



**INTERFAITH**  
CENTER OF NEW YORK



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
**Humanities**

**UNION**

*Religious Worlds of New York*



*Curriculum Development Project*

## **Dissonant Devotion: The Legacy of Contradiction American Religion and Politics**

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### **Abstract:**

This curriculum explores the role of religion in the founding of the American colonies, the shaping of early American life and politics, the formation of the United States of America, and the development of our country's national identity. Its ultimate goal is to expand students' prior knowledge of what history is, build their skills for "thinking like a historian," and develop their critical thinking.

The unit draws upon a number of sources, including: the Library of Congress exhibition *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, the Stanford History Education Group's *Historical Thinking for the 21st Century* project, the First Amendment Center's *Teacher's Guide to Religion in American Life* (available from Oxford University Press), and various resources from the NEH summer institute *Religious Worlds of New York: Teaching the Everyday Life of American Religious Diversity*.

The unit will culminate with an essay (for which students will choose from a prompt menu), and classroom participation in at least two community panel discussions with religious and civic leaders. Guidelines for developing panel discussions are included below.

This unit is part of an 11<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History curriculum at a charter school in Berkeley, California with a high percentage of students of color from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Learning Goals:**

Students will explore and wrestle with questions of morality and righteousness, and the various conflicting ideologies present in religions in America, and how many of those conflicting ideologies became part of the foundational doctrine for what it means to be an American. By the end of the unit, students will be able to answer the following essential questions:

1. What cultural and/or socio-political elements need to be considered or explored to better understand a people's history? What does it mean to be an American?
2. What role has religion had in the foundation of the United States? What lasting effects of this role are present in today's American society?
3. What are the purposes of a dominant narrative? What are the purposes of counter-narratives?
4. Is religion in America a unifying or a divisive force?

## Unit Outline:

As part of an 11<sup>th</sup> grade U.S. History curriculum, this unit will explore the role and influence of religion in America's socio-political landscape from colonial times to modern day. Students will explore how many of the early colonies that would later become the United States of America were settled by men and women of deep religious convictions who in the seventeenth century crossed the Atlantic Ocean to practice their faith(s) freely. Students will also learn how the religious intensity of the original settlers would wane and then return with a fervor during the eighteenth century. The result would be a religious people that rose in rebellion against Great Britain in 1776. Most American statesmen, when they began to form new governments at the state and national levels, shared the convictions of most of their constituents that **religion was crucial to the maintenance of American institutions**. These particular efforts to define the role of religious faith in public life and the degree to which the dominant religious ideologies could be supported by public officials that was consistent with the revolutionary imperatives of equality and freedom for all citizens, and the constant, and very much still present tension between these ideologies is the central question which this unit explores.

- [American as Refuge: The Seventeenth Century](#) looks at the religious persecution in Europe that drove so many to the shores of British North America where these new settlers established colonies often centered on passionate religious convictions;
- [Religion in Eighteenth-Century America](#) challenges the notion that religion was in decline during this period concentrating on the nation's first major religious revival, the Great Awakening, 1740-45;
- [Religion and the American Revolution](#) illustrates the contribution of religious leaders and religious ideas to the coming of the War of independence;
- [Religion and the Congress of the Confederation](#) examines the policies of America's first national government toward religion;
- [Religion and the State Governments](#) illuminates the policies of the revolutionary state governments toward religion, ranging from disestablishment in Virginia to multiple establishments in New England states;
- [Religion and the Federal Government](#) focuses on the status of religion in the new federal government;

- [Republican Religion](#) traces the fortunes of religion up to the 1830s, covering in the process what has been called America's "Golden Age" of Evangelicalism.
- **The Religious Origins of Manifest Destiny** – Students will read the essay by Donald M. Scott, Professor of History at Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and also review various primary documents like Winthrop's speech on the *Arbella*, the Declaration of Independence, and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and his second inaugural address and then engage in a Socratic seminar discussing prompts such as: what happens when nations claim an expansive mission and justify this with a claim to Divine favor? Do they consider the United States to be unique in its basic values of liberty and democracy and to have a "mission" to preserve and promote them? Do many or any of them believe that God does play a role in the action and fate of nations?
- **African-American Christianity** – Students will read and annotate the essay by Laurie Maffly-Kipp of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and also explore several primary sources associated with African American life in nineteenth century America and participate in Socratic seminars answering the following questions: How did the social and political circumstances in which they lived shape their religious expression? Why would southern blacks have so closely associated the ideas of spiritual and political freedom, and northern blacks have been more careful to present their views as traditionally Protestant?
- **Religion in American Politics Today** – Students will read and engage with several articles from the Pew Research Center regarding religion and U.S. politics, dissect various current political events and issues connected to religious beliefs and write a

## Lived Religion Activity:

During the last two sections of the unit (on African-American Christianity and Religion in American Politics Today), students will participate in various **panel discussions** with local religious leaders and political figures. This will provide students the opportunity to meet with religious and civic leaders in their community. Since many of the students have no religious affiliation and most of those that have one have only interacted with people from their own religious group, the experiences involved in organizing a religious leaders panel can help to break down these stereotypes in ways that cannot happen simply through reading texts or listening to lectures.

Students will learn how to create and ask pertinent questions to religious and political leaders in order to obtain information that is relevant to the unit's objectives. Asking good questions in a public forum is similar to asking good questions in a personal interview – it takes preparation. Teaching the process of formulating good questions may require several classes but this will offer valuable research and social skills.

A forum involving local religious and political leaders helps in developing a relationship between the school and the community. Through inviting religious leaders and political leaders to speak about questions that interest high school students, they will learn to respond to the information needs of those outside their religious and political groups.

## **Practical Steps in Organizing a Panel Discussion:**

1. We will decide on a clear focus for the panel before we approach religious leaders to participate. The focus will more than likely be related to the final two essays read in class. Questions will be tied to basic beliefs and practices and how these beliefs and practices connect to what students have learned and explored throughout the unit. Religious leaders will be encouraged to talk about and draw on their expertise.
2. As a class, we will decide which leaders we want to invite based on information from our own research networks and from people that we trust. We realize not all religious leaders are good representatives of their groups or good public speakers. Some religious leaders cannot engage in respective dialogue with people from other faith groups. We will keep in mind that any particular faith tradition is diverse therefore religious leaders can be invited to represent internal diversity among Muslims, Jews, or Christians, for example. Having four to five participants on a panel discussion is ideal.
3. We will set a date and time for the panel. Students will need some class time to familiarize themselves with basic aspects of religion. This will enable them to prepare good questions. The entire event should not last longer than two hours.
4. We will contact the religious and political leaders well in advance of the panel date since they have busy lives and full calendars, and need ample notice (months not weeks) in order to participate in an event.
5. Once leaders have accepted to participate in the panel discussion, we will provide them with clear information about all aspects of the event. We will provide this information in writing (usually via email). We will begin the forum with leaders each taking about five minutes to make prepared comments in relation to the focus of the event. We will advise the leaders that the students will be asking those questions that they have prepared.
6. We will give the leaders information about the other panel participants and the characteristics of the audience/class. If we plan on recording the panel, we will inform the leaders and get their consent.
7. A couple of weeks before the event, we will contact the leaders by phone or email and remind them of their commitment to participate. Offer them details about the start time and the room location.
8. We will have students prepare questions for the panel members through a structured process. We will begin by brainstorming and recording all possible questions – this is best done in small groups. No questions are excluded at this initial stage. Once all of the questions are recorded, we will have the class read them and ask if there are any questions that make people uncomfortable and why. Whether it comes up in the discussion or not, we will talk about posing open ended questions that religious and political leaders will be comfortable answering. Questions that put them on the defensive will, more than likely, not lead to useful information or build trust. Questions should be posed in such a way that the leaders feel that students are interested in trying to understand their point of view and what they have to say about particular

- religious beliefs and practices and political viewpoints. The questions should also be relevant to the course materials or the topic of the workshop.
9. It may take several classes to refine the list of questions. The questions can be grouped according to themes and each theme given a certain amount of time during the panel so that all themes are covered. I will assign each student with at least one question to ask during the panel and determine the order in which the questions will be asked.
  10. Students will be encouraged to volunteer to thank each individual religious and political leader at the end of the event. The students can prepare a few words and write a thank you card.
  11. The panel should start and finish on time. Everyone present will be informed of how the event will proceed. We will welcome the leaders as guests and I will have short introductions prepared for each of them.
  12. We will begin with the prepared questions so that members of the panel are informed about the nature of the discussion.
  13. When the event is concluding, we will allow enough time for students to thank the religious leaders individually.
  14. In our classes, students get credit for participating in the formulation of the questions, for attending the panel and asking questions, and for writing a reflection on the panel after the event.

## **Relevant Standards:**

**[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2](#)** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

**[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3](#)** Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

**[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8](#)** Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

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summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching  
on religious diversity, see: [www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).***