



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Real to Reel: Hinduism and “Gandhi”

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ABSTRACT

This curriculum development project presents an attempt to integrate an understanding of the "lived religions" heuristic into an 8th grade course on History on Film. More specifically, in examining the film *Gandhi*, students will be challenged to explore issues pertaining to Gandhi's own religious beliefs, the extent to which those beliefs fit within the broader context of Hinduism, and how this informs the relationship between Gandhi's beliefs and his legacy, Hindu doctrine, the state of India, and the lived experiences of Hindu-Americans of the present day. Ideally, the unit will culminate in a panel discussion in which several carefully selected speakers from the Hindu Organization of Long Island will come to address students' questions and discuss their opinions of the film.

PEDAGOGIC GOALS

In the present landscape of high-stakes testing, information is often compartmentalized so as to make the process of memorization easier on students. This compartmentalization often comes at the expense of nuance; teachers are not empowered to present complexity, and students are unlikely to seek it out on their own. In such an environment, it should come as no surprise that the concept of "lived religions" is an elusive one for students to grasp. But this paradigm, which suggests that religions are dynamic rather than static, and that religious practices should be understood in context rather than in isolation, is essential for students in today's society.

Thus, this curriculum development project presents an attempt to integrate an understanding of the "lived religions" heuristic into an 8th grade course on History on Film. More specifically, in examining the film *Gandhi*, students will be challenged to explore issues pertaining to Gandhi's own religious beliefs, the extent to which those beliefs fit within the broader context of Hinduism, and how this informs the relationship between Gandhi's beliefs and his legacy, Hindu doctrine, the state of India, and the lived experiences of Hindu-Americans of the present day.

CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK

"Real to Reel," a course which deals with the relationship between historical events and the ways in which these events are presented on film, is a half-year elective course taught to students at the 8th grade level. The course begins by introducing students to the various individuals whose contributions make film production possible (Director, Editor, etc.) but quickly moves into examinations of specific films. For each film, students are presented with one to two days of background information pertaining to the subject. In addition, students are presented with two major themes they can expect to see woven into the film, so as to provide a common framework with which to make sense of what they see. As one of these themes is always present in the film that follows, this also offers students an opportunity to examine the treatment of a single theme in two different contexts. Henceforth, "lived religion" will be included as one such theme.

PROCEDURE

Prior to beginning the film, students will be given two days' worth of introduction, one a brief overview of Indian history prior to World War I, and the other a brief introduction to the basic tenets and practices of Hinduism. The former, which I have presented previously, will include a general survey of the subcontinent, beginning with Maurya and Gupta empires, continuing through the Muslim conquests of western India in the Middle Ages, and culminating in a brief description of the early years of British India. I hope in this way to impress upon students India's rich cultural heritage, as well as framing the religious, ethnic, and colonial conflicts they can expect to see in the film. The latter will acclimate students to the basic concepts of dharma and caste which will be integral to understanding Gandhi's worldview. Finally, students will be introduced to the concept of "lived religion," and will begin to examine Gandhi's place in the world of Hindu philosophy will be complicated by their reading of the publisher's brief from Professor Arvind Sharma's 2005 book, *A Curve in the Ganges: Mahatma Gandhi's Interpretation of Hinduism* (<http://books.google.com/books?id=knEwAQAAIAAJ>).

While viewing the film, students will be asked to take note of several things, including Gandhi's own views on religion (and Hinduism in particular) and how these affect both his philosophy and his behavior. In addition, students will note the ways in which the other characters that surround Gandhi react to him and to his religious beliefs, and how they attempt to modify their behavior accordingly.

Once the film has concluded, students will be tasked with constructing a series of questions they still have. These should address Gandhi's beliefs and how they compare to Hindu doctrine, as well as Gandhi's legacy and its relationship to the state of India, among other things. Specifically, students will be asked to consider how they imagine present day Hindu-Americans might respond to both of these.

If possible, the unit will culminate in a panel discussion in which several carefully selected speakers from the Hindu Organization of Long Island (<http://www.holinewyork.org/>) will come to address the students' questions. Ideally, these speakers will have also watched the film, so as to improve their ability to respond to what the students saw. Of course, students will discuss in advance how to properly address these guests, how to listen carefully, and how to respectfully pose follow-up questions. Students will be asked to reflect upon their experience with both the film and with the speakers by way of a written meta-cognitive reflection.

STANDARDS ADDRESSED

While "Real to Reel" is an elective courses, it is still important that lessons address standards that will benefit student progress. Specifically, this plan addresses the Integration of Knowledge and Ideas component of the Common Core Reading Standards for both Literature and Literacy in History/Social Studies. In addition, this plan addresses Key Ideas 3 and 4 of Standard 2 of the New York State Social Studies Learning Standards, pertaining to the importance of individuals as social, political, and religious change agents, and the concept of multiple perspectives and shifting theories of history, respectively. Finally, this plan addresses a variety of areas within the New York State Social Studies Core Content Standards, specifically those within Unit Six (The Colonial Response of European Imperialism, C9), and Unit Eight (Ethnic and Religious Tensions - Analysis of Multiple Perspectives, A8).

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