



Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Sacred Feasts: Studying Lived Religion through Food

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Abstract and Curricular Context:

This project seeks to observe the ideas of lived religion through the lens of food and rituals of eating, termed "sacred feasting". In the project, students will engage with the sacred and secular aspects of the following meals: the Passover Seder and the Eid al-Fitr feast. The project is intended as an enrichment activity for a course called "Religions in World Cultures". In our district, the course is offered as an elective to students in grades eleven and twelve.

The goal of the project is for students to engage with and reflect upon notions of communal eating as important markers of religious symbolism, religious time, and religious communities. The final project is a multi-faceted reflection, within which students may choose from among several options in presenting the particular aspects of lived religion observed in these meals, and how his/her understanding of the religions studied has been made more complex and nuanced.

In advance of this project, students should have already completed units of study on the history and evolution of each of the attendant religious traditions associated with Seder (Judaism) and the Eid al-Fitr (Islam). In addition, students will have already had some practice in exploring and discussing the concepts of lived religion as it provides a depth of insight into religious practice and the diversity of practice within individual religions.

Lesson Plans and Resources:

In order to first orient students toward thinking about the sacred and secular aspects of communal meals, direct them to reflect on the following questions, either in writing, small groups, or in a full-class setting. A subsequent class discussion may prove fruitful.

Ask:

What foods do you eat at Thanksgiving? Why do you eat those foods? What aspects of the meal have a sacred or religious role? What foods have a sacred or religious role?

Which ones and why are they significant? What people eat with you at Thanksgiving? Why are certain people included? Is there a special seating arrangement and, if so, why? Do specific individuals have special roles, and what are those roles? To what extent do you consider Thanksgiving to be a religious holiday? Why? To the extent that you see it as a religious holiday, is it specific to any one religion? To your particular religious tradition? Why or not?

As students undertaking this project will already have a working knowledge and vocabulary of Islam and Judaism from prior study in the course, it is appropriate to then move directly into discussion of sacred meals as an aspect of lived religion.

Students will read, discuss, and present the following descriptions of the Seder and the Eid al-Fitr. Note to students that these accounts are written from within each tradition, in a modern setting:

What is Pesach (Passover)? : <http://www.jewfaq.org/holidaya.htm>

What are Eid al-Fitr Traditions?: <http://www.theeid.com/eid-ul-fitr-traditions/>

Students will read the following to gain a more direct experience of how each meal is specifically carried out. Students may present these in dramatic or literary fashion. Flexibility is certainly welcome here:

Read a Passover haggadah: <http://scheinerman.net/judaism/pesach/haggadah.pdf>

An Egyptian Family's Eid Feast:
<http://eatocracy.cnn.com/2010/09/10/an-egyptian-familys-eid-feast/>

One of the challenges inherent to this project is that students likely cannot actually attend a Passover Seder or Eid feast, for a number of reasons: logistical, practical access to each meal, dispersion of the meals within the calendar year, and religious convictions (either from students or the communities studied) preventing students from directly witnessing one or more meals. This presents an obstacle in engaging students with "lived religions" directly in this way, though teachers can creatively direct students to the devotional, ritual, and even sensory aspects of each sacred feast, perhaps lending, through detachment, insights not immediately available in person.

Students will view short video selections on the practical and religious dimensions of Seder and Eid al-Fitr meals.

These two videos provide a basis of the physical dimensions of a Passover Seder in clear language:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_cOzyzbfo
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoBZwmP149M>

The Holy Kitchens series has a variety of germane videos on Islamic food traditions, including Eid al-Fitr: <http://holykitchens.com/>

Ideally, the class would be able to invite a local rabbi and imam, preferably for the same class period, to discuss these food rituals and how they are lived out in each specific religious community in your area. Be mindful of your school and/or district's guidelines regarding guest speakers, and make sure to inform speakers of both the purpose of the visit, as well as the specific focus of this project.

Final Assignment:

As a final product, students will prepare and present a reflection on "sacred feasting" as an aspect of lived religion. This reflection may take diverse forms, though the best reflections will contain both a written and a tangible piece; student creativity in this area is encouraged.

Questions for reflection:

What is the purpose of this meal within the tradition? Based on the readings, videos, recipes, and foods you encountered, how has your understanding of how religion is lived changed? What are sacred meals/foods in your tradition? In other traditions represented in your area? What aspects of the meal are sacred? What are secular? What consistencies do you see among the meals you observed? What secular aspects of the meals are cultural, rather than religious? How do you know? How does the fact that you were unable to attend these meals impact your understanding of their roles within each religion? What aspects of sacred feasting did the guest speakers especially illuminate for you? If you do have the opportunity to attend a Seder and/or Eid al-Fitr feast, on which aspects will you focus? Why?

One Last Twist:

Once all projects are presented and discussed within the class, have students read and discuss the following article, "Eating my Religion: Finding Faith in Food" (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/print/54476>), which is written from a non-religious perspective. If time allows, a seminar discussion on the sacred and religious dimensions of eating, in light of student projects and this article, might prove fruitful.

Opportunities for enrichment:

Explore another sacred feast in a different tradition (eg, The Feast of the Seven Fishes, the breaking of various ritual fasts in Hinduism, specific feasts for the Buddha's birthday, etc), attend one or more of these meals at the appropriate time of year and interview participants afterward, comparing that experience with the research done here, prepare and bring some foods important to the sacred feasts discussed in this project.

(some Passover recipes:

<http://www.foodnetwork.com/epackage/passover/index.html>)

(some Eid recipes: <http://www.theeid.com/eid-ul-fitr-recipes/>)

These opportunities for enrichment are up to the teacher's discretion and the time constraints of the class.

***For information about the
Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers,
and many more resources to enrich your teaching on
religious diversity, see:***

www.religiousworldsnyc.org