



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

OMG(s)!: Exploring Contemporary Polytheistic Religions

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Last year, we studied how early Western culture came to be dominated by monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—beginning with the founding of Rome. In addition, we also considered the rise of Hinduism and Buddhism in India and Southeast Asia. There, we said that Buddhism has *no* gods and that Hinduism, unlike other “major” world religions, is sometimes classified as believing in just one god with many incarnations and sometimes as holding firm to polytheism. Let’s complicate that a bit, shall we?

This year, we rewound the clock and learned about the societies and polytheistic religions of Egypt and Greece. But that took us even further back in time. So here’s the question: are there any contemporary polytheistic religions? You might have guessed that the answer is, “Yes!” There are polytheists living in New York. Today. Like, right now.

Some Contemporary Polytheistic Religions

Shinto: The native religion of Japan that dates back to the 8th Century CE. It is a set of practices, to be carried out thoroughly, to establish a connection between present day Japan and its ancient past. Those who practice Shinto express their diverse beliefs through a standard language and practice, adopting a similar style in dress and ritual, dating from around the time of the 700s.



Santería: A religion of West African and Caribbean (particularly Cuba) descent that has been influenced by Roman Catholicism and Native American traditions and finds its roots in the period of American slavery. Santería does not have one central statement of beliefs for its religious practices; it is understood in terms of its rituals and ceremonies that take place in what is known as a house-temple. It is more formally known as the Regla de Ocha (the law of the orichas) and focuses on the worship of deities known as orichas or santos (thus santería).



Taoism: A Chinese philosophy dating back to the 6th Century BCE based on the writings of Lao-tzu that advocates humility and religious piety and living in harmony with the *Tao*. The term *Tao* means "way", "path" or "principle". Taoist propriety and ethics may vary depending on the particular school, but in general tends to emphasize "action through non-action," "naturalness", simplicity, spontaneity, and the Three Treasures—compassion, moderation, and humility.

Mahayana Buddhism: One of three main existing branches of Buddhism that originated in India. "Mahāyāna" refers to the path of seeking complete enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. This branch of Buddhism has sometimes been considered polytheistic because increased devotion to the Buddha grew into a belief in many celestial beings—notably Amitabha, the Buddha of light, and Avalokiteshvara (feminized and known as Guanyin in China and Kannon in Japan), the bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) of compassion. Though these beings are, in theory, unified, some scholars and believers note their separation as independent deities.

Vodou: A religion practiced primarily by Haitians, who consider themselves "servants of the spirit", that began in the time of American slavery. Vodouists believe in a distant and unknowable creator god. As this god does not intercede in human affairs, vodouists direct their worship toward spirits, each responsible for a different aspect of life. In order to keep balance in their lives, vodouists cultivate personal relationships with the spirits through the presentation of offerings, the creation of personal altars and devotional objects, and participation in ceremonies of music, dance, and possession.



Hinduism: The predominant religion of India that grew out of the Aryan religious tradition 2,500 years ago. Hinduism includes a wide spectrum of laws and prescriptions of "daily morality" based on the notion of karma, dharma, and societal norms. It also famously ascribed to the caste system. Hinduism is tricky, because Hindus and scholars are still in dialogue about whether it is mono- or polytheistic. The issue lies in whether its many gods are all really a part of the supreme god, Brahman, or whether they are separate entities.

Assignment

You'll work in groups of three to investigate one of these religions and find out about their rituals and practices and how, or if, that religion intersects with their everyday lives.

1. First, we'll spend a couple of days researching these religions in order to gain background on them. I've set aside texts from the library, and we'll have laptops available to access online sources. (Remember the skills we honed during last year's research paper: make sure that you're verifying your online sources and relying on the databases RSS has made available.)
2. As a group, you will use your research to develop a series of questions that will help you further explore your religion. You'll pose these questions to both a clergyperson from your religion and a member of that faith (that I've found for you). Before you conduct your phone interviews, I will approve your lists of questions and provide any suggestions to help your interview go smoothly. Remember that your goal is to discover how this polytheistic religion is practiced today in New York and in what ways that religion influences the lives of its believers.
3. You will conduct your interview with the clergyperson and transcribe it. Your clergyperson will also put you in touch with the member of his or her faith. Again, you'll interview this person and transcribe that interview.
4. As a group, you will decide how to *creatively* present the information you've learned about your religion. For instance, you might create a five- or seven-minute documentary that explores the basic beliefs and practices of your religion and then conveys the information you gleaned from your interviews. Make sure you check with me before you finalize your plan for this presentation.
5. Each group will give their presentations in class. Each group will be graded on collaboration, content, and creativity, as well on the questions it develops and the transcriptions of its interviews.

Pre-Planning

What religion are you researching? _____

Who are your group members? _____

Use the space below to write down your initial questions about the religion as you begin to discuss it with your group. These questions will help guide your research.

***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:***

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