



UNION

*Religious Worlds of New York* • *Curriculum Development Project*

# Threads in the Tapestries of Religious Life

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## **Abstract:**

Through this semester-long assignment, students will become class “experts” on a specific aspect or thread of religious life and experience that is common across a wide range of religious traditions (eg, coming of age rites, food regulations, sacred architecture, etc, etc). They will research this dimension of religion as we journey through our classroom studies of several traditions. At the end of each unit on a specific tradition, each student will give a brief presentation on his/her chosen topic.

The following initial lesson explaining the assignment is intended for the first day of class in a semester long course on World Religions. It was designed for use with high school seniors in a faith-based school, but could be adapted for older or younger students in a range of school communities.

## **Learning Objectives:**

Students will...

- Describe how religious beliefs, codes and formal practices intersect with the more human, lived dimensions of religion.
- Identify how other aspects of culture (geography, language) influence religion and create intra-religious diversity.
- Examine how both historical and contemporary issues and concerns have created challenges for religious living.

## Establishing the Framework:

### Initial class discussions

- Begin an informal discussion around the question: Why is it important/ useful to study World Religions? (Why did you sign up for this class?)
  - List the answers and categorize them to agree upon 3 – 4 main goals... one of which will undoubtedly be: To be able to engage with people of diverse traditions in positive ways.
  - Then, tell students that we will focus on that goal for further discussion.
- Hand out a few post-it notes to each student. Ask them to think about the following questions and write a response (or two) to each on separate post-it notes. Project on a slide:  
**If our goal is to understand people of diverse faith traditions in a way that enables us to engage with one another in positive ways,**
  1. What kinds of things do we want to know about these people?
  2. How are we limited by having to do this in a classroom setting?
  3. What barriers might we encounter in being able to gain this understanding of others?
  4. What aspects of life are highly influenced by religion?
  5. What are some dimensions of religion that we cannot learn from a textbook or lecture description of religious beliefs and formal practices?
- Break the class into five groups by numbering them. Assign each group one of the questions to gather the responses, and then to categorize those responses through group discussion. This work can be done on one of the wall spaces in the classroom.
- Have each group share the categories that emerged, and any interesting responses, with the class.

After this discussion, I will invite the students to consider the following topics as worthy of consideration and further investigation to fill up and out the visions of the religious traditions that we are able to create through classroom studies:

- |   |   |                              |
|---|---|------------------------------|
| ✓ Ritual, liturgical or clerical clothing | ✓ Religious education                             | ✓ Liturgical or ritual music |
| ✓ Ritual Food / Food rituals              | ✓ Gender roles                                    | ✓ Iconography                |
| ✓ Food regulations and/or prohibitions    | ✓ Architecture / worship spaces                   | ✓ Sacred symbols             |
| ✓ Marriage ceremony                       | ✓ Tools for prayer / worship (beads, mandalas...) | ✓ Rites of initiation        |
| ✓ Marriage preparation                    | ✓ Individual or alternative prayer forms          | ✓ Coming of age rites        |
| ✓ Courtship and dating                    | ✓ Sacred sites / pilgrimages                      | ✓ Death rites                |
| ✓ Parenting                               |   | ✓ History within America     |
|   |   | ✓ Health and Medicine        |

Students can offer additional suggested topics at this point, or in the next couple of days if they think of any others.

I will then explain that each of them will need to pick one of these topics to become our class expert.

### **Assignment Specifications:**

**As we move through our studies of each tradition you will do independent research and create mini presentations (4 minutes in length) to teach about that dimension of the religious experience.**

**These presentations will be given during one class period at the end of each unit.** If the class size is large, you may work with a partner so that no more than one class meeting is taken up for presentations at the end of each unit.

You may take a pass on two of the seven traditions covered, so that you **complete a total of five presentations.**

See the syllabus for dates.

- Because these aspects of lived religion are *deeply contextualized in other aspects of culture*, you must be attentive to the **diversity of ideas and expressions that exist across distinct cultures.** So, for example, the icons of Buddha may look very different in Thailand than they do in Japan.
- Because religious expressions are also *deeply contextualized in the historical period*, you must also be attentive to the **ways in which they have changed over time.** It will be particularly interesting to examine if and/or how particular problems related to your topic have emerged in current societies. So, for example, the gender roles for religious leadership may have changed over time.
- Because these aspects are only truly *relevant if understood through the lens of the faithful practitioners*, you must **include at least three interviews of religious folk** involved in, or affected by your chosen aspect. These interviews can all be related to the same religion, or from three separate religions. You may interview persons of faith that you personally know, that I have referred you to, or you might use some of the video or audio interviews in the resource list given to you. So, for example, you could find an interfaith couple to interview about marriage, or find a podcast, video or radio interview of a religious adherent speaking about marriage.

My evaluation of your presentation will depend on these three factors in addition to the accuracy of the information provided and the quality of the presentation itself. All sources should be cited at the end of each presentation. See rubric for assessment details.

Some of these topics may cause debate between the religions and within them.  
Some of these may be creating some problems in our modern world, contemporary society.  
Be attentive to those issues throughout.

*Your final presentation*, given at the end of the semester will examine two ideas related to your topic:

1. How it has been a source or domain of conflict within the individual religions.
2. How your topic might provide a point of intersection between the various religions that might be crucial as a point of conflict, or valuable as a source of unity.

There will be a separate rubric provided for the final presentation.

Before beginning these final presentations, we will be reading and discussing a few articles that demonstrate *the tension between tradition and interpretation*. These articles and discussion will provide you with some ideas and questions to consider as you create your presentation.

## **Interview Guidelines:**

If you decide to interview someone personally, you will need to provide me with the person's name, contact info, religious background and current affiliation. If the interview is done by email, you can cc me in that correspondence.

Depending on your topic, it might be appropriate to find someone through an internet search. But first see me for more personal contacts and/or look for connections through our school community.

If you cannot find significant, relevant personal contacts or connections, you may use an already produced interview. Just be sure you cite the resource and/or share the link with me.

### Some Alternative Interview Resources:

My Life, My Religion

Religion and Ethics Newsweekly

On Being

Oprah's Super Soul Sunday interviews

### Other Research Resources:

The following link will bring you to a list of books that will provide you with information needed for your separate presentations.

<http://religiousworldsnyc.org/resource-page/readings-lived-religion-and-american-religious-diversity>

## Presentation Grading Rubric

	F – fog, darkness and confusion	D – a dim light emerging	C – glimpses of ultimate reality	B – clear reflections of the sacred or divine	A – a religious experience in itself
Adequacy and Accuracy	The class didn't learn anything from this presentation or there are serious questions about the validity of the information presented.	The presentation is too short, mostly off topic, <b>and/or</b> fails to give any new information. Or, most of the information was wrong, or biased.	The presentation is not very informative, <b>and/or</b> is often off topic. Many times, information was presented that was wrong, or biased, or limited in perspective.	The information may be stretched a bit thin, or crammed in too tight. The information is accurate and presented in proper perspective. One or two inaccuracies subtle biases are evident.	The amount of information is appropriate. It is informative throughout and cited from valid sources. Perspectives are acknowledged. All of the information is accurate.
Clarity and Creativity	It left me more confused than before. Or, bring a napkin to clean the drool off of my desks.	Almost half of the time, the information given was confusing. It was difficult to pay attention during much of the presentation.	It wasn't always clear how the pieces of information fit together. Some of it was unclear. At times, the presentation didn't demand attention.	There was a general sense of organization and 90% of the explanations given made sense. The presentation was engaging most of the time.	The overall organization and specific explanations given made the information easily understandable. There was striking pizzazz, interest and appeal in the presentation.
Intrareligious diversity	IS every member of this religion exactly the same? Hmm... There are no variations presented.	There is minimal acknowledgment of variations and the cultural influences on them.	There has been some attempt to portray variations, but no analysis and little acknowledgement of the cultural factors impacting them.	Some of the variations are portrayed. There is some acknowledgment of the cultural factors impacting those variations.	The variations within each religion is made exceptionally clear. An analysis of how related aspects of culture have influenced this religion is demonstrated.

Historical context	Get the static guard! The information is presented as though this dimension is totally static. There is no reference to history.	The presentation mentions a change or two that have occurred over time.	The presentation shows some changes, but without reference to whether or why they are significant.	The presentation shows some important changes over time, but with little analysis.	The presentation shows interesting and important aspects of historical change and development of this religious dimension, with some analysis of the reasons for those changes.
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Hinduism: \_\_\_\_\_

Islam: \_\_\_\_\_

Buddhism: \_\_\_\_\_

African Diaspora: \_\_\_\_\_

Judaism: \_\_\_\_\_

Sikhism: \_\_\_\_\_

Christianity: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview 1: \_\_\_\_ Int. 2: \_\_\_\_ Int. 3: \_\_\_\_

***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).***