



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Visualizing Lived Religion: Placing Doctrine in Context

Thomas Sharp, Holland Hall School, Tulsa, OK

Abstract

I teach sixth grade social studies in an independent Episcopal school. The course explores a narrative history of the Atlantic world beginning with the European Age of Exploration, particularly examining the theme of colonialism as it unfolds in Latin America/the Caribbean and Africa. The content of the course moves between the historical narrative and current global issues that, in some way, tie into that narrative. A major goal of the course is building global citizenship and empathy among the students. The course includes a stand-alone unit on world religions with the goal of attaining a basic degree of religious literacy and understanding the religious components of the historical narrative and current issues we discuss. Another main objective is helping students develop a respectful understanding of and empathy toward diverse religious traditions. This project articulates the beginning point of the unit on world religions by starting with the concept of lived religion. Because sixth graders need to develop the basic content knowledge of major religious traditions as a starting point, it is important to precede any discussion of the "basic facts" of any religion with the explanation that each tradition is characterized by astounding internal diversity. Using this preliminary discussion as a starting point, students can then move into the discussion of each faith tradition understanding the nuances that there is no such thing as a "pure" example of any tradition.

How can we move beyond a monolithic treatment of religious traditions when introducing religious studies to middle school students? This is the main question behind this project. The NEH Summer Institute, "Religious Worlds of New York," has emphasized the concept of "lived religion" as an alternative approach to the more traditional model of focusing primarily on basic beliefs and practices as a way to learn about religious traditions. Rather than treating these traditions as monolithic or unchanging, the lived religion or cultural studies approach sees religion as a dynamic, constructed reality in the lives of practitioners that is situated in a particular historical context and, therefore, infinitely diverse in its expression.

The challenge I attempt to undertake with this project is how to communicate essential information about the world's most influential faith traditions to middle school students in a way that acknowledges the staggering internal diversity of human experiences of these traditions.

I have been persuaded by many of the readings and speakers in this institute of the value and need for the lived religion approach. In particular, Dr. Ali Asani, one of the foremost scholars of Islam in the United States, argued that treating religions monolithically is a cause of ignorance and dehumanization, which of course lies behind many of the religious conflicts we are experiencing in today's world. Clearly, there is an imperative to teach from a lived religion or cultural studies approach given my overall course goals of global citizenship, empathy and respect. However, in my context teaching sixth grade in a relatively religiously homogeneous community, I am starting from "square one" in terms of introducing these faith traditions for the first time. There is a clear tension between the task of learning the "basic facts" about each tradition and understanding religious life in context of the lived religion approach.

In thinking through how to alleviate this tension, I propose a new way of framing how I introduce the study of world religions for my sixth graders. Instead of launching into learning about history, beliefs, practices, geography, etc. for each religion, I will begin by introducing the concept of lived religion as a way of demonstrating the internal diversity of each faith tradition and the enormous complexity of factors affecting its expression in the "real world" where we live. In short, I want my students to approach the study of each tradition with the caveat that there is no such thing as the "pure" expression of that tradition.

What I propose in this project is a visual model or template for thinking about lived religion. I will use the graphic resource I have created here to explain the concept of lived religion and to caution against projecting the basic facts of any tradition onto any individual practitioner, faith community, denomination, or entire religion. I will use this concept as a way of setting the tone for our study of religion as one of what Robert Orsi calls "radical empiricism" - that my students can approach the study of each tradition as a detached observer rather than a devotee, expert, or theological critic. This will allow us to explore the basic facts of each tradition in the context that these facts have no "pure" expression in the real world. Then, as we examine real examples of lived religion in our community through field trips and ethnographic research, students can explore questions surrounding the extent to which the examples they have encountered reflect the basic traditions we have discussed.

In addition to my emphasis on lived religion as an alternative approach to understanding religious studies, I will include some discussion of how the study of religion ties into the broader theme of colonialism, a major theme of our sixth grade course. The very idea of "religion" is itself a cultural construct of westerners imposed on nonwestern contexts (Asani, Orsi, Paden, Diner, Hawley, and others we have read or heard from as guest speakers in this institute have emphasized this point). This graphic will help me return the discussion to the theme of colonizer and colonized as we study religions by looking at colonialism as one component of the historical context through which we must filter our study of religion as a lived phenomenon.

Finally, while I did not have time to do this for this project, I plan to include this entire explanation in a YouTube video. I have most recently taught world religions by introducing content as a "flipped" unit - where content introduction takes place on YouTube videos that students watch for homework, and what is typically assigned as homework (processing, debriefing, writing, making sense of content) takes place in the class period at school.

I hope that through this careful framing of our discussion of the idea of lived religion, my students will understand that the basic facts of the traditions are an important starting point for understanding religions in the world today, but never are they representative of the religious reality of lived experience.

Bibliography

Asani, Ali. Lecture on Introduction to American Islam. "Religious Worlds of New York" NEH Summer Institute, July 20, 2012.

Asani, Ali. *An Infidel of Love: Exploring Muslim Understandings of Islam* (Harvard U. Press, forthcoming).

Diner, Hasia. Lecture on Introduction to American Judaism. "Religious Worlds of New York" NEH Summer Institute, July 19, 2012.

Diana Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in Hinduism* (Columbia U. Press, 1985).

Hawley, John Stratton. Lecture on Introduction to American Hinduism. "Religious Worlds of New York" NEH Summer Institute, July 18, 2012.

Orsi, Robert. "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton U. Press, 1997), pp. 3-21.

Orsi, Robert. "Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In?" in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2003), pp. 169-174.

Paden, William. *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Beacon Press, 1988).

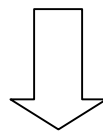
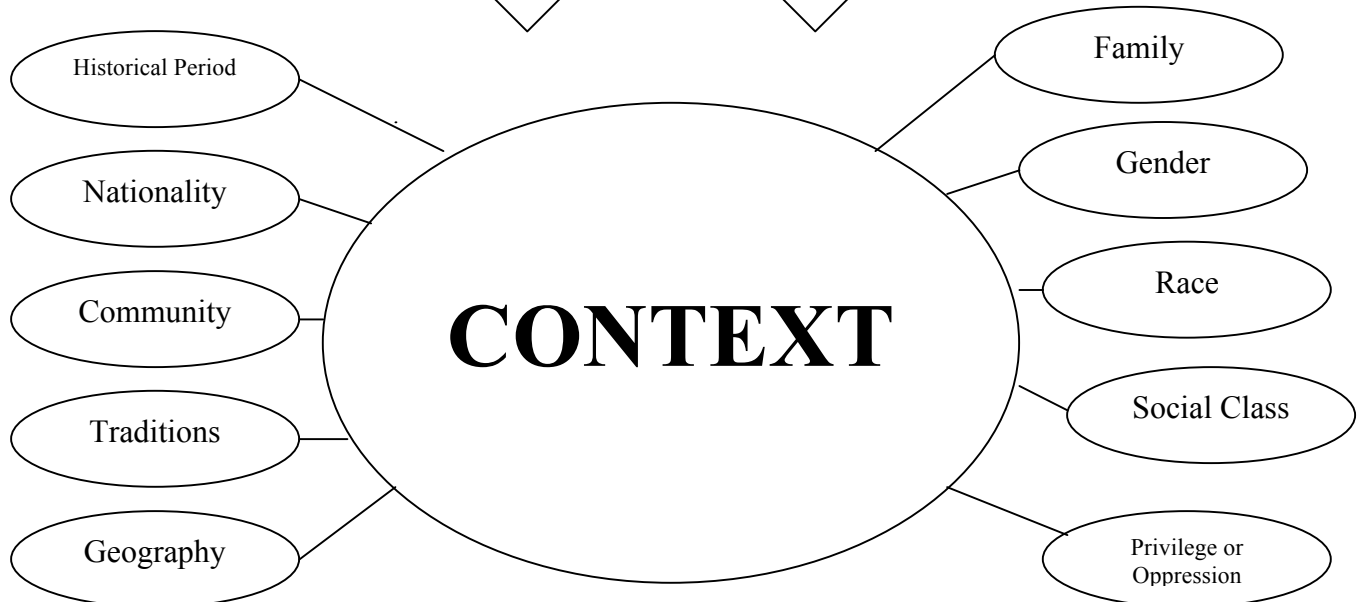
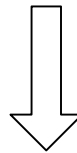
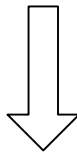
***For information about the
Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers,
and many more resources to enrich your teaching on
religious diversity, see:***

www.religiousworldsnyc.org

Lived Religion: A Graphic Model for Studying Religious Traditions

RELIGIOUS TRADITION:
"Basic Facts" - Origins/Founder,
Geography, Beliefs, Practices, Texts,
Statistics, Main Groups/Sects

Filters through



**INDIVIDUAL'S LIVED
EXPERIENCE OF THIS
TRADITION**

Contextualized again by relating
to other followers, local faith
communities, groups,
denominations, or sects