



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Exploring Lived Religion in Central Virginia

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Abstract

This year-long research project introduces students to the diversity of local religious life through five site visits in Charlottesville, VA, and surrounding counties – Satchidananda Ashram Yogaville, Ligmincha Bon Buddhist Institute, Congregation Beth Israel, the Islamic Society of Central Virginia, and Our Lady of Angels Trappist Monastery. Grounded in experiential and project-based learning, students will create a web-based guidebook on World Religions in Central Virginia that integrates classroom readings, background research, documentation of the five site visits, as well as additional independent site visits.

[Click here to check out the web-based multimedia guidebook students created in the 2014 - 2015 school year](#), and keep reading to learn more about the course.

Curricular Context

“Comparative Religion: Philosophies of the East and West” is a year-long senior seminar at St. Anne’s Belfield-School, an independent school in Charlottesville, Virginia. Seniors are required to take at least one seminar course, and they choose from options across a wide range of subjects. Shared goals for all senior seminars include Harkness discussion, project-based learning, experiential learning, 21st century skills, and interdisciplinary study. Various versions of the course have been taught over the last seven years.

The majority of students enter the seminar with some background in World Religions based in previous study within the curriculum (e.g. a lengthy 6th Grade World Religions Unit, an Introduction to Religion course, and a primary thread in 10th Grade Humanities). Required texts for the seminar include: Huston Smith’s *Illustrated World Religions*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, *The Tao Te Ching*, and additional brief primary sources.

Whole-Class Site Visits

Spanning five world religions, site visits provide direct experience of religious diversity within our community. Many residents of Charlottesville, including most parents of our students, have no idea about the breadth of local religious sites. Our visits typically include:

- Satchidananda Ashram Yogaville (a Hindu Ashram and the Light of Truth Universal Shrine)
- Ligmincha Bon Buddhist Institute (a Tibetan Buddhist retreat center)
- The Islamic Society of Central Virginia (an Islamic mosque)
- Congregation Beth Israel (a Jewish synagogue founded in the 19th century)
- Our Lady of Angels Trappist Monastery (a Catholic monastery)

The visits range in length from a full day at Yogaville to 2-3 hours at the other sites, and include various forms of observation and participation in community life. At Yogaville we do a Hatha yoga class, tour the LOTUS shrine with an ordained lay leader, and join the community for a vegan lunch. At Ligmincha, we tour the shrine room and meditation hall, listen to a talk by a senior Buddhist student, and experience a brief mindfulness meditation. At the mosque, we observe the 1:15 Friday *Jumma* prayers and speak to members of the community afterwards. At the synagogue, we meet with the rabbi, tour the two sanctuaries, and view the Torah. At the Trappist monastery, we meet with two sisters and then observe the brief midday prayer. During the site visits students will conduct ethnographic field research including, as circumstances allow, the recording of a brief interview and photo-documentation.

Independent Site Visits in Small Groups

In addition to the five whole-class site visits, pairs/trios of seniors will select and organize an independent ethnographic field research trip to **one** additional site in Charlottesville or nearby counties. These sites can range within the broad spectrum of our studies, and should reflect individual interests. Students will learn the necessary background for the site, visit the site, attend a service if applicable, conduct an interview, and document the site with photography.

Digital Guidebook to Religion in Central Virginia

Integrating our academic studies in the classroom, the whole-class site visits, and the independent site visits, students will create and design a Web-Based Guidebook for Lived Religion in Central Virginia. This guidebook implements the school wide goal of project-based learning and involves contributions from every senior in the seminar. The web-based platform of the project provides the valuable opportunity for an authentic audience beyond the classroom and to educate the broader community about the religious diversity within central Virginia. It is conceivable that local government and community leaders will take a real interest in our findings. Weebly.com is a recommended tool for website creation, but this can change depending on the vision of the students.

[Click here to check out the web-based multimedia guidebook students created in the 2014 - 2015 school year.](#)

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.