



Religious Worlds of New York



Curriculum Development Project

Virtual Lived Religions

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Abstract

This project is not a self-contained lesson plan, but rather a collection of online resources and pedagogic strategies which may be used to add an additional layer of experiential learning to any religious diversity curriculum.

These resources were initially developed for use in a semester-long world religions course for 9th graders. Due to the constraints of the course, which include the large number of students as well as the fact that this is a required course in a public school, we are not able to leave the classroom and visit local religious communities. It will therefore be necessary to include a lived religion component in virtual settings. By using digital technologies to bring the experience of sacred space into the classroom, I will be able to give students personal and tangible encounters with some of the world's major religions, without the challenges and potential pitfalls that a true physical visit would invite. These "virtual site visits" will enhance the learning experience and show students that the commonly understood elements of religious life exist not only in textbooks but in communities throughout the world.

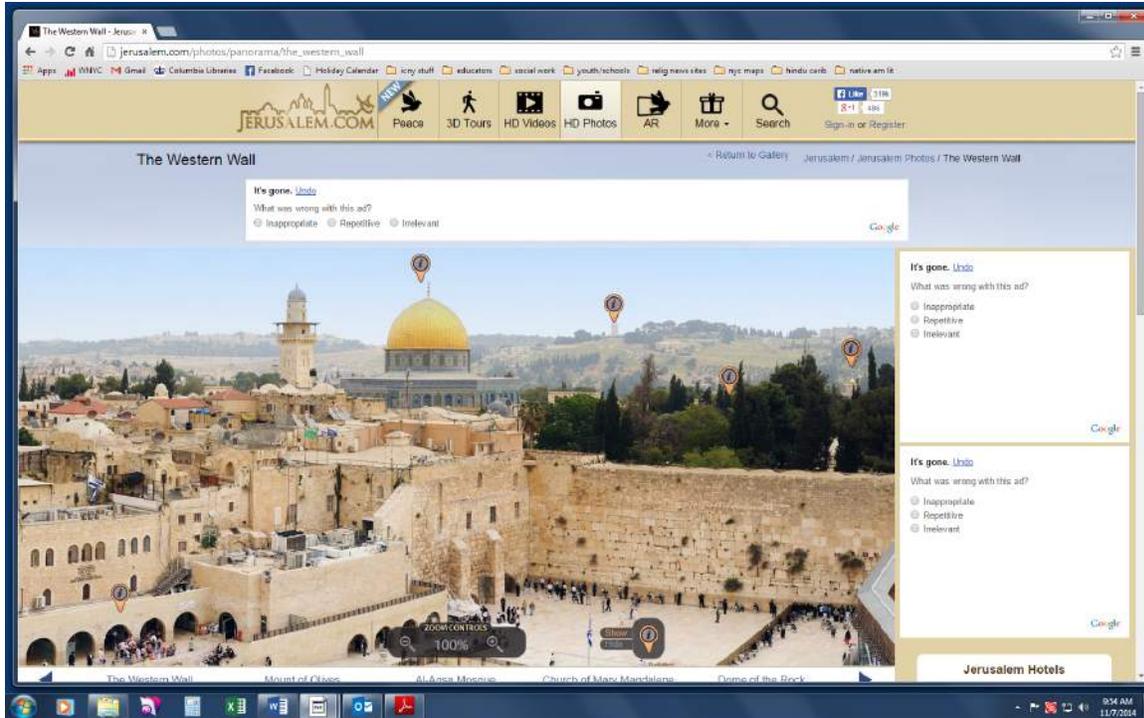
Overview

The 1999-2000 school years were game changers for everyone in the social studies department of Modesto City Schools. We were given the seemingly impossible task of satisfying everyone and offending no one while designing the nation's first (and still only) required world religions course for a public school district. The safest way to do this both effectively and constitutionally was to avoid any situations that could lead to controversy – situations typically found in real world interfaith dialogue or encounters. This resulted in a curriculum devoid of rich experiences with lived religion. Teachers rely on a textbook, along with a list of approved videos and pre-written materials. With 15 years of experience now behind us we know that this recipe was successful in avoiding controversy. However, it may be time to rethink the lived religion component in a safe and tightly controlled setting.

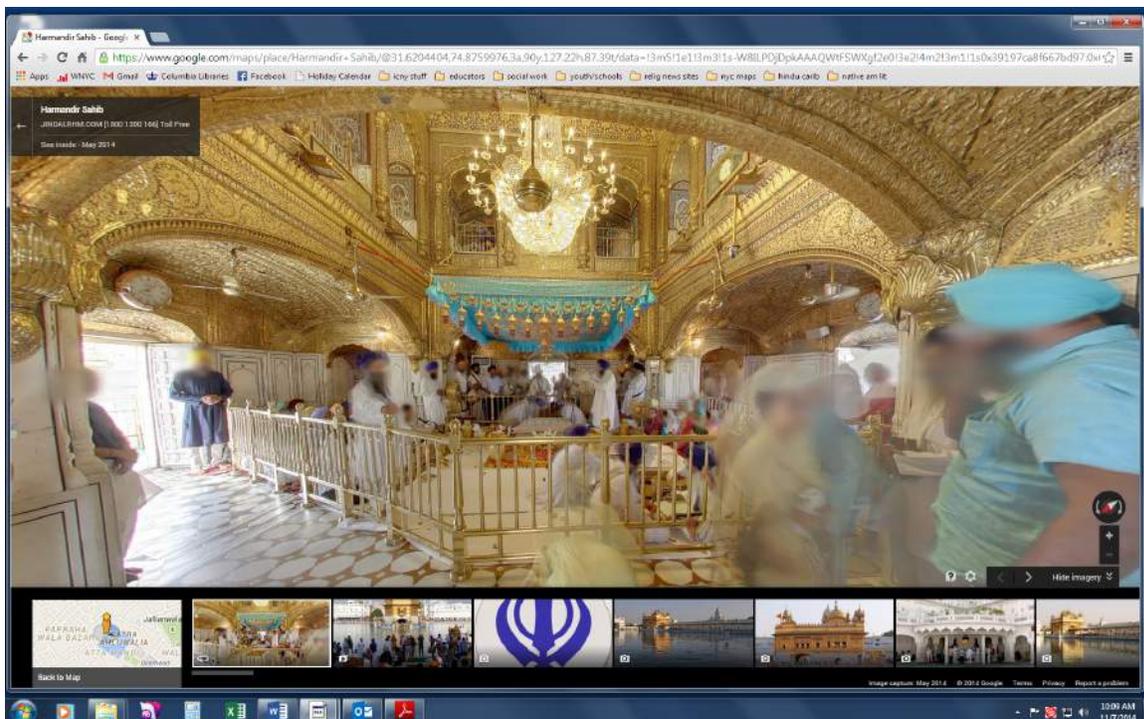
The simplest and most manageable way to accomplish this is by using the plethora of websites, virtual tours, apps, and religious services available on the internet, as well as personal collections of photographs, videos, and music. These can be invaluable resources for teachers, but still do not guarantee constitutional safety for our classroom settings. Each potential resource would need to be vetted in by our team of lead teachers and curriculum coordinators. This tight control offers the individual teacher a safe place to bring new ideas for review and fine tuning as well as a forum for sharing with all seven high schools in our district.

The internet is rich with possibilities to bring lived religions into the public classroom.

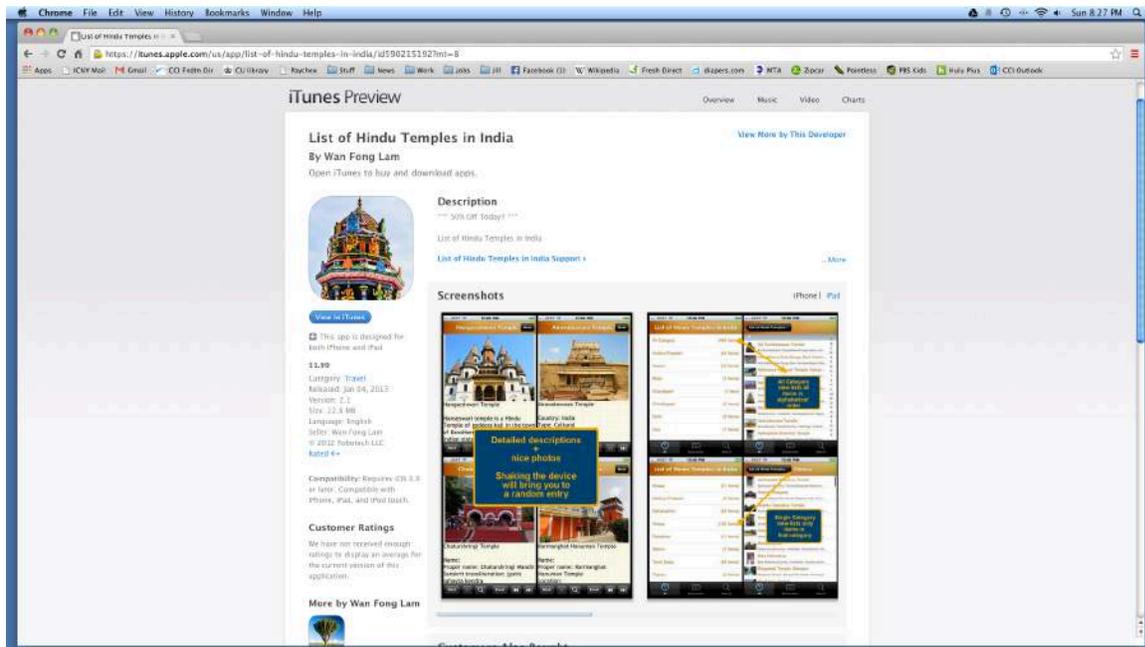
One possible example would include the website jerusalem.com where teachers can take their students on a virtual tour of the Holy City of Jerusalem, including photos and videos of many sites, like the Dome of the Rock and Western Wall, seen below.



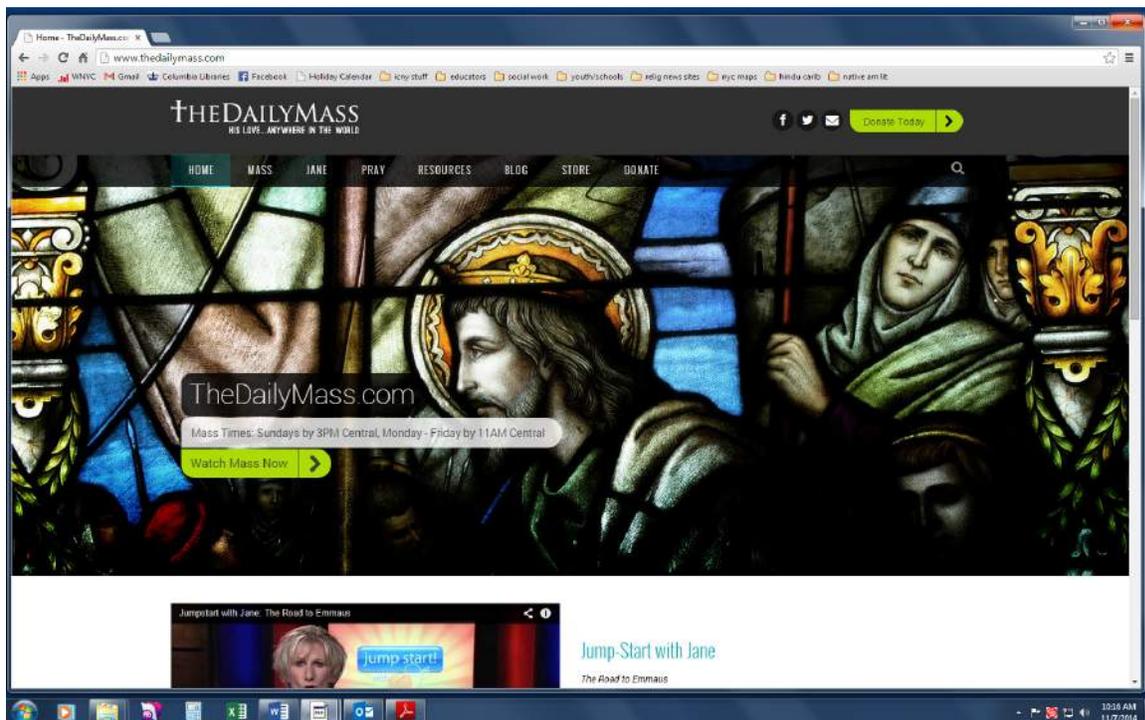
Equally rich is the multimedia capability of Google Maps, which can take you on 360° tours of many sites, like the Golden Temple at Amritsar, India, which is the very heart of Sikhism.



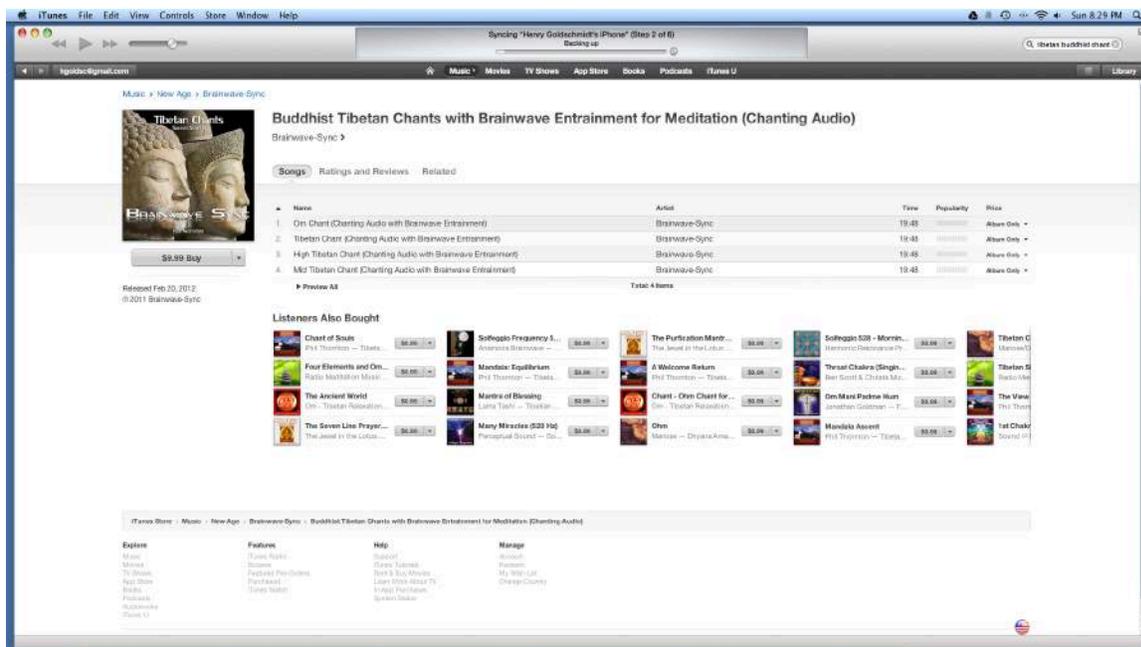
Apple's App Store is replete with possibilities as well. Search for any religion and a lengthy list appears. One example is this List of Hindu Temples in India. For \$1.99 a teacher can take students to the source of Hinduism and share the beauty of its temples with the entire class.



If observing a portion of a religious service in action is appropriate for your curriculum, there is a daily mass broadcast on thedailymass.com, straight from the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans which boast the title “oldest continually operating cathedral in the USA.”



Finally, if music truly calms the savage beast (or enriches the dry world religions lecture), then a quick trip to the iTunes Store provides countless options for your course. Recordings of Buddhist chants, for example, give students a unique opportunity to listen to Tibetan monks performing a part of their daily ritual.



With the many thousands of opportunities for bringing lived religion experiences to your students without leaving the classroom, it seems like a simple solution.

In the end, I would suggest you follow the sage advice given by Charles Haynes and John Leach, in the publication *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in American Life* (Oxford University Press, 2002), which states that the question for social studies teachers is no longer “Should I teach about religion?” but rather, “What should I teach, and HOW should I do it?”

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.