



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Students Teaching Syncretic Religions

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Abstract:

To conclude an introductory unit to three of the major religious worlds, Christianity, Buddhism and Islam, I will ask my students explore the result of the interaction among religious traditions and ideologies. Some sample 'syncretic' traditions might include Vodou, Santeria, the Nation of Islam, Zen Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism. In small groups, students will need to research their chosen (or assigned) tradition with the purpose of preparing a 40-minute class session where they will teach and introductory lesson about their topic. While I hope this project will teach the students practical research skills, teamwork skills, and presentation skills; content-wise I hope this project will begin to help students see the diversity within traditions, role of culture and history to shape the development of traditions, and begin to get a sense of the lived reality of religious expression. This project will serve as the midterm assessment for the students, so I will expect them to demonstrate their understanding of the material we have covered in class thus far. It will also lay the groundwork for our transition to study the relationship between globalization and religion in the second half of the course.

School and Demographics:

I teach at a private, boarding school in New England. While the socio-economic status of the student body can vary, the students are generally from the middle to upper class economically. We have a number of international students as well. Class size averages between 12-14. The course is taught in a block schedule, so each class period is 80 minutes.

This serves as a required course for a handful of four year students who have opted to postpone taking their sophomore level world religion requirement. It can also meet the religious studies and philosophy requirement for new juniors and PGs.

Relationship to Broader Curriculum:

My course is an introduction to world religion for seniors and juniors, which is framed around the concept of globalization. In the course students will be introduced both to how religion is a force in globalization and how religion is impacted by globalization. This project would conclude a larger set of sections that introduced the three focus religions: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. These ‘crash course’ sections will have provided students with basic knowledge about the founder, sacred text, history, and basic beliefs. This project would serve to help students see both the lived element to religion as well as the role of culture to shape and adapt religion.

Basic Goals:

Teach students to work in groups
Teach basic research skills
Give practice at public speaking
Foster creativity
Explore the concept of lived religion
Explore the relationship between culture and religion
Explore how religions change over time and in response to culture, politics, etc.

Introductory Readings: (today homework – see above)

For this project I will give each group a handout of readings that will introduce them to the topic and orient them in preparation for their research.

- Nation of Islam – Edward Curtis, “Peril and Possibility: Muslim Life in the United States” in *Islam in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. R.M. Feener (ABC-CLIO, 2004), pp. 288-302
- Haitian Vodou – Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Beacon Press, 1995), chapter 2.
- Cuban American Santeria - Joseph Murphy, *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Beacon Press, 1995), chapter 4.
- Zen Buddhism – Jeffery Brodd *World Religions* (St. Mary’s Press, 2009), chapter 9
- Tibet Buddhism – TBA

Midterm Project Handout

Purpose:

Over the last six-seven weeks, this course has introduced you to three different religious traditions. Through this introduction you have developed an understanding of the basic beliefs and practices of these traditions. You have also begun to understand the diversity within traditions and development of these traditions over time. This project will ask you to apply and expand upon that understanding through an exploration of how Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam each interact with another major religious tradition or ideology. Through this process you will develop a greater understanding of lived religion, as well as an understanding the complex relationship between religion and cultural context.

Assignment:

In groups of three you will research one tradition that represents a merging, syncretism, or reaction of one or more religious traditions or ideologies. It will be the responsibility of your group to become ‘experts’ on this tradition so that you are prepared to teach 40-minute class session on the tradition.

Possible topics:

Nation of Islam, Zen Buddhism, Vodou, Santeria, and Tibetan Buddhism,

Research questions:

The following questions should help guide you as you begin your research and prepare for your class session:

- What religious or ideological traditions interacted to produce your tradition?
- What is the geographical location(s) of your tradition? How might this impact the development of your tradition?
- What was the historical context for the development of this tradition?
- What are the beliefs and practices of this tradition?
- How do the beliefs and practices of this tradition reflect the tradition(s) it derives from?
- How has this tradition developed over time?
- In what ways can this tradition be considered a ‘sect’ or ‘sub-sect’ of either Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam? In what ways can it be considered a separate or unique tradition?
- How does this tradition help you understand the concept of globalization?

Classroom Lesson Expectations:

You are meant to teach your topic to the class in an interactive way. Lessons that are merely long lectures or presentations will not be as successful as class sessions, which engage the students interactively throughout the allotted time. Thus you want to balance instruction with activity and creativity. Possible ideas include: writing a skit, making up a game, using a Prezi/Powerpoint, creating/finding a case study, or developing something new. Be sure to consider time when planning since you only have 40 minutes to present.

A successful presentation will be one that appropriately balances instruction with class involvement. It will use time wisely and appropriately, not going too long or too short (40 minutes is the maximum, but you have a three minute window of wiggle-room). When presenting, you should speak clearly and in an organized and professional way on the topic. Creativity and effort should be apparent throughout the presentation. While notecards are permitted, you should use them appropriately and not 'read' their information to the class. Group members should contribute equally, and thus it is imperative that each group member participates in the lesson. The group should also be prepared to answer questions on their topic.

Assigning Homework:

Each group should also develop a 30-45 minute homework assignment that will introduce your peers to your topic and lay the groundwork for class. Your group needs to be thoughtful as to what you assign so that it will supplement the lesson well, but not be too long as to overwhelm your peers (they will theoretically have two assignments since two groups present each day). Homework should be given during the class before the group will present.

Homework assignments should lay the groundwork for the presentation. You should assume that your peers have read the homework and thus use it as a jumping off point to begin your class.

Group and Self Evaluation:

Write a one-page self and group evaluation (Times New Roman, size 12 font, 1 in margins). For this paper you should analyze your participation in the group as well as the roles played by the other group members. The goal here is not to 'grade' your group members, but to reflect on how you worked as a team and how you worked individually to help your group. You should include what worked as a group and what might be improved.

Timetable:

Today: Chose groups and topic

Homework: read the provided text on your tradition

Day 1: Library research, turn in a research bibliography by the end of class with at least 4 sources (1 must be a library source – book, magazine or database)

Homework: at the beginning of class submit your initial, but thorough answers to the first four research-questions and create a list of 5 further research questions

Day 2: Library research, begin creating an outline of your class session; in the last half hour of class I will meet with each group for 5-10 minutes to discuss your project and provide feedback

Homework: work on the project

Day 3: Classroom work-day, research should be completed and each group should be preparing for the class lesson

Homework: finish project, complete assigned homework by the other groups (where applicable)

Day 4-5: Presentations, each student is responsible to take notes over the other group's presentation in preparation for a test

Homework: complete assigned homework by the other groups (where applicable), Prepare for exam and write your self-evaluation to submit with your exam

Day 6: Exam

Grading:

Presentation:	75 points
*Individual Presenting skills:	10 points
Homework Assignment	15 points
Group/Self Evaluation	10 points
Exam	50 points
Total Points	160 points

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