



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Religious Life and the *Life of Pi*

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Abstract and Rationale

This lesson was designed for ninth graders at a 6-12 independent coed day school in suburban New Jersey. The student body is predominantly white but has a large number of students of Asian and Indian descent. The student body is religiously diverse and socioeconomically affluent. Overall, the students are highly motivated and high achieving. *Life of Pi* serves as the summer reading text for Ancient World, the freshman Humanities course. The scope and sequence of this curriculum follows the roots of human expression, particularly those in the Western tradition, through the historical study of ancient civilizations and world religions. This mini-unit was designed to anchor the course and introduce the course throughlines of religious tradition, lived religion, and spirituality, all of which dominate the novel. It was designed to take place over four 55-minute class periods in a class of about 13 freshmen. Students will make connections between the novel and their real life communities by completing interviews with adults about their experiences with religion, lived religion, and spirituality.

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Define and differentiate between the terms *religious tradition*, *lived religion*, and *spirituality*
- Apply their summer reading of Yann Martell's *Life of Pi* in context of the study of religion and history and the themes of the course
- Explain that diversity exists both in lived religion and religious traditions in their own communities in the 21st century
- Practice interview skills
- Use evidence to defend written and oral argument

Lesson Plans

Day 1

Aim: How does perspective affect our understanding of truth?

Lesson Activities:

- Explain to students “Hamburger” model of building an argument with an illustration
 - Top bun as thesis statement
 - Lettuce, tomato, and patty as pieces of evidence
 - Bottom bun as conclusion
- Divide students into groups of 3-4 and send them to the board. Each group must draw and apply the hamburger model to the novel *Life of Pi* by answering the question: Which story is true, the animal story or the people story? Students must give concrete examples from the book to respond to this question. Give groups 10-15 minutes to collaborate and prepare to present.
- Students present arguments. Teacher should scaffold and reinforce the model as a structure to use evidence to defend argument as students present, challenging uses of weak evidence or conflicting evidence as necessary.
- Class discussion about the nature of truth based on the novel: why are there two different versions of the story? Could both be true? Neither? Why or why not? Teacher should continue to require students to use evidence from the novel.
- Teacher gives out essay questions for final unit assessment and explains that students should keep these questions in mind throughout the unit (see Day 4).

Assessment:

Hamburger presentation; formative assessment throughout based on student contributions to discussion.

Homework:

Take notes on questions for discussion, documenting evidence from *Life of Pi*.

- In your own words, define “religion” and “spirituality” and be sure to clarify what the difference is between these two concepts.
- To what extent is Pi religious? Spiritual?
- What three religions does Pi embrace? Explain how and why Pi embraces all three of these religions.
- What do the adults think about Pi embracing all three religions? Why? What do you think Martel is trying to say regarding religion and spirituality? Adults and adolescents?
- How does organized religion both enable and hinder Pi to experience God?
- As Pi struggles to survive, he often relies on his religion and spirituality to persevere; however, this means he is confronted with difficult decisions and moral dilemmas. Have you ever faced a moral dilemma that was solved or hindered by your own sense of religion or spirituality (if you have any)? Be prepared to discuss in class.

Day 2

Aim: How does Life of Pi explore themes of religion, lived religion, and spirituality?

Lesson Activities:

- Students brainstorm as a class, based on their homework, definitions of “religion” and “spirituality” that teacher records on the board. Teacher gives a final definition of each. Teacher should also introduce terms “atheism,” “theism,” and “agnosticism.”
- Teacher introduces, defines, and clearly differentiates “lived religion” from the above terms; teacher asks students to explain why the differentiation of these terms is important by asking for and giving examples.
- Class discussion: Teachers may adapt and direct discussion around the following questions:
 - Where do we see examples of these ideas (religion, spirituality, and lived religion) in *Life of Pi*?
 - Would you consider Pi more spiritual or religious? Why?
 - How does organized religion both enable and hinder Pi to experience God? How does Pi live these religions in his own way?
 - What do the adults think about Pi embracing all three religions? Why? What do you think Martel is trying to say regarding religion and spirituality? Adults and adolescents?
 - Teacher should highlight Chapters 16, 21-22, 23, 61
- Introduce Lived Religion Interview Assignment and explain the importance of approaching this subject with sensitivity and respect. Use Graphic Organizer of Religious Tradition→Context→Individual’s Experience to introduce this concept.
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Assessment:

Formative throughout student discussion, submission of homework questions.

Homework:

Complete interviews for Lived Religion Interview Assignment

- Students will interview three adults about their lived religious experience. Students should attempt to find three people who practice a diversity of religions; only one of the three may be a parent.
- Students should ask the following questions and record written, audio, or video responses to be submitted to the teacher:
 1. Do you currently practice any kind of religion? If so, what?
 2. For you, what does it mean to be _____ (Jewish? Hindu? Catholic? Religious? Spiritual?) – *this will depend on the interviewee’s response to the first question.*
 3. Were you raised in a particular religious tradition? If this is different than that which you were raised, when and why did you find yourself interested in something different?
 4. Do you consider yourself spiritual? Do you practice your religion and/or spirituality at all, and if so, how?
 5. How much do you value religion in your life? Religious practice in your life? Spirituality in your life? Why?

Day 3

Aim: What do the realities of lived religion show us about why we should study religion at all?

Lesson Activities:

- In-class write: What overall conclusions or lessons did you learn about lived religion based on your interviews and our discussion of *Life of Pi*?
- Students will work in groups of three to share their findings of the interviews and their responses for the in-class write. Frameworks for the discussion:
 - Why is it important for us to recognize diversity in religion, lived religion, and spirituality?
 - Why is it important that we study religion at all?
- Class discussion of group work. Teacher should continue to tie in *Life Of Pi* and solicit more examples from the novel to underscore discussion.
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Assessment:

Students will submit written or audio responses of Lived Religion Interview Assignment. Formative throughout student discussion.

Homework:

Prepare outlines for in-class essay on *Life of Pi*.

Day 4

Assessment: Using a prepared outline and with use of the novel *Life of Pi*, students will respond to one of three essay questions in a 5 paragraph essay (based on the “Hamburger” model). Students will receive only one question each on the day of the test, but must be prepared to respond to all three.

1. Consider Martel’s themes and our class discussions of religion, lived religion, and spirituality. Which of these is most important, according to Martel? Use at least three examples from the novel to support your response.
2. To what extent is spirituality the main theme of *Life of Pi*? Discuss with reference to theism or lived religion, atheism, and agnosticism. Use at least three examples from the novel to support your response.
3. To what extent is religion the main theme of *Life of Pi*? Discuss with reference to both lived religion and the religious traditions of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Use at least three examples from the novel to support your response.

For more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity see

www.religiousworldsnyc.org