



UNION

*Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project*

## Introducing the Study of Lived Religion

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### Introduction

The curriculum for my 11th-12th grade World Religions course aims to introduce students to a “lived religion” approach to teaching about religion. By disabusing students of the “dates and doctrines” approach, I hope to give them an academic lens that moves beyond the idea that religions are static or monolithic structures easily described in a columns and rows worksheet. Additionally, this course aims to teach students that religion intertwines with nearly every other aspect of life.

Below, you will see some of the essential questions discussed in a two- to three-week unit introducing students to the study of world religions. Next, you will find a description of each lesson and links (they are underlined) to the appropriate resources, including Google Slides lectures, guided notes for students, and any additional readings. To access the lectures, you can sign in to [Google](#) and then copy my lecture or notes into a new file. From there, you may alter the content as needed to suit your curriculum.

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### Essential Questions

What is religion? What are the major ways to study religion and how have those methods changed over time? Why are people religious? What role does religion play in everyday life? What is the relationship between religion and science? What role do myth, symbol, and ritual play in ordering our understanding of how religion is practiced?

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### Lesson Plans (assumes 85 minute classes)

#### Day 1

This lecture is the first day lesson I give in a semester-long course on the religions of the world. Besides introducing ourselves and covering the syllabus and course platforms (which I don’t expect will be useful information to others), this lesson asks students to reflect and write about some important themes related to

religion. Students will take 5 minutes to think and write independently before sharing in small groups about their answers to each of the questions I propose. I monitor students while they write and attempt to read their answers and offer probing questions along the way. We conclude the day by creating the norms of the class and how we will discuss difficult issues. I draw from an article about creating brave spaces to drive the discussion norms—in particular, I would suggest reviewing pages 144-149 that address some of the common mistakes that teachers make when they set their norms.

*Resources*

- [Lecture](#)
- [From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces](#)

Day 2

Class 2 develops a definition of religion [from my textbook](#): “Human transformation in response to a perceived ultimacy”. The class discussion defines each term from the definition and attempts to de-Christianize students’ preconceived notions of religion (my school’s population is largely Protestant Christian). Furthermore, we discuss the importance of local context and the ways in which practitioners of the same faith may have radically different views on practice and doctrine. We then move to a discussion expanding the definition of what counts as religion. I use photographs from the Upper West Side to ask students whether a stark line exists between the secular and the divine.

*Resources*

- [Lecture](#)
- [Guided notes for students](#)

Day 3

The first part of class investigates why people are—and, increasingly, why people are not—religious using data from various Pew Research reports. I also show students photographs to ask about how people express religion in their daily lives. The middle third of class investigates the various ways one could study religion—this is an essential part of the introductory course, so do not pass over this section even if it seems a bit meta or theoretical. I argue that the best approach to studying religion is a descriptive, phenomenological approach rooted in the lived religions method. We end class by discussing the 7 question framework that will be the foundation for our course. On the face, these questions lean slightly to the doctrinal perspective, but I take the time to highlight that practice exists on an equal plane—the “What are the means of transformation?” question highlights the essence of what we think of as religious practice.

*Resources*

- [Lecture](#)
- [Guided notes for students](#)
- [Pew Research Center](#) information on religion in the US

## Day 4

The final class in this unit describes the role that myth, ritual, and symbol play in religion and how those words have different contexts than they do in “normal” life. We then discuss how rituals help students to structure their everyday life, and I reiterate the importance of the lived religion approach to studying the ways in which religion similarly influences daily life. We end the class by learning the *etic* and *emic* approaches to study with a classic text from Anthropology about The Nacirema. I ask students to read an excerpt from the original text and underline any of the rituals they want to know more about. After reading, they share that information with a partner. We debrief together and I write the most “interesting” components of the Nacirema culture on the board. As discussion ends, I ask students to return to the top of the article and write “Nacirema” backwards. The big reveal is that the Nacirema is just an etic perspective on 1950s American life. I ask students to go back to the article and unpack all the rituals they thought were “weird”. Finally, students take a component of their daily life and write about it from an *etic* perspective. Students share their responses and attempt to guess what ritual their partner has described.

### *Resources*

- [Lecture](#)
- [Guided notes](#)
- [Nacirema culture](#)

***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).***