



UNION

*Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project*

## Surfacing Implicit Biases about “Religion”

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### Abstract

This professional development training is designed to surface implicit biases regarding religion, religiosity, faith, and spirituality (hereafter *religion\**) among the PreK-12 faculty of the Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools. It builds upon prior professional development in the areas of talking about race and racism, and LGBTQ+ support and inclusion. Using the structure of a faculty meeting presentation, the project invites teachers to explore their relationship with religion\*, investigate implicit biases they hold regarding religion\*, and consider how these biases impact their curriculum and their students.

This professional development session is part of a broader plan in the field of equity that directly supports the school’s mission, vision, and values. This presentation could be the first step in a comprehensive community-wide conversation regarding the inclusion of academic teaching about religion in the curriculum.

### Curricular Connections and Community Context

Montpelier Roxbury is a public district in central Vermont, consisting of four schools (two elementary, one middle, one high) distributed in two municipalities. English Learners (ELL) comprise 5-8% of the total school population. The two municipalities are different and religious practices are different among the students and families; for example, there is an active Catholic community, and there is a substantial contingent of secular, “post-religion” voices.

Vermont is one of the least religious states in the country (tied for 48th in the [Pew 2014 Religious Landscape Study](#)) and many of the teachers and students in the Montpelier schools do not practice a religion. Most of the immigrant families who move to Montpelier from another country do practice a religion. Thus, many of the teachers and other students may not be equipped to understand this

important element of our immigrant families' lives and value systems. For many teachers, teaching about religion in a public school seems fraught with potential parental or administrative backlash.

The pedagogic goal of this session is to bring religion\* into an ongoing faculty conversation about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and introduce three important elements: implicit biases, the First Amendment, and the concept of "lived religion." This will help teachers as they teach about religion, whether that is already in their curriculum or if it is a new addition to their curriculum. It will also help teachers as they respond to questions and comments that arise from students throughout the day.

Part of the district mission statement refers to students becoming engaged citizens, and being able to respond in an informed and respectful way to a variety of religious traditions and practices is an important element of that citizenship. This faculty session is meant to begin or broaden discussion and understanding amongst the faculty, so they in turn may better support students' learning.

## Topics and Schedule

The 60-minute professional development session is planned as follows (for more details, please see presentation slides included below):

- Introduction to "Lived Religion" (5 min)
  - "Islam" vs. "Islams," for example
  - Practice vs. doctrine/faith
- Student voice via video (5)
- Activity - Personal religion\* inventory (10) (discuss with a partner)
  - Modify questions from the [RCI-10](#)
  - Discussion question: How does my background regarding religion\* impact my students and curriculum?
- Brief First Amendment overview (10)
  - "Religious literacy"
  - Establishment clause
- Case study - discuss in small groups (20)
  - "Some truths can be found in all religions."
- Report out (5)

- Resources for further study (5)

[A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools](#) (First Amendment Center)  
[The Pluralism Project](#) (Harvard University)

**Follow up/Future topics:**

- “Why should we make the time to let our students discuss lived religion?”
- “What are some examples of how lived religion relates to our curriculum and classroom conversations? Where is it already coming up?”

*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).*

# Thinking about Religion\*

Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools  
January 20, 2020  
Sylvia Fagin, presenter





## Today

Why I'm here ~ what I hope I can offer ~

thank you for being part of my learning journey.

Feedback is welcome!

Religion\* = religion, religiosity, faith, spirituality...



# Agreements for Courageous Conversations

- Stay engaged.
- Speak your truth (knowing it's only part of the truth).
- Experience discomfort.
- Expect and accept non-closure.
- + Confidentiality (share the learning, not personal details)

Adapted from Singleton, G. E., & Linton, C. *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA Corwin Press, 2006.



## Essential Questions:

- How has my background shaped my thinking about religion?
- What implicit biases do I hold regarding religion?
- How do these biases impact my curriculum, my classroom, and my interactions with students?



## Student Voice

Muslim Girls Making Change: [Hijab 101](#) (at 6:35)

- How is religion\* referenced in their performance?
- If you could ask these young people a question about their religious practice, what would you ask?
- How do I see/ hear/ experience students' religion\* at school?



## The First Amendment

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

*First Amendment, U.S. Constitution*



## Two Clauses

The Establishment clause – the government, on any level, can not establish or endorse any specific religion over another.

Free Exercise clause – the government can not inhibit the free practice of religious expression.



## In School

The approach must be *academic*, not *devotional*.

The school strives for student *awareness* of religions, but does not press for student *acceptance* of any religion.

The school sponsors *study* about religion, not the *practice* of religion.

The school may *expose* students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.

The school *educates* about all religions; it does not *promote* or *denigrate* religion.

The school *informs* students about various beliefs; it does not seek to *conform* students to any particular belief.



# MRPS: Role of Religion in the Schools

[Handbook](#), pp. 20-22:

- Religious Holidays, Festivals and Observances
- Religious Symbols and Signs
- Music, Assemblies and Programs
- Religion in the Curriculum
- The School Calendar
- Training of Staff
- Tips for Planning Activities Teaching about Religious Holidays, Festivals or Observances



## Personal Religion\* Reflection

There will not be enough time to be comprehensive.

Scan both pages of the reflection [worksheet](#).

Try to do a bit from each section.

Try hard to spend a little time in the big circle.



## In pairs or triads, discuss:

How does my background regarding religion\* impact my **curriculum**? What topics do I choose to include/exclude and why?

How does my background regarding religion\* impact my **classroom environment**? What conversations do I allow/shut down and why? What topics do I fear/hope will emerge?

How does my background regarding religion\* impact my **relationships with students**? How are my relationships with learners and families impacted when my religious background/identity doesn't mirror theirs?



## Case Study

Form a group of three.

Read the [case study](#) on your own and jot some notes. (5 min)

Each person take 2 minutes to share thoughts/ideas, uninterrupted. (6 min)

Then, discuss together, using one or more of the questions on the case study worksheet. (9 min)



## Case Study: possible responses

“In this course, we’re not trying to determine what’s true or false. We’re trying to understand what we each believe and what’s important to each other.”

“If we don’t understand how we differ, we can’t understand each other.”

“What are some ways we can talk about this? Nobody speaks for all Muslims/all Christians/etc.”

Help students respect the fact that people choose a religion because they believe it’s true.



# “Lived Religion”

“There is no religion...that people have not taken up in their hands.”

~Robert A. Orsi, “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In?” 2002

Considerations for academic study, based on a lived religion approach:

- Examine contemporary practice as well as doctrine/belief.
- Seek to understand local context and the diversity within faith traditions.
- Expand the traditional definition of what “counts” as “religion.”



## Resources

[A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools](#)  
(First Amendment Center)

[The Pluralism Project](#) (Harvard University)



**Feedback please!**