



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Making Room for Religious Diversity In the IB English Language & Literature Curriculum

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Abstract:

This project outlines a professional development workshop for teachers teaching Part 3 of the International Baccalaureate English Language & Literature curriculum, HL, Year 2 course. It will help teachers adapt a required unit of the IB curriculum, to include a focus on of religious diversity in the study of texts which are rich with religious reference and experience in character development, setting and plot design. The idea is to take teachers through the first novel of a 3-novel study which includes the examination of formal traditional elements juxtaposed to the “lived religion” acted upon by characters in the texts. This will help facilitate a serious discussion of the necessity of addressing and actively teaching religious diversity in a public school system that is academically high-achieving but lacking in community awareness of the religious practices and beliefs of their neighbors.

The two-day workshop will introduce the teaching of religious diversity through the study of literature, and begin a conversation about the importance of studying religious diversity in the context of “lived religion” as presented in texts.

Goal/Vision:

- 1) To introduce and to offer the idea that the inclusion of religious diversity in our International Baccalaureate English classes addresses the IB requirement of helping students develop global awareness and understanding.
- 2) To offer a pedagogy to teachers by modeling what they can do with students.

Execution:

For a teacher workshop, I will lead teachers of Part 3 of the **International Baccalaureate** *English Language & Literature, HL, Year 2 course*, through the process that I would complete with students that introduces the in-class study of ***A Fine Balance***, with the final outcome in mind. The process we use to include religious diversity of our study of ***A Fine Balance*** can then be repeated with ***The Handmaid's Tale***, and ***Pedro Paramo***.

First, I would have teachers read and discuss 3 articles:

- 1) Henry Goldschmidt's essay "[From World Religions to Lived Religion: Towards a Pedagogy of Civic Engagement in Secondary School Religious Studies Curricula](#)" (in *Civility, Religious Pluralism and Education*, eds. Vince Biondo and Andrew Fiala, Routledge 2014)
- 2) Robert Orsi's essay "Everyday Miracles" (in *Lived Religion in America*, ed. David Hall, Princeton U. Press, 1997).
- 3) The First Amendment Center's [Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools](#).

School: *Newbury Park High School*, a public high school (approximately 2600 students from 9-12) in an affluent section of Ventura County. Students are high-achieving; 65-80% of parents have college education. **Class:** IB Language and Literature HL, Year 2 – Part 3 of the course

- 1) Senior students, in year 2 of IB Language and Literature. These students are accomplished students of language and literature with a strong emphasis on academics...less so on understanding diversity. To clarify, they accept diversity, but may not even care, nor think it is important to understand religious traditions and/or paradigms.
- 2) Students come into the first class, having read the book, *A Fine Balance* AND having kept a journal on characters and settings

Texts: ***A Fine Balance*** by Rohinton Mistry, ***Pedro Paramo*** by Juan Rulfo, ***The Handmaid's Tale*** by Margaret Atwood

- 1) **Introduction:** ball of string activity (from NEH Institute) –goal is to see the tug-of-war PLUS interconnectedness of individuals within a group – could be religious tugs, but also societal, political, etc. A brief activity that tactilely emphasizes diversity.
- 2) **Research:** small groups to research Hindu, Islamic and Parsi religious traditions – formal features as presented by academic sources and perhaps sites from Temples? Prepare mini-presentations on the “facts” of these traditions. Present to class, while members take notes on these formal aspects.

Parsi: "Delhi Parsis." *Delhi Parsis*. Wordpress, n.d. Web. 26 July 2017.
<http://delhiparsis.com/>

Hinduism: V, Jayaram. "Hinduism Concepts, Beliefs and Practices." *Hinduism Concepts, Beliefs and Practices*. N.p., 1999. Web. 26 July 2017.
<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism.asp>

Islam: "Beliefs and Daily Lives of Muslims." *PBS*. Public Broadcasting Service, 1995-2014.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/muslims/beliefs.html>

- 3) **What to look for in research:** Major beliefs and practices. The sites are brief but scholarly.
- 4) **Share research with the group:** take notes on the sections you did not research.
- 5) **Small groups** (jigsaw) – this time divided so that each group has representatives of the 3 different religious traditions. Discuss the following questions about the novel, *A Fine Balance*, within the backdrop of religious diversity and the impact of religious traditions on people's lives as illustrated in the novel.
 - a. Why do Ishvar, Om, and Dina survive, in their diminished ways, while Maneck finally gives up? Is it due to something in their pasts, their childhoods, their families, their characters, their religious and cultural beliefs?
 - b. How would you sum up Beggarmaster: Is he ruthless, kind, or a bit of both? Does he redeem himself by his thoughtful acts, the seriousness with which he takes his responsibilities toward his dependents? How does Mistry present this character? Consider wordings and descriptions. What does Mistry suggest about categories as "good" and "bad"? Does Beggarmaster's belief system line up with any of the religious information we researched?
 - c. How much of this hatred seems to be fomented by political leaders? Dukhi observes bitterly "that at least his Muslim friend treated him better than his Hindu brothers" [p. 115]. What does this say about ethnic and religious loyalties, as opposed to personal ones?
 - d. Post-Independence India has seen much religious and ethnic violence. The novel gives us a vivid picture of life for members of the untouchable caste in remote villages. Why might such an apparently anachronistic system have survived into the late twentieth century? Does it resemble any other social systems with which you are acquainted? Why do so few of its victims fight the system, as Narayan does? Why do so few leave the village: is it from necessity, social conservatism, or respect for tradition?

The next two questions would be written for assessment purposes. The group would discuss and submit group answers.

- e. ****What general statement can your group make about the relationship between facts about religion and “lived religion” as presented in the characters of **A Fine Balance**?*
 - f. ****What literary/ stylistic techniques has Robinton Mistry favored in presenting the religious and cultural impact on the characters living in this particular time and place? To what effect?*
- 6) **Follow-up:** I will introduce to teachers another “diversity” exercise, similar to the ball of string. I would likely use the image exercise where students/teachers look at the same image and write 3 different words or phrases that describe the image, silently, in their notes. After they do this, we would share the different thoughts WITHOUT COMMENT, and THEN discuss the diversity that is revealed even though we all looked at the same image.
 - 7) **Next,** I would then ask teachers how they could plan lessons for *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Pedro Paramo* that will include time to research the formalities of different traditions under the general heading of Christianity, and then in the study of the novels, discover the differences between formal information and “lived religion” and also the influences of religious tradition on everyday realities.
 - 8) **Final discussion:** discuss IB exam questions (Paper 2 questions) that are included every year that deal with a CONTEXTUAL LENS. I would assess students with a final in the unit, using the prompt below that comes from a previous actual IB Paper 2 exam.

Assessment: Show how belief or faith is represented in at least two of the literary works you have studied and discuss how this aspect might be interpreted or understood in different historical, cultural or social contexts.

Steps 1-6 can be duplicated with students, and I believe they allow for individual teacher “tweaking” that suits any teacher style.

***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.***