



**UNION**

*Religious Worlds of New York*



*Curriculum Development Project*

## Comparative Origin Myths

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### *Abstract*

This curriculum project outlines the essential questions, learning goals, and learning plan for a course unit in my 12th grade World Religions curriculum. The unit encourages students to develop a comparative perspective on religious life by exploring both Jewish and Buddhist origin myths, with an emphasis on the links between origin myths and ritual/social practice. I have reimagined the goals and structure of the unit in light of the four "Big Ideas" (listed below) that I've taken from our work together in the *Religious Worlds of New York* summer institute.

### *Curricular Context*

This is the introductory unit for the second year of a two-year International Baccalaureate (IB) World Religions elective course. The unit serves as a bridge between a prior Buddhism unit (taught during the winter of 11th grade), and our very first unit on Judaism. It therefore acts as a bridge between old and new material. Students may have no prior knowledge of Judaism, and I think that focusing on "Origins" by looking at the book of Genesis and its ties to social practice will provide an excellent introduction to the tradition.

The Brooklyn Latin School is a NYC public school, but still offers teachers a great deal of flexibility in terms of curriculum design and fieldwork experiences. Non-negotiables, however, are the cumulative assessments of IB exams (in the spring of senior year), the use of Socratic seminars (whole-class oral discussions on unit essential questions), and the use of [Understanding by Design \(UbD\) Framework](#) to structure all units.

## *Big Ideas from the Summer Institute*

1. “A basic premise of religious studies is that religions are not internally homogeneous but diverse. In schools and in popular culture, faith traditions are often presented as a single set of beliefs, practices, and representations without internal variation. . . . It is important for students to learn, for example, that Muslims in Indonesia will practice their faith differently than Muslims in Nigeria. In a similar vein, wealthy Muslims in Jakarta may practice an Islam that looks somewhat different than poor Muslims in rural Java. Helping students see that there are many ‘Islam’s’ (or Judaisms or Hinduisms) in the world enables them to consider carefully both what it means to study Islam and the complexity of the question, ‘What do Muslims believe?’” ([The American Academy of Religion, \*Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States\*](#), pg. 12)
2. “[T]he study of religion is not limited to analyzing historical traditions such as Buddhism and Judaism but also investigates the religious ‘language’ common to all traditions.” ([William Paden, \*Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion\*](#), pg. 1)  

“Comparative work is not only a process of establishing similarities or analogies. It is also the fundamental instrument for discerning differences. . . . Only by seeing what is common between things can one see what is different or innovative about any one of them.” (Paden, *Religious Worlds*, pg. 4)

“Comparative perspective [studying multiple religions comparatively] . . . gives context, dimensionality, and indeed a certain humanity, to particular histories and traditions. It creates a certain familiarity with worlds that might otherwise have been relegated to the foreign, the inferior, the bizarre.” (Paden, *Religious Worlds*, pg. 45)
3. Myths shape religious practice, and visa versa. (see Paden, *Religious Worlds*, pp. 86-90, on “The Immanence and Application of Myth”)
4. Site visits and classroom guest speakers (including pre-research on the site/speaker and debriefing as well as a related assessment) can help to illustrate key “Lived Religions” concepts like the internal diversity of religious traditions and the nature of religion as social practice, not just a set of beliefs (personal experience gathered through site visits w/ the summer institute and my own classes).

## *Pedagogic Background and Strategies for Redesign*

Last year, in an attempt to make my 12th grade World Religions curriculum “more like a college course,” I created and implemented one thematic unit on Rites of Passage. We studied the Buddhist Shin Pym ritual of Burma and the Jewish bar/bat mitzvah. I realize now that my justifications for planning the thematic unit (a thematic unit is “harder;” a thematic unit allows us to explore a specific practice/belief in greater depth) were true but somewhat vague and incomplete. While the unit did allow us to look at specific practices in more depth, I wasn't exactly sure of the larger purpose of the thematic and comparative perspective. I think that lack of clarity had some negative impact on the outcomes of the unit because, in our final assessment, I observed that students were knowledgeable

about each separate ritual, but did not come away with any understanding of larger themes like the significance of Rites of Passage in general. Students were also unable to connect specific acts in the Rites of Passage with the core beliefs/themes of each faith, or draw any larger conclusions about the uniqueness of each faith tradition.

I now feel better able to articulate that a thematic, comparative approach (as opposed to units exploring specific religious traditions) is valuable because it firstly makes the unfamiliar more familiar (Big Idea #2, above), which pushes students to be more tolerant of the material studied. Second, this approach enables students to see common themes across religions (working towards answering the year-long Essential Question of the entire course: “What is religion?”) as well as key differences between religions that emphasize each faith’s unique perspective.

I also now realize the necessity of tying core beliefs to practice (Big Idea #3). Last year, our study of rites of passage was somewhat disconnected from core beliefs of the practitioner. As a result, as we delved into the steps and procedures of each rite, I myself was asking the question: "But what’s the *point*?" My attempt to teach the rites without generating essential questions that connected belief to action resulted in a study of acts that seemed without context and almost bizarre.

I also realize that study of the Jewish bar/bat mitzvah without focusing on a specific geographic place or community was also misguided, as it created the false impression that this practice is monolithic throughout Jewish sects, denominations, and cultures. My redesign then must provide at least two interpretations of religious belief/practice from two different cultures (Big Idea #1).

Finally, while I did have two classroom visitors come to share stories from their experiences in rites of passage, I did not adequately frame those visits as unique, culturally-specific experiences, nor did I use them to connect beliefs with practices. In my redesign, I intend to frame and debrief classroom visitors more rigorously (Big Idea #4).

***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).***

*UbD Template for the  
Comparative Study of Origin Myths*

Desired Results	
<p>Understandings:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. diversity of time and place results in diversity of religious practice</li> <li>2. see “Students will know” for core themes unique to each faith</li> <li>3. religion involves sacred myths that are taken as symbolic or literal truths; these truths have a great impact on texts &amp; practice</li> </ol>	<p>Essential Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Contemporary religious studies scholars refer not to ‘Judaism’ and ‘Buddhism’ in the singular, but to ‘Judaisms’ and ‘Buddhisms’ in the plural. What insight has our study offered into the diverse nature of each religion?</li> <li>2. What key themes of Judaism emerge from our study? Of Buddhism?</li> <li>3. In what ways are these origin myths similar to or different from the Big Bang Theory? Given your responses, what is religion? (recurring, year-long EQ)</li> </ol>
<p>Students will know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the definition of “myth” according to William Paden</li> </ul> <p>Judaism:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the strong relationship between Jewish biblical history and ritual practice</li> <li>- the strong relationship between Yahweh &amp; humanity</li> </ul> <p>Buddhism:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ‘what the Buddha said’ may conflict with actual ritual practice</li> <li>- Buddhists value of self-seeking</li> </ul> <p>Both:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- differing beliefs regarding the foundational human flaw</li> <li>- origin myths point to a “Great Time” that has passed and that is to come</li> </ul>	<p>Students will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- generate &amp; answer their own essential questions</li> <li>- conduct fieldwork in response to their own essential question</li> <li>- respond to “pop” Paper 2 questions</li> </ul>

### Assessment Evidence

- weekly content pop quizzes
- fieldwork assignment, to be determined
- Socratic Seminar (including 1 day of student-led seminar)
- Paper 2 exam

### Learning Plan

1. Paden on “myth” (excerpts from [Religious Worlds](#), pp. 69-92)
2. Use Paden to generate essential questions for analysis of myths
3. Buddhism key content review
4. analyze the “Kalama Sutra” using essential questions for myth analysis
5. classroom visit / video / transcript to trace influence of “Kalama Sutra” on American Zen practice
6. debrief & address essential questions for myth analysis
7. introduce fieldwork assignment; preliminary research
8. lecture & video on historical context of Buddhism in Tibet
9. [“The Tibetan Creation Myth”](#) (from *Tibetan Folk Tales*, edited by Fredrick and Audrey Hyde-Chambers; available online thanks to a colleague at Santa Margita Catholic High School, an IB World School)
10. connection of creation myth to Tibetan Buddhist practice
11. context for the biblical book of Genesis, and using Genesis to make predictions about Judaism
12. textual analysis of Genesis
13. lecture & video on Shabbat
14. context for fieldwork at Shabbat service at [Romemu Temple](#)
15. in-class work time for Fieldwork assignment; 1 source due
16. trip to Romemu temple
17. debrief & address essential questions
18. classroom visit / video / transcript on influence of Genesis on American Orthodox Jewish practice
19. practice answering “pop” EQs.
20. fieldwork assignment debriefs
21. seminar including use of 1 student EQ
22. Paper 2 exam using variation of EQ #1