students engage with a number of major themes in many high school social studies curricula. The novel’s reflections on African-American life in Harlem and the rural South, for example, can give students of U.S. history an intimate, first-person understanding of the Great Migration. Its portrait of a deeply segregated New York, as seen through the eyes of an African-American family, raises enduring questions about race and the modern American city—questions that echo in today’s Black Lives Matter movement. And the poignant story of young John Grimes speaks to the personal and political choices faced by many high school students, as they struggle to reconcile the emerging tensions between their religious faith and sexuality. In these and other ways, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* can help teachers and students explore a range issues at the heart of American history and civic life.

But while social studies teachers have grown increasingly comfortable with the use of literature to deepen their students’ understandings of historical events like the Great Migration, they are often reluctant to apply the same rich pedagogy in teaching about religious diversity. Rather than asking students to explore evocative narratives of religious faith and experience, they generally stick to the comfort and security of dates and doctrines, texts and founders. Novels set in contemporary faith communities can thus enrich the study of religion, by offering students a more fully human, empathic understanding of religious lives that are different from their own. I hope to show (not just tell) you what I mean through a brief discussion of *Go Tell it on the Mountain.*

The narrative unfolds over the course of the Saturday evening Tarry Service at the Temple of the Fire Baptized, which is “not the biggest church in Harlem, nor yet the smallest” (p. 5). Baldwin describes the spirit-filled prayers of the saints, and how “Their singing caused [John] to believe in the presence of the Lord; indeed it was no longer a question of belief, because they made that presence real” (p. 7). He captures the swelling, syncopated rhythms of Pentecostal worship, describing how:

> While John watched, the Power struck someone . . . they cried out, a long wordless crying, and, arms outstretched like wings, they began the Shout . . . then the tambourines began again, and the voices rose again, and the music swept on again, like fire, or flood, or judgment. Then the church seemed to swell with the Power it held, and, like a planet rocking in space, the temple rocked with the Power of God. (pp. 7-8)

In addition to such vivid descriptions of religious practice, Baldwin explores the spiritual lives and experiences of the Grimes family—their personal faith, doubts, and aspirations. At the very moment of his conversion and rebirth as a Christian, for example, Baldwin describes how Gabriel Grimes (John’s authoritarian adoptive father) hears his mother’s voice “a-singing low and sweet, right there beside me,” and:
Choosing Novels and Films for Teaching Lived Religion

I point out in this chapter that the study of literature and film can enrich the study of religion in American secondary schools, by offering students a more fully human, empathic understanding of religious lives that are different from their own. But how do teachers choose novels and films to support classroom teaching on diverse faith traditions? What should they look for in literary and cinematic representations of religion? There’s no one right answer to these questions—as with resources for teaching on any subject, the answer depends on you, your students, and your school community. But I can suggest some general guidelines.

First, you should acquaint yourself with the wide range of texts and films available for students and young adult readers. A Google search for “Buddhism novel” or “Islam film,” for example, can identify suitable educational websites that open a world of possibilities. For specific suggestions, see the lists of novels, dramatic films, and documentaries set in American religious communities (as well as other resources for teaching religious diversity) on the website of the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, at http://religiousworldsnyc.org/resource-page/resources-teaching-american-religious-diversity. And for a broader view of the field, see the scholarly articles and reviews in the journal *Religion & Literature* and the *Journal of Religion and Film* (both of which are available online).

But how to choose from this embarrassment of riches? Perhaps above all, look for novels and films that offer portraits of individuals and communities living their faith in specific social contexts. Don’t waste your time searching for a single novel or film that captures the full spectrum of diversity within a global religious tradition. There is no such thing. One of your jobs as a teacher is to situate a novel or film within that larger whole, tying its distinctive characters and local settings to their broader social and religious histories. Effective teaching with *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, for example, would probably require a little research on African-American church history, and perhaps the strategic use of a “world religions” textbook, in order to place the Grimes family within the larger Christian world.

Similarly, look for novels and films that illustrate specific themes or issues within a given religious tradition, or perhaps comparative themes that are relevant to a range of traditions. Don’t waste your time searching for a single novel or film that sums up the theological heart of a faith. There is no such thing. I have argued that *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, for example, is an extraordinary resource for teaching aspects of Christianity, but no one text can tell your students everything they need to know about two thousand years of Christian thought and practice. Again, one of your jobs as a teacher of lived religion is to draw out the ties between part and whole—revealing the world in a proverbial grain of sand.

Look for novels and films that include vivid, experiential descriptions of religious life and ritual practice, while avoiding sensationalist or stereotypical images. The challenge, of course, is to make this distinction when evaluating a novel or film set in a faith community you are not familiar with. If you’ve never been to an African-American Pentecostal church, for example, or read any scholarship on the Pentecostal movement, how can you judge whether Baldwin’s description of the Grimes family’s church “rock[ing] with the Power of God” (see p. x of this chapter) is a vivid portrait or a clichéd stereotype? In most cases, you can rely on your own critical reading skills—if you can spot racial stereotypes in a dusty old textbook, you can likely spot religious ones in an unfamiliar novel or film. When in doubt, however, it can be extremely helpful to gauge reactions to a novel or film among members of the faith community it describes. Ask your friends and colleagues, or look for comments online, but be sure to keep in mind the internal diversity of the faith tradition in question—members of a relatively elite African Methodist Episcopal church, for example, might react negatively to an accurate, sympathetic description of Pentecostal rituals with which they are unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

Look for novels and films centered on fully human, idiosyncratic characters, wrestling in creative ways with their faith traditions. Contrary to a widespread secular stereotype of religiosity, very few people of faith “blindly”
When he heard this singing, which filled all the silent air, which swelled until it filled all the waiting earth, the heart within him broke, and yet began to rise, lifted of its burden; and his throat unlocked; and his tears came down as though the listening skies had opened.

"Then I praised God [says Gabriel], Who had brought me out of Egypt and set my feet on solid rock.” (p. 93)

This passage, and many others like it, offers readers an intimate understanding of Christianity that they cannot gain from a world religions textbook.

Beyond these rich portraits of Christian life, Go Tell it on the Mountain also offers an extended meditation on one of the central premises of the Christian tradition: the transformative power of conversion. This may not be a “core doctrine” of Christianity—world religions textbooks don’t generally rank conversion alongside the Trinity and the Incarnation—but ever since the Apostle Paul’s dramatic change of heart on the road to Damascus (according to the biblical book of Acts 9:3-18), mainstream Christian thought has generally assumed that sinful individuals can be transformed through the salvific work of Christ. Indeed, this promise of personal transformation—a present day, this-worldly correlate of eternal salvation—has been particularly significant within American Evangelical Protestantism, both Black and White, since the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The devout older teenager Elisha gives voice to this tradition in Go Tell it on the Mountain, when he reassures John, “when the Lord saves you . . . He gives you a new mind and a new heart, and then you don’t find no pleasure in the world, you get all your joy in walking and talking with Jesus every day” (p. 49). Baldwin explores this claim throughout the novel, but ultimately questions the Christian promise of transformation. He offers unsparing accounts of individual sin—more often than not on the part of the saints—and a scathing critique of our sinful society, wracked by the brutal legacy of slavery. The Grimes family looks to its faith for redemption from a broken world. But against this backdrop, Baldwin asks, can one really find in Christ “a new beginning, a blood-washed day” (93)?
At a pivotal moment in the narrative, John’s mother Elizabeth poses this searching question to her future sister-in-law Florence: “But don’t you think,” she hesitantly asked, “that the Lord can change a person’s heart?” Florence replies:

I done heard it said often enough, but I got yet to see it. These [people] running around, talking about the Lord done changed their hearts—ain’t nothing happened to them [people]. They got the same old black hearts they was born with. I reckon the Lord done give them those hearts—and, honey, the Lord don’t give out no second helpings, I’m here to tell you. (p. 182)

Elizabeth’s question—at once social, psychological, and theological—is the kind of question secondary school students need to explore if they wish to understand the human realities of religious life, as opposed to the clear-cut claims of doctrine. Elisha answers yes, “when the Lord saves you . . . He gives you a new mind and a new heart.” Florence answers no, “the Lord don’t give out no second helpings.” John himself isn’t sure, and Baldwin’s narrative moves ambivalently back and forth between these perspectives. While the world religions section of a widely used high school history textbook blithely asserts that, “Christians believe that faith in Jesus saves believers from God’s penalty for sin,” Go Tell it on the Mountain offers a series of subtle reflections on this claim though the moving story of John Grimes, his family, their church, and their society.

James Baldwin may stand out in his literary genius, but Go Tell it on the Mountain is hardly the only source available for such a rich, engaging account of religious life. Secondary school teachers might teach aspects of Judaism—and particularly the internal diversity of the American Jewish community—through Chaim Potok’s The Chosen. They might teach aspects of Islam through Mohja Kahf’s The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf, or aspects of Haitian Vodou through Edwige Danticat’s Breath, Eyes, Memory. In addition to novels like these, they might look to dramatic films like Bernardo Bertolucci’s “Little Buddha,” Spike Lee’s “Malcolm X,” or Jonathan Wacks’ “Powwow Highway.” They might have students explore the mainstream of American religious life through documentary films like Danny Alpert’s “The Calling” and Rashid Ghazi’s “Fordson: Faith, Fasting, Football, and the American Dream,” or have them explore the ragged edges of contemporary religious identities through films like Lucy Walker’s “Devil’s Playground” and Omar Majeed’s “Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam.” None of these books and films is a perfect source (whatever that may mean) for the study of the traditions and communities they chronicle. To use them effectively, teachers must help students understand that no media representation—very much including documentary film—offers a purely objective, transparent window into social life. But with this essential caveat in mind, the study of literature and film can enrich—or transform—the study of religion in American secondary schools, by introducing students to the textures and tensions of everyday life in specific, local religious communities.

The most daunting challenge, and the greatest reward, of such a pedagogy lies in this local specificity. A serious engagement with lived religion focuses our attention on the diversity within every faith tradition, and makes it impossible to speak of world religions in sweeping, universal terms. In teaching Go Tell it on the Mountain, for example, it is essential for students to understand that the Christianity of an African-American Pentecostal church is different, in many ways, from the diverse Christianities practiced in other communities throughout the world. The Grimes family cannot stand in for the world’s nearly 2.2 billion Christians. But the essential point is that no one can—not even the ancient founder of the tradition. The study of lived religion should help students understand that global religious traditions only come to life in the particular concerns and experiences of their adherents. As the influential historian Robert Orsi has put it:

The key questions [for the study of lived religion] concern what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what
they make of themselves and their worlds with them . . . . There is no religion apart from this, no religion that people have not taken up in their hands.15

The Grimes family may stand, in its historical specificity, for the process of “take[ning] up” religion in one’s hands—the project of world-making, community-building, and self-fashioning through faith. Far more than any dates or doctrines, this deeply human project is what students need to understand if they are to be active participants in the civic life of their religiously diverse society.

NOTES

2. For a critical analysis of the state of religious studies in American schools see Warren Nord, Does God Make a Difference? Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41-99. One need not accept Nord’s far-reaching critique of the secularization of American education to recognize the dispiriting portrait he paints of religious diversity education in our public schools.


6. For detailed discussions of two such programs, see Goldschmidt, “From World Religions to Lived Religion” (cited above in note #4), 185-190.

7. Take, for example, the heated controversy that developed after a social studies class from Wellesley Middle School visited the Islamic Society of Boston in May of 2010. For a detailed discussion see Linda K. Wertheimer, Faith Ed: Teaching about Religion in an Age of Intolerance (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 39-70. Given these and other concerns, a number of scholars and educators have, in fact, advised against the use of guest speakers and site visits in secondary school religious studies curricula. See, for example, the concerns articulated in the American Academy of Religion’s Guidelines, 23-24 (cited above in note #3).


9. I’ve specified high school curricula in this passage, as opposed to middle school or younger grades, because Go Tell it on the Mountain could be a tough book to teach for younger students. It includes evocative descriptions of sexuality, though no real sex scenes to speak of. And perhaps more challenging, Baldwin’s characters often use the fraught term “nigger,” in ways that are entirely appropriate to their historical and linguistic context, but require some critical sophistication on the part of contemporary readers.


11. There are, of course, important exceptions to this generalization, including some views of predestination in and around the Calvinist tradition.

12. I have substituted the term “people” where Baldwin has Florence use the fraught term “niggers.” As noted above, in note 9, Baldwin’s use of this term is entirely appropriate to the historical and linguistic context of Harlem in the 1930s, but I am reluctant to use it in my own context as an author and educator.
