



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

World Religions and Religious Worlds

Corey Davison, Newton South High School, Newton, MA

Abstract:

This world religions unit is situated at the beginning of a year-long 9th grade world history course. Students will engage with the following essential questions:

- What is religion? What are its fundamentals?
- What are the basic tenets of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? How did they develop historically?
- How do these religions look in the world? How are they enacted in our community?

The unit is designed to take about two months. It will be implemented in a public high school in an affluent and relatively diverse suburb of Boston. The classes have anywhere between 20 and 25 students, and for the purposes of this unit, about one third to a half of them are Jewish, while the rest are either Catholic, Protestant, or nonaffiliated.

Goals and Structure:

The purpose of this religion unit, as indicated in the essential questions, is to introduce students to the concept and reality of religion through the lens of five faith traditions. By the end of the unit, students will not only have a working knowledge of each of the five religions, but they will also be able to identify and examine the ways that these five religions act in their community of Newton and the Greater Boston Area. Whereas my previous religions units focused on the content of the faith traditions (their doctrines, founding stories, and features of practice), this unit strives to add the lived dimension of religion to my students' education. Since site visits are difficult (due to the culture of my school) and First Amendment issues can make teaching lived religion in public school tricky, I have taken the following approach to this unit:

1. Before each religion is introduced, students will get a chance to see how each faith tradition is lived out. This is not intended to be an exhaustive introduction; it is merely meant to encourage students to view religion through the "lived" lens, rather than simply as a topic that exists on PowerPoints and in handouts. Potential resources for these lived religion introductions are described in detail below.

2. After this introduction to everyday life in each faith tradition, we will briefly review the “textbook version” of each traditions as I've always done: stories, founders, tenets, rituals, etc. This would follow, more or less, the unit plan that I have used previously, although with lessons shortened or cut out for time consideration. A very abbreviated schedule of lessons follows this introduction – feel free to contact me for specific lesson plans, handouts, etc. And please note that these days will inevitably be stretched – a “Day 10” lesson plan can easily stretch into two days, so it is more helpful to view them as “Topics” rather than strict “Days.”)

3. Finally, after each religion has been introduced and students have some familiarity with each faith tradition, there will be a summative assessment. This will take the form of two assessments:

- 1) A pen-and-paper test. Since this will be the first history unit of these students’ high school career, it is important for them to be introduced to standard tests. This will also serve the purpose of ensuring that students have internalized the essentials of each faith tradition. (It is also possible to have quizzes after each faith tradition mini-unit, but in order to keep the material fresh in students’ minds before the interview, it may work better to have an all-encompassing test before the interview project.)
- 2) An interview project – described in detail below, with suggested handouts for students.

Lived Religion Resources:

As noted above, one of the central goals of the unit is to introduce students to everyday life of diverse religious communities (aka, “lived religion”) in addition to the doctrines, texts, and ideas at the heart of each religious tradition. Unfortunately, however, it will be difficult for me to lead site visits to local houses of worship (due to the culture and expectations of my school), and First Amendment issues can make it hard – though definitely not impossible! – to teach about lived religion in public school.

Given these constraints, students will use resources like the following in the introductory “lived religion” segment of each mini-unit:

1) Viewing online interviews of various members of a faith community, then jotting down 6-8 things that these people seem to value. (living a moral life? Going to worship services? Personal forms of worship [prayer, meditation, etc.]? Living out their faith in a political sphere?) For example:

- There is an interview series on YouTube with various Christians, called [40 Days 40 Nights, a Conversation with Christians in America](#). Each video is very short and students could pick 3-4 to watch and notate.
- Using the Internet Archive’s Way Back Machine, there are also videos interviews with religiously diverse American accessible through the (unfortunately defunct) Ravel-Unravel project

- I hope to create a series of short interviews with religious leaders and laypeople in the Greater Boston Area in the style of the aforementioned series.
- The Interfaith Center's YouTube channel has uploaded [videos of our panel discussions with local religious leaders from the *Religious Worlds of New York* summer institute](#) – selections of these can be easily digestible by 9th graders (e.g. the responses to questions about wearing the hijab)

2) Conducting brief interviews with members of their own community (this would be especially easy for Judaism and Christianity, possible for Hinduism and Islam, but very difficult for Buddhism, due to the religious demographics of the area around my school). Students would do the same thing as they did in the previous activity - just getting at what they value, how their religion informs their lives, rather than getting at doctrine, ritual, etc. Since this is similar to the final project, it would be good to give students some practice; however, it might be irresponsible to ask students to interview subjects about their religion without them first being introduced to those religions.

3) Online “site visits” to diverse houses of worship via Google Earth and other internet resources. Either as a class or by themselves, students will explore houses of worship through Google Earth, gathering whatever information they can about what that faith tradition seems to value (what kinds of images do you see? What do people seem to be doing? What can the architecture tell you about what this religion values?). The problem with this, however, is that only the most famous houses of worship can be found in detail on Google Earth, and so students would probably not get an accurate representation of that given faith tradition. So, I would select website of houses of worship for students to explore - and these could be sites of local houses of worship. Then, students could combine, compare and contrast what they saw on Google Earth to what the local houses of worship project on their site. ([Click here for another *Religious Worlds of New York* curriculum project focused specifically on online “site visits” to houses of worship.](#))

4) Using visual and auditory art. Playing the adhan in different cities, looking at Christian iconography, statues of Buddha, Hindu deities, etc., in different parts of the world - but always including something from Boston.

The goal of all these resources is to introduce religion not as a static, theoretical entity in the world (usually the far-off world), but as a living thing that affects all human communities, including Newton and Boston. Although students may not fully understand what they're seeing/hearing, the rest of each religion's mini-unit will give context to what they experience in the lived religion introduction.

For information about the *Religious Worlds of New York* summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.

Abbreviated Schedule of Lessons

Day 1: Intro to religions unit

1. Hand out textbooks

2. Activity to explore relationship of Belief vs. Fact

HW: Why should we study religion? 1. Read section in Prothero. Summarize his argument & tell me, in a paragraph, why you agree or disagree. 2. Reflect on your connections to each religion in our unit: jot down how you are personally connected to each.

Day 2: Why should we study religion?

1. Discussion of homework reading, “connections” assignment, viewing of video exploring religious diversity in the human experience, to compile a list of reasons to study religion.

HW: 1. Using the Definitions of Religion worksheet, formulate your own (working) definition of religion. 2. Fill out the sacred spaces worksheet sheet.

Day 3: What is religion? What is sacredness?

1. Use the homework to come up with a definition of religion together

2. Use the homework to examine the idea of sacredness – employ PowerPoint or Google Earth to interrogate the concept of sacred spaces by traveling virtually

HW: Lived Hinduism assignment (TBD)

Day 4: Introduction to Hinduism

1. Discussion of homework

2. Basic vocabulary/tenets of Hinduism

HW: Read the Upanishads text; see if you can find the ideas of those terms in the reading

Day 5: What are the main tenets of Hinduism?

1. Illustration of ideas and concepts found in Upanishads

HW: Read the Gita text; see if you can find the ideas of those terms in the reading

Day 6: What is Hinduism?

1. Discussion of ideas in the Gita; comparison to Upanishads.

2. Come up with tweets and #hashtags to explain moksha, karma, dharma, etc.?

[Optional, given time: HW: Caste reading] Otherwise, no homework.

[Optional, given time: Day 7: Do we have a caste system?]

Discussion re: American “caste system,” using news articles

HW: Activity examining Hindu deities

Day 8: How do Hindus worship?

1. Introduce Hindu devotional practices
2. Revisiting the definition of “religion” [may have to be pushed to the next day]

HW: Lived Buddhism assignment (TBD) [perhaps a comparison between the traditional Siddhartha story and the Prince Vessantara story]

Day 9: Intro to Buddhism

1. Discussion of homework
2. Introduction main terms/tenets of Buddhism
[possible: introduction of notions of the self; differences between the Buddhist concept of the self and the “Western” concept of the self]

HW: TBD

Day 10: What is Buddhism?

1. Finish whatever is left over from yesterday
 2. Review of different sects of Buddhism
- HW: Worksheet: Is Buddhism more of a religion or a philosophy?

Day 11: How do Buddhists worship? Buddhism – Religion or Philosophy

1. Buddhist worship rituals and practices
2. Discussion of homework
3. Revisiting of the definition of religion

HW: None

Day 12: Introduction to Monotheisms and Judaism

1. Activating prior knowledge about Judaism, Christianity, & Islam
 2. “Revolution of the Jewish Monotheistic God” activity
- HW: Lived Judaism activity (TBD) (Since we live in a predominantly Jewish community, there is enough ethnic and religious diversity to do small interviews or polls for this assignment.)

Day 13: What is Judaism?

1. Discussion of homework
2. Introduction to the basic tenets of Judaism

HW: Torah selections

Day 14: How do Jews worship? How has Judaism developed throughout its history?

1. Discussion of homework, connections to main tenets discussed on Day 13
 2. Jewish worship
 3. Basic history of Judaism, Temples, difference between Ashkenazi and Sephardic, Israel, etc.
- HW: Lived Christianity assignment (TBD)

Day 15: What is Christianity?

1. Discussion of homework
 2. Introduction to basic tenets of Christianity
- HW: Parable assignment

Day 16: How do Christians worship? How and why did Xty change shape?

1. Christian worship: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant
 2. Historical Development of Christianity
- HW: Finish Parable assignment

Day 17: Flex day – Finish up spread of Christianity, etc.

HW: Lived Islam assignment (TBD)

Day 18: What is Islam?

1. Discussion of homework
 2. Introduction to basics of Islam
 3. Introduce final project
- HW: Begin working on project proposal (due on day 21)

Day 19: What do Muslims believe?

1. Main tenets of Islam, Qur'an readings
- HW: Introduction to the Hajj packet

Day 20: Islamic worship and mosques

1. Islamic worship & looking at mosques around the world
 2. Video: what does the hajj look like?
- HW: Finish proposal for unit final project

Day 21: How did Islam develop after Muhammad's death?

1. Spread of Islam, Sunni/Shia divide
 2. Other sects of Islam: Sufism, Wahabbism, etc.
- HW: Study for upcoming test, begin working on interviews

Day 22: What are other kinds of religion? What IS religion?

1. Civil Religion: Who are our saints? What stories do we tell? What are our sacred places? What religion is this most like?
2. Revisit the class definition of religion

[Other options: African Diaspora Religions, Sikhism, Atheism and/or Agnosticism...]

HW: Study for test, keep working on interviews

Unit Assessment: Lived Religion Interview Project

Now that we have had some time to unpack five of the major world religions partially in our local context, your task is to explore that “lived” aspect even further. Over the next two weeks, you will find out how religion has taken shape in your community by conducting a series of interviews and reporting on your findings.

Nuts and Bolts

This project will be due on: _____

A. Choose one of the following options:

Option 1. Interview four members of your Greater Boston community, each belonging to a **different** faith tradition.

Option 2. Interview four members of your Greater Boston community, all of them belonging to **the same** faith tradition, but belonging to different generations (e.g. your friend at South, your older cousin, your friend’s mother, and a member of your grandparents’ generation [be polite about questions regarding age ☺])

Option 3. Another option that you choose that gets at the variety of lived religion in our community. Play with other ways of finding diversity – options 1 and 2 look at age and faith, but you might want to look at ethnic background, geographical location, etc. Whatever you choose, **this must be presented to and approved by me.**

B. Fill out the interview proposal sheet. **This will be due on day 21.**

C. Conduct your interviews! You do not have to transcribe them, but you should be able to quote them directly in your written report. Interviews should include **at least five questions**. Questions you may want to ask your interviewee include:

- How long have you been a member of your faith community?
- How has being _____ shaped or affected your life?
- How has being _____ changed over your life?
- To you, what does it mean to be _____ in Boston?
- What was it like growing up _____ in your hometown? Do you have a particular anecdote/story that illustrates this?
- (If hometown is not Newton/Boston) How does that differ from your experience here? Illustrate with a story/anecdote?
- What aspects of your religion are most important to you?
- Follow up: are there any rituals or holidays that are particularly meaningful to you?
- Anything other question you feel compelled to ask!

Make sure you write this down on your interview proposal sheet so that I can check it first.

D. Type up your reflection. In doing so, do your best to answer all three questions below in 3-4 pages. **Remember to use details both from our religion course and your interviews!**

- What are the most striking similarities between your interviewees? How about the differences?
- What is religion? Is the class definition satisfying to you? Why/why not?
- Why is it important to study religion in its local context?

E. Grading. You will be graded on:

- The quality of your questions. Do they have a unified goal? Are they attempting to explore a focused question or theme? Do they reflect careful thought and effort?
- The quality of your reflection. Does your written reflection display effort? Do you reflect thoughtfully on your interviewees' responses?
- The extent to which you demonstrate your understanding of the unit material.
- The quality of writing in your reflection. While this is not an English class, you should do your best to avoid spelling and grammar mistakes. Proofread!

Important Things to Keep in Mind

- There is an unbelievable amount of diversity in human religion. Not everyone you interview will conceive of their religion in the same way that we've discussed. That doesn't make anyone wrong, it just makes everybody different – exploring those differences is part of the point of this assignment.
- Some people might not be comfortable with you using their full name in your reflection. **Make sure you ask them beforehand** if it's ok for you to use their name when you type up your reflection, since you might be quoting them. If you need help figuring out how to do this, ask me!
- Sometimes, when talking about religion, it is easy to offend people or to get offended yourself. If your interviewee expresses an opinion that offends you or vice versa, do your best to approach this as a “professional.” We will discuss this in further detail in class.
- Interviews will probably take longer than you think. Sometimes, the best conversations are the ones that last a lot longer than you expected 😊
- In person interviews are preferable to phone or email interviews (please, no snapchat interviews!). If you have to resort to phone or email, please let me know and we can discuss how you can get the most out of your interview.
- Don't just stick to your questions! An interview is a conversation, not a robotic survey.

Interview Cover Sheet

Due Date:

Name:

1. Which interview choice (1, 2, or 3) did you choose and why? What do you hope to find out in your conducting these interviews?

2. When interviewing, it helps to ask everyone the same questions (more or less). Jot down at least 5 questions that you'd like to ask everyone in the space below.

i.

ii.

iii.

iv.

v.

3. Whom are you interviewing? Please include their name, when you plan on contacting them, and how you plan on contacting them.

Interviewee 1:

Interviewee 2:

Interviewee 3:

Interviewee 4:



Mr. Davison's Comments: