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Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Introduction to World Religions

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Abstract and Context

This project offers a detailed lesson plan with PowerPoint slides for the first class meeting of a World Religions unit. It was designed for use at Cristo Rey New York High School, a Catholic school serving low-income students. This course is mandatory for all students to take their senior year. This course meets for 70 minutes three times a week, being taught from the ending of November to May. Prior to this unit, students would have taken the 7 Sacraments from September to November and have a basis of what is sacred to them and to their classmates. Students will generally not receive homework but will be graded on work that is done in class. World Religions will be designed to introduce students to the concept of the academic study of religion, and the concept of “lived religion.”

PLEASE NOTE: The PowerPoint slides referenced throughout this project are included below. You can also [click here to download the file from Google Drive](#).

Introduction activity (~15 mins)

Early in the lesson, I want to expose my students to the idea that not everyone has the same experience as them. Although they would have spent a few months together in class, it is very important to realize that people’s life experiences and cultures may shape the way they look and think about things. During this activity students will look at three different images. They will have about 1-2 minutes to look at the picture (see PowerPoint below) and write down what comes to mind when they see the image. After all three images have been shown, students will turn to their neighbors and discuss what they wrote, why they wrote it & what influenced their answers. With this activity, students will see how even when they are shown the same picture everyone has a different answer based on their lived experience.

Why study World Religions? (~25 mins)

During this portion of the lesson I will ask my students the broad question *Why should we study World Religions?* After a few students have answered the question, I will show them a map of the different religions of the world (see PowerPoint below). This is meant to broadcast the religious diversity of the world. I will move on and show the religious makeup of New York City. I have several graphs which show different aspects of what being religious/ practicing religion looks like. I do this to show how even though the majority of New York adults are religious, they don't necessarily attend a religious ceremony every week. With this point, I am going to show them that being religious doesn't mean attending service every week. There is so much diversity in the way people practice their faith. On the next slides (see PowerPoint below), I have places of worship from some of the religions we are going to discuss. These places of worship are in the vicinity of the school. The purpose of showing the students these charts and these places of worship is to show how diverse New York City is when it comes to religion. It is also meant to help students with the idea of "lived religion" because it will show even in our own neighborhood there is religious diversity. This will reinforce the idea that learning world religions is important to them and their community.

Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant (~25 mins)

During this activity students will be divided into groups of 4-5. They will all read the parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant (included below). Individually, they will answer the questions that are given to them. These questions will also be found on the PowerPoint. Students will then come back together in their groups and they will share their answers with each other. As a group they then have to all come up with one answer to each question. Students will then share their answers with the class and we will discuss what is being said.

Wrap up (~5 mins)

During this time students will be able to wrap up the main ideas of the first day of lesson. Students will have an understanding of what was discussed and what are their biggest take away when it comes to this lesson. This will also be a time for clarifying any misconceptions they have or any questions they have. We will also be going over last minute norms on what is expected from students in the classroom during this time.

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, visit www.religiousworldsnyc.org.

Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant

Source: *Udana*, Buddhist Pali Canon

A number of disciples went to the Buddha and said, "Sir, there are living here in Savatthi many wandering hermits and scholars who indulge in constant dispute, some saying that the world is infinite and eternal and others that it is finite and not eternal, some saying that the soul dies with the body and others that it lives on forever, and so forth. What, Sir, would you say concerning them?"

The Buddha answered, "Once upon a time there was a certain raja [prince] who called to his servant and said, 'Come, good fellow, go and gather together in one place all the men of Savatthi who were born blind, and show them an elephant.' 'Very good, sire,' replied the servant, and he did as he was told. He said to the blind men assembled there, 'Here is an elephant,' and to one man he presented the head of the elephant, to another its ears, to another a tusk, to another the trunk, the foot, back, tail, and tuft of the tail, saying to each one that that was the elephant.

"When the blind men had felt the elephant, the raja went to each of them and said to each, 'Well, blind man, have you seen the elephant? Tell me, what sort of thing is an elephant?'

"Thereupon the men who were presented with the head answered, 'Sire, an elephant is like a pot.' And the men who had observed the ear replied, 'An elephant is like a winnowing basket.' Those who had been presented with a tusk said it was a ploughshare. Those who knew only the trunk said it was a plough; others said the body was a granary; the foot, a pillar; the back, a mortar; the tail, a pestle, the tuft of the tail, a brush.

"Then they began to quarrel, shouting, 'Yes, it is!' 'No, it is not!' 'An elephant is not that!' 'Yes, it's like that!' and so on, till they came to blows over the matter.

"Brethren, the raja was delighted with the scene.

"Just so are these preachers and scholars holding various views blind and unseeing. In their ignorance they are by nature quarrelsome, wrangling, and disputatious, each maintaining reality is thus and thus."

Then the Exalted One [The Buddha] rendered this meaning by uttering this verse of uplift,

O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim
For preacher and monk the honored name!
For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.
Such folk see only one side of a thing.



Intro to World Religion

Objective

Students will get an introduction to World Religion

Do Now

Students will look at the images and write down what comes to their mind.

Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



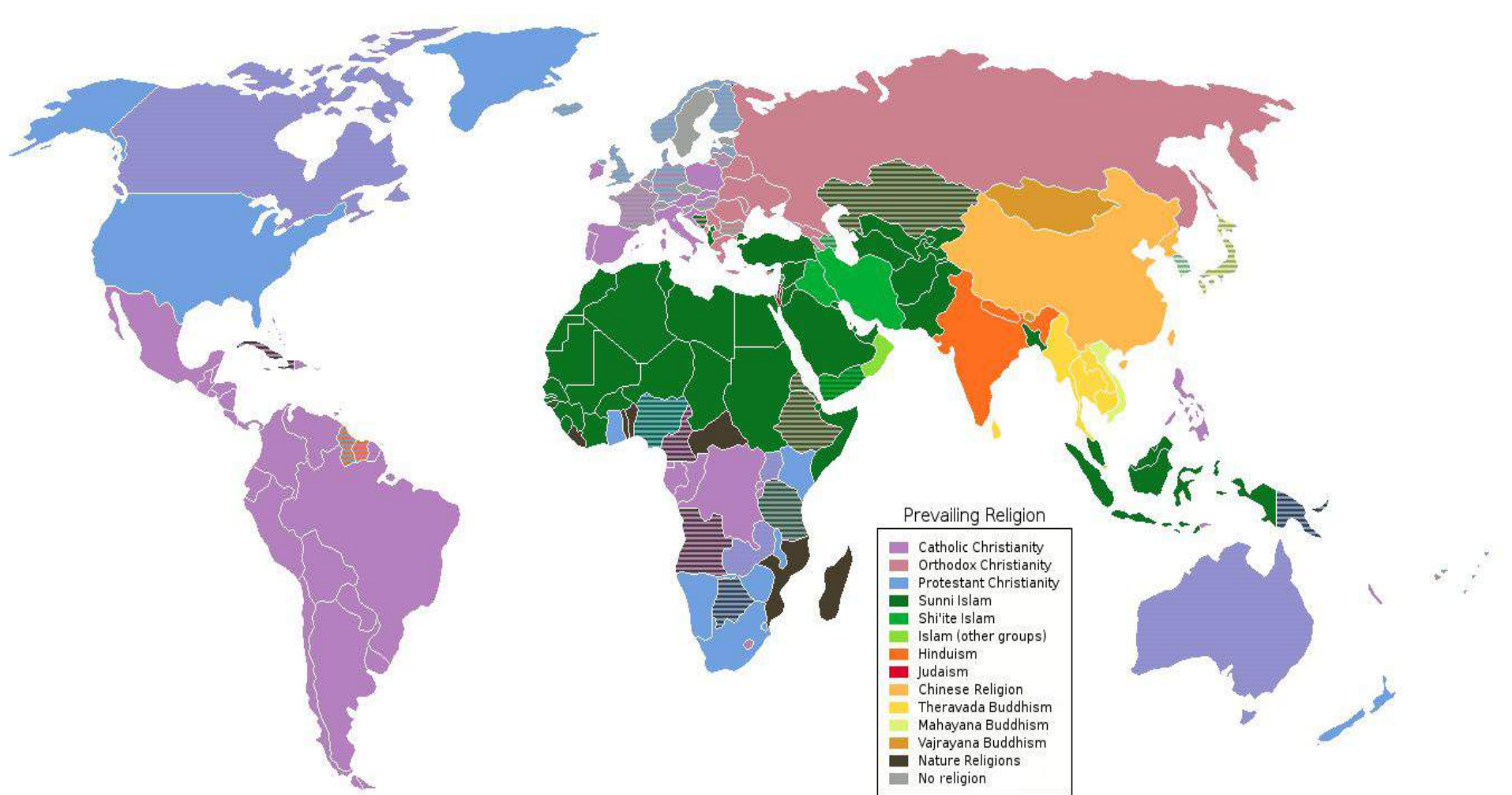
Discuss in your group:

***What* did you write?**

***Why* did you write down what you
did?**

***What* influenced you?**

Why study World Religion?



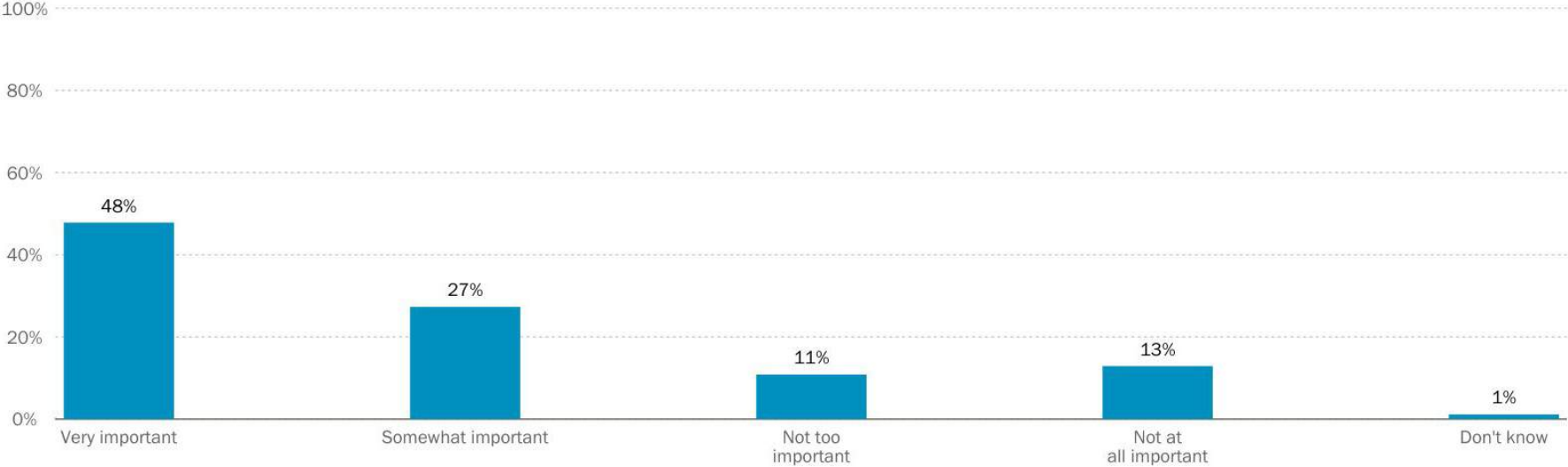
Is there a problem with this graph?

Religious composition of adults in the New York City metro area



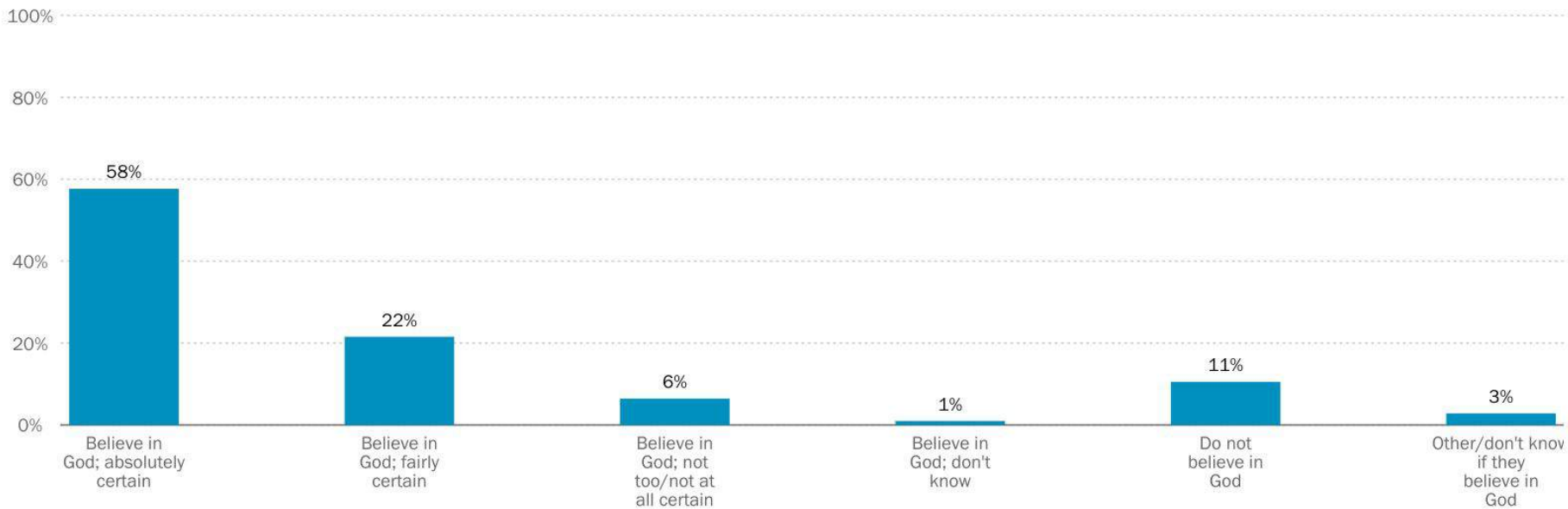
Importance of religion in one's life among adults in the New York City metro area

% of adults in the New York City metro area who say religion is...



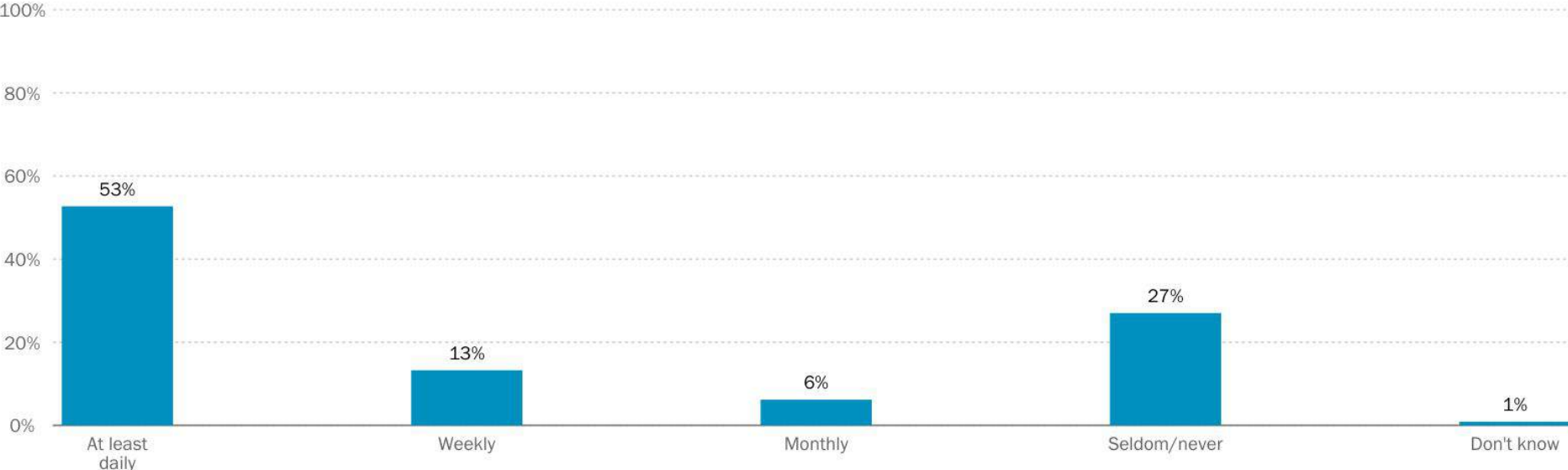
Belief in God among adults in the New York City metro area

% of adults in the New York City metro area who say they...



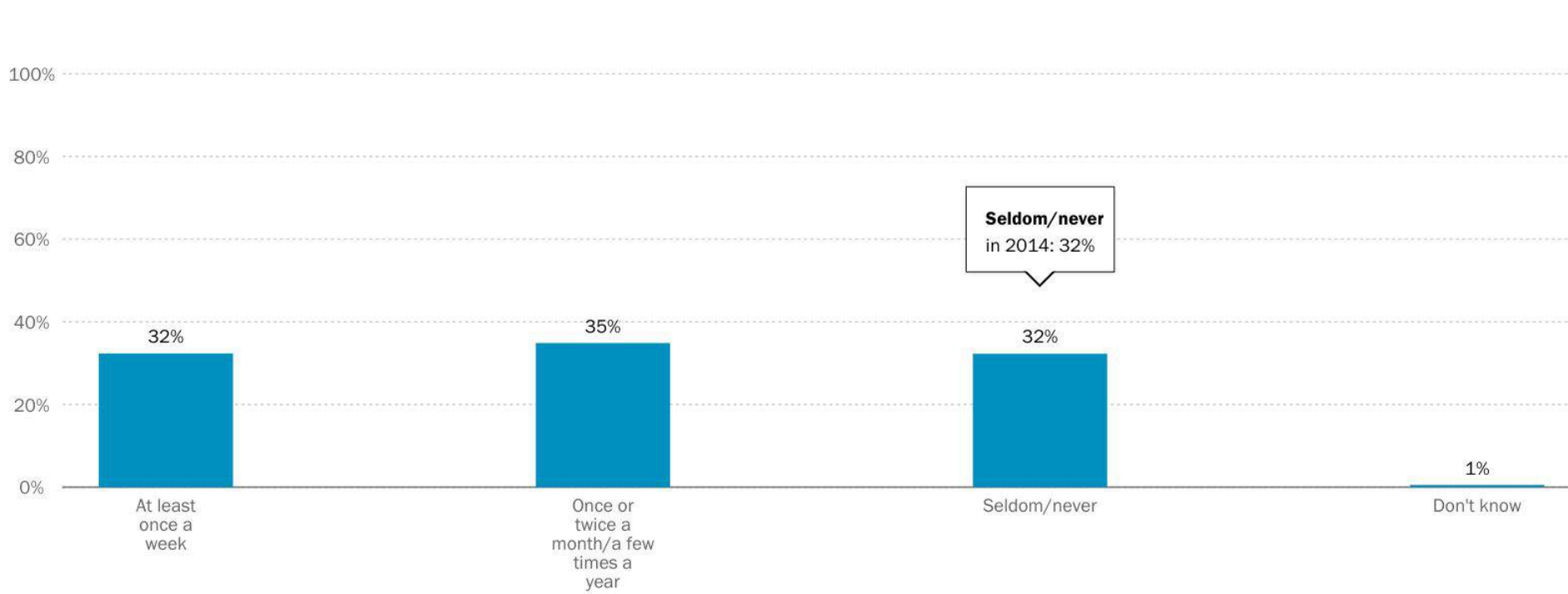
Frequency of prayer among adults in the New York City metro area

% of adults in the New York City metro area who pray...



Attendance at religious services among adults in the New York City metro area

% of adults in the New York City metro area who attend religious services...



**What do these charts tell us about what we think of
religion in NYC?**

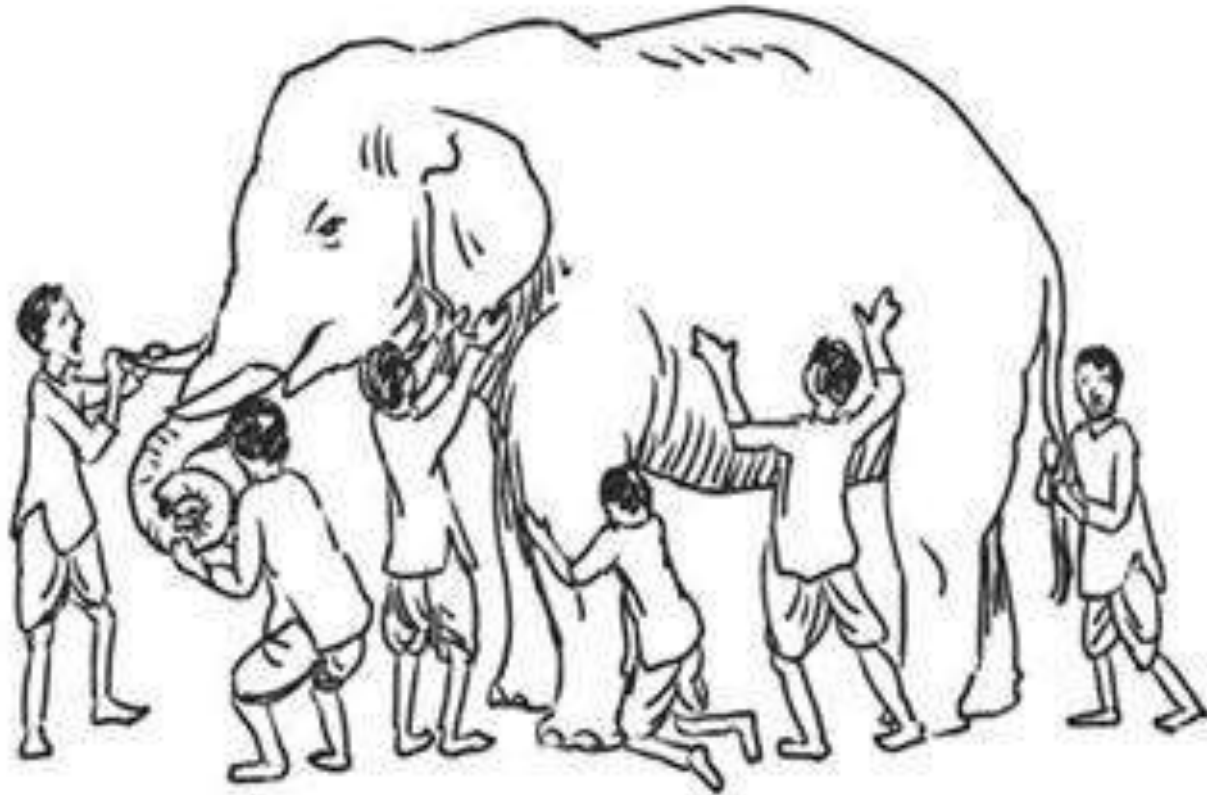
**How do you know what you know about your own
religion?**

In our own neighborhood- Places of worship

- Catholic Church:
 - St. Cecilia-Next door
- Hindu Temples:
 - Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York- 94th St
- Buddhist Temples:
 - Chogyesa Zen Temple of New York-96th St
- Jewish Synagogues
 - B'nai Jeshurun-86th St
 - Ansche Chesed- 100th St
 - Congregation Ramath Orah- 10th St
- Islamic Mosques
 - Islamic Cultural Center of New York (ICCNy)-97th St
 - The Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood-113th St
 - Annur Islamic Center-111st



The Parable of the Blind Men & the Elephant



Parable of the Blind Men & the Elephant

- **In your group discuss the following questions. One person should write down your answers:**
 - What did the blind men learn from the Rajah? What does the storyteller want us to learn from this tale?
 - Do problems like this happen in real life? Think of times when arguments or misunderstandings have occurred because people saw situations from different points of view. Describe what happened.
 - How does it feel when another person doesn't "see" something the way you do? How can you address those differences in perceptions?
 - Does the story give you any ideas about how these problems can be solved? What are some steps you can take to understand why another person doesn't see things the way you do?

Takeaway

- Religions are very internally diverse
 - Not everyone from the same religion thinks the same thing
 - Not everyone practices religions the same way
- You will not be comfortable with every religion
 - There are going to be times when you might come across a belief a religion has that doesn't align with yours but you must remember to be respectful
- Religions are embedded in culture
 - Culture and religion go hand in hand

Reminders

- In this classroom we will be respectful of other traditions and cultures
- I will not tolerate any negative comment about any religion
- We are going into this with an open mind