



**UNION**

*Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project*

## **“Different Ways to Pray” Using Poetry to reflect on the Diversity within Islam**

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### **Abstract**

This project was designed to increase students understanding of Islam and foster cross-cultural dialogue about religion by analyzing Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem “Different Ways to Pray” (full text below) and completing a reflective personal project.

The poem was selected because of its vivid descriptions of Islam in everyday practice. It addresses some of the core concepts if Islam while also demonstrating diversity within the religion. This will give students a lens of lived religion to reflect on the role religion plays in their own community.

### **Educational Context**

This mini unit is designed for 10th grade English language learners with relatively low English proficiency. Most students will have scored “entering” or “emerging” on the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test, and have lived in the US for less than 4 years.

The school is a public international school located in the Bronx. There is a high population of Muslim students from Bangladesh, Yemen, and Guinea who are often socially isolated from other students. Through the religious dialogue within this project students will gain a better understanding of each other’s religious practices and have space to respectfully address any misconceptions that may exist. Studying religion as an academic topic will help to bridge the divide between religious groups in the school community.

## Essential Understandings

- 1) Students will be familiarized with some basic tenants of Islam and recognize diversity of practices within the religion.
- 2) Students will expand their definition of religion and question what makes a religion authentic.
- 3) Students will use this expanded definition of religion to examine and describe religious practices in their own community.

## Schedule

**Week 1-** The unit will start by having students address the question “What is Religion?” by completing a word web and analyzing both familiar and unfamiliar religious images. Next, students will be given background knowledge on both Naomi Shihab Nye and some of the basic tenants of Islam. Students will then work in groups to read and analyze one stanza of Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Different Ways to Pray.” In these groups, students will create an image representing their stanza, define any key vocabulary they uncover, and write a short analysis explaining the key themes of their stanza. Students will then complete a gallery walk to examine and take notes on each other’s work. Lastly, students will participate in a Socratic seminar in which they will discuss the central idea of the poem and key supporting evidence.

**Week 2-** Students will draft and revise their central idea essays analyzing themes of religious diversity in “Different Ways to Pray” using differentiated outlines to meet their language needs. As a homework assignment, students will be asked to take a photo that addresses the question “What does religion look like in your community?” Students will be encouraged to seek out non-traditional subjects such as those described in “Different Ways to Pray.” Using this image, students will first brainstorm a list of words that describe their images using the help of a translation dictionary and thesaurus. They will then choose their 5 most descriptive words and then incorporate them into a stanza describing the religious practices depicted in their image. When students are done drafting, revising and typing their stanzas the teacher will compile the stanzas into one long poem to be presented to the class and if possible displayed in a local library or community space.

## Approximate Calendar (96 min class)

Week One				
“What is Religion?” Brainstorm	Background knowledge about Author	Group Project: create a poster with an image, vocabulary and analysis for your stanza	Gallery walk or presentations of group projects	Socratic Seminar: What is the central idea of “Different Ways to Pray”
Background knowledge about Islam	Group Project: read one stanza from the poem for understanding			
Week Two				
Drafting central idea essay	Revising and typing central idea essay	Brainstorming words to describe religious image  Drafting poem about the image	Revising and typing poem	Presenting final “Different ways to Pray” class poem

## Assessment

Students will complete a Regents style central idea essay about “Different Ways to Pray.” Students will cite evidence from the poem that demonstrate how Nye develops the theme of diversity within Islam using one or more literary element.

Students will complete a personal project in which they take a photo of religious life in their community. This photo does not need to be of a traditionally religious setting. Students will be encouraged to seek out non-traditional subjects such as those described in “Different Ways to Pray.” Students will then write one stanza describing their image using the Nye’s work as a mentor text. All students images and stanza’s will then be compiled into one longer “Different Ways to Pray” poem.

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

## Key Text

### **Different Ways to Pray**

by Naomi Shihab Nye

There was the method of kneeling,  
a fine method, if you lived in a country  
where stones were smooth.  
The women dreamed wistfully of bleached courtyards,  
hidden corners where knee fit rock.  
Their prayers were weathered rib bones,  
small calcium words uttered in sequence,  
as if this shedding of syllables could somehow  
fuse them to the sky.

There were the men who had been shepherds so long  
they walked like sheep.  
Under the olive trees, they raised their arms—  
Hear us! We have pain on earth!  
We have so much pain there is no place to store it!  
But the olives bobbed peacefully  
in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.  
At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese,  
and were happy in spite of the pain,  
because there was also happiness.

Some prized the pilgrimage,  
wrapping themselves in new white linen  
to ride buses across miles of vacant sand.  
When they arrived at Mecca  
they would circle the holy places,  
on foot, many times,  
they would bend to kiss the earth  
and return, their lean faces housing mystery.

While for certain cousins and grandmothers  
the pilgrimage occurred daily,  
lugging water from the spring  
or balancing the baskets of grapes.  
These were the ones present at births,  
humming quietly to perspiring mothers.  
The ones stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses,  
forgetting how easily children soil clothes.

There were those who didn't care about praying.  
The young ones. The ones who had been to America.  
They told the old ones, you are wasting your time.  
Time?—The old ones prayed for the young ones.  
They prayed for Allah to mend their brains,  
for the twig, the round moon,  
to speak suddenly in a commanding tone.

And occasionally there would be one  
who did none of this,  
the old man Fowzi, for example, Fowzi the fool,  
who beat everyone at dominoes,  
insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats,  
and was famous for his laugh.