“So Help Me God”:
The Religious Language of the Inaugural Address

**SUMMARY:** This lesson was designed for seventh grade American history students with the goal of building foundational knowledge of the religious landscape and demographics of the United States today. This lesson will be part of a unit of study examining the role of religion in American politics, both historically and in the upcoming 2012 election. Through the analysis of map and charts from The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and excerpts from several Presidential inaugural addresses students will explore how religion influences American identity.

**Essential Questions**

What is the religious landscape of the United States?

What role does religion play in American politics?

What role has religion played in Presidential inaugurations?

**Part 1**

**Learning Objectives**

Build understanding of the religious composition of the United States population by examining and analyzing charts and maps.

**Materials:** The Pew Forum maps and charts:

- Party Affiliation for U.S. Religious Traditions
  

- Religious composition of United States (as a whole and by state)
  
  [http://religions.pewforum.org/maps](http://religions.pewforum.org/maps)
**Discussion Points/Questions:**

- What is the majority religious affiliation in the U.S.?
- What percentage of the country identifies as Protestant? Catholic? Jewish? Muslim?
- Which states have the largest percentage of adults who identify with the Jewish tradition? Evangelical Protestant tradition? People who do not affiliate with a religion?
- If you were running for president would you consider this information as you planned your election campaign? If so, explain how it might inform your strategy?
- What questions do you have that may not have been answered by looking at these maps and charts?
- How many people were surveyed by The Pew Forum to compile this information?

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**Part 2**

**Learning Objectives**

Recognize a pattern of religious references in a variety of inaugural addresses (including terms, and phrases with religious connotations).

**Materials:** Video of inaugurations and excerpts from inaugural addresses.

**Activities:**

A) Brainstorm with students or introduce some of the aspects of religion that have been part of Presidential inaugurations. It may be helpful to watch part of President Obama’s 2008 inauguration.

Examples:

- The oath (addition of “so help me God”) use of bible or not?
- Religious content in the inaugural address
- Inaugural worship services
- Clergy-led inaugural prayers
B) Excerpts from inaugural addresses:

2008 President Obama

“We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.”

“For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus -- and nonbelievers.”

2004 President Bush

“From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights and dignity and matchless value, because they bear the image of the maker of heaven and Earth.”

“That edifice of character is built in families, supported by communities with standards, and sustained in our national life by the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Koran, and the varied faiths of our people.”

1976 President Carter

“Here before me is the Bible used in the inauguration of our first President, in 1789, and I have just taken the oath of office on the Bible my mother gave me just a few years ago, opened to a timeless admonition from the ancient prophet Micah: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."
Discuss:

What does Scripture mean?

Share Biblical references to 1 Corinthians 13:11 “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.”

What do you think President Obama means by “nonbelievers”?

Which sacred texts does President Bush reference?

Culminating Project:

Students write their own inaugural speech. Include at least two major issues they will focus on during their term as president.

Instructional Resources:


PBS. God in America: God in the White House
http://www.pbs.org/godinamerica/god-in-the-white-house/

http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/jan/20/uselections2004.usa

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life
http://www.pewforum.org
A new analysis shows that the share of voters identifying with or leaning toward the GOP has either grown or held steady in every major religious group. This includes both religious groups that are part of the GOP's traditional constituency as well as some groups that have tended to be more aligned with the Democratic Party, including Jewish voters. In general, the pattern among religious groups mirrors that among the electorate as a whole; the number of voters who identify as a Democrat has declined, while the number saying they lean toward the GOP has risen.
## How the 112th Congress (2011-2012) Compares With the American Public

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Number in Congress</th>
<th>% in Congress</th>
<th>% American adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican/Episcopal</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorationist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nondenom. Prot.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holiness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/Quakers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>&lt;0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anabaptist</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>&lt;0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietist</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>&lt;0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified/Other</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mormon</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other World Religions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>&lt;0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Faiths</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know/Refused</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>535</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data for Congress from CQ Roll Call and Pew Forum; data for American public from the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007. (Muslim data from Muslim...
**Religious Tradition**

- Evangelical Protestant Tradition 26%
- Mainline Protestant Tradition 18%
- Historically Black Protestant Tradition 7%
- Catholic Tradition 24%
- Mormon Tradition 2%
- Orthodox Tradition 1%
- Jehovah's Witness Tradition 1%
- Other Christian Traditions < 0.5%
- Jewish Tradition 2%
- Muslim Tradition 1%
- Buddhist Tradition 1%
- Hindu Tradition < 0.5%
- Other World Religions < 0.5%
- Other Faiths 1%
- Unaffiliated 16%
- Don't know/ refused < 0.5%

**National: ± 0.6% margin of error, 35,556 cases**

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

[www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org)