



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Student Questions for the Study of Lived Religion

Larry Borst, Grand Rapids Christian High School, Grand Rapids, MI

Abstract

These two lessons are part of the introductory unit of an eleventh grade World Religions class at a largely Protestant high school. This section of the introduction gets students used to the idea of a Lived Religions approach by having them practice using (and being involved in editing) a set of questions that can be used to look at how people live out their religious traditions.

By reflecting on the questions they pose, students will hopefully become aware of their own preconceived assumptions about other people who are from other religions, cultures, or times. Students will then explore these preconceptions by responding to poems by Sietze Bunning (included below), and to the first episode of the “Dearborn Girls” podcast (linked below).

Goals

1. Give students some sense of how we will look at religion during the semester with some traditional elements that will be informed by a “Lived Religion” approach that seeks to give students a sense of the diversity within religions, dynamic ways religions can change, and the complex ways religions are woven into their surrounding cultures as they also are introduced to some of the more traditional elements of a World Religions curriculum.
2. Help students qualify their definition of religion from some clear set of teachings that can be clearly defined and described to something that with some internal consistency which can best be seen as it is lived out in a variety of ways.
3. Encourage students to begin asking questions of people (in poems, movies, podcasts, and conversation) that explore how religion is lived out and woven into their lives.

4. Explore with students how stereotypes are formed on a cognitive level and explore ways to keep these preconceived assumptions from harming others or limiting our interactions with others

Relationship to Broader Curriculum

These lessons will work as part of the introductory material to the class and the questions asked of the poems and podcasts will serve as a template for further analysis of site visits, speakers, films, and other podcasts that will seek to give students a sense of religions as they are lived out.

The introductory part of the class will go roughly as follows (written for block schedule):

--Day One: Class expectations and the difficulty of defining “religion.” Assign “How Racist Are You.” Students will be asked to write up 200-300 word summary with a short response due next class.

--Day Two: Discussion of article, confessional stories of stereotypes (innocent and harmful), and poetry reading with worksheet will be assigned.

--Day Three: Student bring their worksheets together into four groups and teach the poem to the class after short discussion. At the end of class students are assigned the first episode of “Dearborn Girls” podcast with a reflection worksheet (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIEe--N66Sk>).

--Day Four: Review podcast worksheet, our assumptions and the realities and general discussion of a Lived Religion approach. Discussion centers on how such an approach makes others more “real” to us and issues surrounding disagreements more poignant. End with the polarized way discussions about religions often go in the United State with the video from Politically Incorrect (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0ne6HUmW90>). Video is an example of how we tend toward polarization between a strong exclusivism and a strong relativism.

--Day Five: Notes on finding a better way (five ways of looking at the other) and the intellectual virtues of humility and courage. If time start Hinduism.

Background:

1. According to a “Lived Religions” approach, religions are not so much agents in themselves that remain static over time and have great consistent influence on the devotee, rather, they are lived out in daily life and emerge from that living out. A

strength of such an approach is that it does not rely on external structures to analyze a religion but seeks to meet the people on a more existential level. A weakness of such an approach is that it lacks much structure which can be useful as one seeks to encourage students to look at others in other faiths in a new way. Students and teachers need a way or some structure to start with. Robert Orsi does come close to offering some structure in the following quote: "Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the reality of everyday life. Four things are necessary to understand religious practice: (1) a sense of the range of idiomatic possibilities and limitations in a culture---the limits of what can be desired, fantasized, imagined and felt; (2) an understanding of the knowledges of the body in the culture, a clear sense of what has been embodied in the corporality of the people who participate in the religious practices, what the tongues, sin, ears, "know"; (3) an understanding of the structure of the social experience --- marriage and kinship patterns, moral and juridical responsibilities and expectations, and the allocation of valued resources and so on; and (4) a sense of what sorts of characteristic tensions erupt within these particular structures." (Orsi, "Everyday Miracles" in *Lived Religion in America: toward a history of practice*. Edited by David D. Hall). These four aspects of a lived religion approach can be used to design a set of questions to prompt the student engage from a lived religion approach. The goal is that students will see something familiar in a new way.

2. Frequently students resist the idea that they might be biased or have stereotypes but by reviewing the article "Are You Racist" (*Mother Jones*, January/February 2015 or at <https://www.motherjones.com/mag/2015/01/toc/>) in a non-threatening way students get a sense of how the brain naturally forms stereotypes.

Practical Details and Resources:

Based on Orsi's four points the following questions have evolved as a template so far...this will be an ongoing list edited with students that can be used to analyze examples of lived religion:

- a. Describe the physical surroundings: what do the people feel, see, hear, smell...?
- b. Are there any objects, phrases, actions, sounds...etc... that seem central to the space you are in or to the action?
- c. What are the people physically doing?
- d. Are there any religious practices (something repeated in the lives of people) you see?
- e. Who are the main actors?

- f. From what you can tell, what do the people seem to think is being done even if you cannot see it happening?
- g. What are the range of things that can happen or what seems to be hoped for?
- h. Do there seem to be rules to follow?
- i. What would it look like for someone to do something wrong here?
- j. Does it feel a little wrong for you to be here? Intrusive? Explain as much as you can.
- k. What limits or seems to motivate the people?
- l. What are the powers or ideas or traditions or social rules that seem to loom in the minds of the people and seem to influence the people?
- m. Do the decisions of the main players come to easy?
- n. Are their actions spontaneous or set by the practice?
- o. What are their struggles? What are they torn between?
- p. Are some people skeptical in this action?
- q. Do some people seem to hold seemingly contrary ideas in their minds?
- r. There may be a sense of a tradition lived out here...how is what you see tied to that tradition?
- s. Are you watching something that seems like it will continue and has continued?
- t. Does what you are seeing seem to support social structures such as marriage, legal responsibilities, financial obligations or expectations and so on?
- u. What other questions should we ask? What different ways can we look at these events? Add to the following ideas by brainstorming with students:
 - i. If a person did something out of order would it change things?
 - ii. What would "working" look like?
 - iii. Did anything surprise you as the observer?
 - iv. Add at least three more questions one might wonder about?

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.

Reflection #1:

Responding to Poems by Sietze Bunning – “First Lesson in Rhetoric,” “Obedience,” “Excommunication, and “Seventeen” (all found below)

Sietze Bunning is the Pen Name for Stanley Wiersma (1930-1986) who grew up in a strict Protestant home in Northwest Iowa. The term Dominie means “lord” and refers to the minister.

1. Expectations: when you hear the following words **“A Christian/Protestant Farmer from Iowa in the 1950s”** shut your eyes and imagine and try to be as specific as possible:

- a. What this person looks like, how they talk? What do they wear?
- b. What three words will most likely describe them.
- c. Do you think you will like them?
- d. How will this person describe their religion?
- e. How will they practice faith or religion?

2. **Read your assigned poem** out loud to each other in groups of two or three and then read the poem again to yourself. Then answer the following on your own:

- A. Underline the words that describe the physical world of the poem: what do the people feel, see, hear, smell...?
- B. Circle any religious practices (something repeated in the lives of people) you see in the poem? Who are the main actions? What do the people do?
- C. What is the main issue or the main “problem” that confronts the people in the poem?
- D. List what could have happened or the options for the characters faced with the poem’s central “problem.”
- E. What limits or motivates the characters? What are the powers or ideas or traditions that seem to loom in the minds of the people and seem to influence the people?

F. Do the decisions of the main players come to easy? What are their struggles? What are they torn between?

3. How does the poet bring his past struggles and apply them to his adult life? There may be a sense of a tradition lived out in different ways yet somehow the same...how is it the same? How is it different?

4. What is it that gets lived out in each of these poems? Looking at all three poems carefully write this out together.

5. Does the poet continue this tradition? Does he seem to agree with it? Does he respect it? Is he critical of it? Can he be critical and still love it somehow?

6. How does the author of the poems question display humility about his own views or ideas? Is humor involved in anyway here?

7. Look at what your expectations were in question #1 above. Were your assumptions and expectations right? How did they need to be more complicated? Do we all need a bit of humility when it comes to our own assumptions?

f. What this person looks like, how they talk? What do they wear?

g. What three words will most likely describe Bunning now.

h. Did you like the poet?

i. How did this person describe their religion?

j. How did they practice faith or religion? **And how might this help you define or get a sense of what religion is and perhaps how we might define the term "religion?"**

From *Purpaleanie and Other Permutations*, by Sietze Buning
Middleburg Press, Orange City, Iowa, 1978 (Out of Print)

Obedience

Were my parents right or wrong
not to mow the ripe oats that Sunday morning
with the rainstorm threatening?

I reminded them that the Sabbath was made for man
and of the ox fallen into the pit.
Without an oats crop, I argued,
the cattle would need to survive on town-bought oats
and then it wouldn't pay to keep them.
Isn't selling cattle at a loss like an ox in a pit?

My parents did not argue.
We went to church.
We sang the usual psalms louder than usual—
we, and the others whose harvests were at stake:

"Jerusalem, where blessing waits,
Our feet are standing in thy gates."

"God, be merciful to me;
On thy grace I rest my plea."

Dominie's spur-of-the-moment concession:
"He rides on the clouds, the wings of the storm;
The lightning and wind his missions perform."

Dominie made no concessions on sermon length:
"Five Good Reasons for Infant Baptism,"
though we heard little of it,

for more floods came and more winds blew and beat
upon that House than we had figured on, even,
more lightning and thunder
and hail the size of pullet eggs.
Falling branches snapped the electric wires.
We sang the closing psalm without the organ and in the dark:
"Ye seed from Abraham descended,
God's covenant love is never ended."

Afterward we rode by our oats field,
Flattened.

"We still will mow it," Dad said.
"Ten bushels to the acre, maybe, what would have been fifty
if I had mowed right after milking
and if the whole family had shocked.
We could have had it weatherproof before the storm."
Later at dinner Dad said,
"God was testing us. I'm glad we went."
"Those psalms never gave me such a lift as this morning,"
Mother said, "I wouldn't have missed it."
And even I thought but did not say,
How guilty we would feel now if we had saved the harvest.
The one time Dad asked me why I live in a Black neighborhood,
I reminded him of that Sunday morning.
Immediately he understood.

Sometime around the turn of the century
my sons may well bring me an article in *The Banner*
written by a sociologist who argues,
"The integrated neighborhoods of thirty years ago,
in spite of good intentions,
impaired Black self-image and delayed Black independence."
Then I shall tell my sons about that Sunday morning.

And I shall ask my sons to forgive me
(who knows exactly what for?)
as they must ask their sons to forgive them
(who knows exactly what for?)
as I have long ago forgiven my father
(who knows exactly what for?)

Fathers often fail to pass on to sons
their harvest customs
for harvesting grain or real estate or anything.
No matter, so long as fathers pass on to sons
another more important pattern
defined as absolutely as muddlers like us can manage:
obedience.

Excommunication

**With at least six other possible ways of handling it,
Benny Ploegster stood up, his suit still crumpled
from the night before, for his excommunication.
As soon as proceedings began three years before
(the consistory was not hasty), when his case
was announced to the church without his name,**

he could have said,

"Churches are full of Pharisees," and never gone to church again, resigning his membership. Or he could have said,

"This Carnes church is full of Pharisees," and gone to a more permissive church which does not excommunicate alcoholics. He could have done so even after his case was announced with his name a year before.

Or

he could have moved away and made a new start in a new church. Or

he could have repented and given up alcohol, though had any of us including the overweight dominie, who pressed for excommunication—"It sharpens up a church"—comprehended what it is to give up a hand or an eye for the Kingdom? Or

he could have continued going to church but not have come on excommunication Sunday, though it would have weakened his case: he only skipped for hangovers. Or

he could have come and not stood up.

**But Benny—
motherless from birth
and now too old to marry
for who would have a drunkard?—
stood up. His father next to him
cried quietly.**

And why shouldn't Benny stand up? One stands for Confession of Faith, and excommunication is its reverse.

Why shouldn't Benny stand up? He felt the full impact of the bond written in ordinances against him: the rebukes from the elders and the dominie, the promises before them and God to reform, the patience of God and the church running out and the fear of Hell.

Why shouldn't Benny stand up? He knew that excommunication is a key which seems to close but actually opens, threatening the sinner into grace.

How would it take, if he were not there to take it.

Why shouldn't Benny

stand up? To show that he accepted his alienation as his own responsibility when the dominie read the form? "Since by his stubbornness Benny daily aggravates his transgression, he is to be accounted as a Gentile and a publican. We exhort you to keep no company with him to the end that he may be ashamed. He is excluded from the fellowship of Christ and the church until he amends his life."

Why shouldn't Benny stand up?

Jesus himself had set up the procedure,
followed by St. Paul, John Calvin,
and other fathers Benny respected.

Why shouldn't Benny stand up?

That in twenty centuries
there was not a single
precedent for bodily
presence of an ex-
communicant at his
excommunication
is insufficient
reason not to.
Each case is
private.

It was not in protest although the dominie thought so
and it was not in stupidity although the congregation thought so
that Benny stood up
for excommunication
and until he died of cirrhosis he attended as regularly as before.
He did not partake
of communion.

Like Jacob wrestling with God and saying, "I will not let you go until
you bless me," our Benny was wrestling with us and with God.
Though he lacked Jacob's talent for articulation, his standing
said as explicitly as its verbal equivalent:

**I will not be cut off
as though I do not exist.
I am God's child,
all right,
God's naughty child,
but still God's child:
Benny.**

And what of us who attended church regularly
out of custom and superstition
and without much desire

and without any
questioning
that we had
a right to
be there?
What of us
who had never
wrestled like Benny?
Though he did not intend it,
by standing up to be excommunicated,
was Benny excommunicating us?

The church
is gone now, the lumber used for a cattle shed,
but in memory the place where Benny stood is forever
holy ground.

Was
Benny excommunicating
me?

First Lesson in Rhetoric

Father's
fellow elder
Marius called in-
frequently. Did his talk
leave too little or too much
to the imagination of the emerging
adolescent trying to sleep in the room
above with an open register between?

"Confession of guilt at consistory meeting is not enough.
Better to have them stand up at a service. Better to purge
the unclean thing from among us. There are more and more
shotgun weddings. Nothing to be afraid of, standing up
in church, not after sinners stand before God and confess.
Besides, it's a chance for the church to welcome back the
wayward. A truly Christian couple would prefer it."

Several such visits—the cases different
but the rhetoric identical—and ***rhetoric***
not even part of our active vocabularies—

and then a visit from Marius with a new
Rhetoric:

"Our Martha
loved unwisely.
Our Martha must keep
the baby. Our Martha
so repentant, so sensitive.

Must our Martha stand in church?
Her mother will die—blood
pressure over two-hundred
right along. Our Martha
loved too well. Our
Martha"

Did the differences in rhetoric leave
too little or too much to the imagination
of the emerging adolescent, ear at
the register? And none
of us—not Marius,
not Father, not
I—even aware
of the word
rhetoric

Seventeen

(this the second to last of a series of poems written to his father about *Purpaleanie*...a word he uses for love or sex or something his father was teaching him all along without the poet knowing it at the time.)

Mother worried
that my sex education
was not complete, not knowing
you had undertaken it when I was one.

Mother called a family council before I went to college.
Mother led off:

"Love is never sin.
Lust is always sin.
Love is giving.
Lust is getting.

Love always lasts.

Lust never lasts.

Love is expressing yourself

Lust is gratifying yourself."

And you, Dad,

suddenly agitated:

"This uncivilized English

language, with two words for the same thing,

only one is good and the other bad! In Dutch

lust means like wanting food when you're hungry!

Sure, it's getting,

it never lasts,

and its self gratifying.

But its not a sin to enjoy food when you're hungry!"

Then you fell silent.

When you spoke again

You were calmer.

"When you get married, Sietze,

I hope it's for love,

but I hope it's for lust too."

Reflection #2:

Responding to Dearborn Girl Podcast.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI Ee--N66Sk>

1. **Before you Listen.** Expectations: when you hear the following words “**Muslim Girl from Dearborn Michigan**” answer the following
 - A. What this person looks like, how they talk? What do they wear?
 - B. What three words will most likely describe them.
 - C. Do you think you will like them?
 - D. How will this person describe their religion?
 - E. How will they practice faith or religion?

2. Listen to the first 25 minutes: What are your first impression of Miriam Jalloul? Is she proud of Dearborn or her High School? Try to list 7 things about her you noticed.

3. What is the main issue or the main “problem” or issue she faced at Harvard? Is this problem tied specifically to her religion?

4. What limits or motivates the characters? What are the powers or ideas or traditions that seem to loom in the minds of the people and seem to influence the people?

5. Do the decisions the main players come to easy? What are their struggles? What are they torn between?

6. While at Harvard Miriam was criticized for wearing a scarf....she sees it very much as her own choice...research the main arguments for or against this made from women:

7. Is Miriam more critical of her tradition or of Harvard? Why?

8.. Look at what your expectations were in question #1a above. Were your assumptions and expectations right? How did they need to be more complicated? Do we all need a bit of humility when it comes to our own assumptions?

- k. What this person looks like, how they talk? What do they wear?
- l. What three words will most likely describe Bunning now.
- m. Did you like the poet?
- n. How did this person describe their religion?
- o. How did they practice faith or religion?

Notes and reflections on our responsibilities as “stereotypers”

And how might this help you define or get a sense of what religion is and perhaps how we might define the term “religion?”