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UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

Poetic Voices of Religious Identity

Gillian Steinberg, SAR High School, Bronx, NY

“What do they know of England, who only England know?”

-Rudyard Kipling

Abstract

This project aims to increase students’ understanding of lived religion by reading a range of poetic voices and posing complex philosophical questions about understanding self and other. The poets come from a variety of religious traditions and, within those traditions, demonstrate diverse experiences, emotions, and reactions. Through analysis and discussion, this project guides students away from overly narrow or “textbook” views of religion and helps them focus on lived experiences. In doing so, it also helps them understand the nature of literary study, which complicates rather than flattens the vast diversity of human lives.

Educational Context

This project was designed for students at a high-achieving Modern Orthodox Jewish high school. While the English classes are not tracked, students across levels tend to work up to the higher levels of student performance and are willing to be challenged. For students who genuinely struggle with reading and writing, the assignments can be modified.

Because most of my students live in a relatively insular environment -- coming primarily from Orthodox neighborhoods in Riverdale, Teaneck, Englewood, New Rochelle, White Plains, Great Neck, etc. -- they often have profound insights into contemporary Jewish life but very little knowledge of other religions. An expansive project such as this one, presented in 9th grade

alongside a history curriculum that exposes students to world religions' developments and foundational beliefs, can expand their understanding of the world and the subtlety with which they understand people outside the Orthodox Jewish world. Ideally, it also helps them to reflect on their own religion and culture by gaining contextual awareness, as the Kipling quote above suggests.

This project will comprise half of a five- or six-week poetry unit that culminates with each student producing a portfolio, which includes multiple poetry analyses, poems, and a self-evaluation of each student's evolving relationship with the genre.

Learning Goals

- To understand both intimate and public, and both externally and internally diverse, religious experiences.
- To recognize and be aware of insider/outsider status as we read, and how the reader's perspective inevitably (but not necessarily problematically) shapes interpretation.
- To gain insight into the categories of belief, behavior, and belonging that reflect individuals' lived religion.
- To express their own sense of lived religion, in their lives and others, without judgment or oversimplified compartmentalization.

The following pages map out 12 class periods in the unit, with poems and discussion questions for each class, and student writing prompts for some classes.

Following this outline of the unit, you will find the full texts of all referenced poems.

PART ONE: LIVED (RELIGIOUS) EXPERIENCES IN VERSE

Days One and Two:

Jim Daniels' "Speech Class"

(<http://childrenspoetry.blogspot.com/2007/04/poetry-break-speech-class-for-joe-by.html>)

Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays"

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46461/those-winter-sundays>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How do we read poetry?
 - Read by the punctuation, not by the line breaks.
 - Ask yourself who is speaking, to whom, and about what?
 - Find the narrative, even in lyric poems.
 - Try to remain open to others' words even when they might feel alienating or foreign to you. Remember that someone else's beliefs and experiences aren't a comment on your beliefs and experiences.
- How does poetry allow us access to people's lived experiences and the lenses through which they view the world and themselves?
- How do belief, behavior, and belonging function in our lives? What does each of these poems tell us about those three areas of life?

Day Three:

"Oranges" by Gary Soto

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=35513>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Belief, behavior, and belonging: what does this poem tell us about the speaker's interactions with these three areas?
- What is lived religion, and how is it different from understanding orthodoxy or orthopraxy?
- What's the distinction between understanding someone's demographic -- religious or otherwise -- and understanding that person's life?

PART TWO: TELLING (RELIGIOUS) STORIES

Day Four:

“Kneeling” by R. S. Thomas

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48946/kneeling-56d22a97b5917>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How does this poem make you feel? Why?
- Can you imagine a different kind of person, with different life experiences, feeling a different way about it?
- If yes, what does that tell us about the nature of the reading experience?
- What diction choices highlight the speaker’s faith and religious experience?

Day Five:

“Some Keep the Sabbath” by Emily Dickinson

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52138/some-keep-the-sabbath-going-to-church-236>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How does this poem make you feel? Why?
- Can you understand Dickinson’s sentiments about formalized prayer?
- Can you understand Dickinson’s sentiments about nature?

WRITING PROMPT:

- Write a style parody from your own perspective of “Some Keep the Sabbath.”

Day Six:

“Different Ways to Pray” by Naomi Shihab Nye

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48595/different-ways-to-pray>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What are some of the ways to pray, according to the poem?
- What are some of the ways to pray in your own life?

WRITING PROMPT:

- Add a piece onto Nye's poem. In your section, focus on telling a story -- your own or an imagined one -- and use evocative language and sensory detail as Nye does.

Day Seven:

"Autobiography" by Kazeem Ali

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54255/autobiography-56d23464e0446>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Which line speaks to you? Why?
- If none do, why not?
- Do we need to know more about his life to understand this poem?
- Would you have a different interpretation of the poem if the poet looked different or had a different name? Why or why not?
- What might you title this poem if you were choosing a title?

PART THREE: WHAT DO WE KNOW? WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW?

Day Eight:

"Monastery Nights" by Chase Twichell

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48727/monastery-nights>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What do you think the speaker is trying to say about himself and his experience of religion?
- What religion is he talking about? What do you know about it?
- How do you know what you think you know about this religion?

- What is significant about the speaker's focus on his religious failures? Do you think a poem about religious success is more or less effective than one about religious insufficiency?

Day Nine:

"The Legend" by Garrett Hongo

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48947/the-legend-56d22a98239de>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Can you tell what's happening in the poem's narrative?
- What outside information do you need to understand this poem and the story it tells?
- How does Mark Jarman's interpretation (after the poem, below) help you follow Hongo's meaning?
- Now that you've read a summary of Descartes's religious philosophy, do you agree or disagree with Jarman's interpretation?
- What do you think the poem is saying about belief and spirituality?

Days Ten and Eleven:

"Baal Teshuvah at the Mikvah" by Yehoshua November

(https://www.torahcafe.com/yehoshua-november/poetry-reading-baal-teshuvah-at-the-mikvah-video_b2323bfe7.html)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Is this poem meaningful to you? How so, or why not?
- Can you imagine reading this poem as an outsider to Jewish culture, language, and tradition? What would you understand? What would you not understand?
- Even if someone had access to all of the definitions and technical insights that would allow them to understand this poem, how would being outside the tradition change a reader's reaction to the poem?
- Within the Jewish community, would you feel differently about the poem if you were baal teshuva (became Orthodox as an adult) or were raised Orthodox yourself?
- What does this difference in insider/outsider reading status suggest to you about your ability to fully understand any literature at all?

WRITING PROMPT:

- Choose an experience from your own life and write about it in two ways, one for an insider audience and one for an outsider audience. This can be a religious or other experience; the work needn't be written in poetic form.

Day Twelve:

“Poem without End” by Yehuda Amichai

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56282/poem-without-an-end>)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is this poem saying?
- How does what the poem SAYS differ from what the poem DOES?
- What do its circular references to the speaker, a synagogue, and a museum say about the speaker's view of himself? Feel free to speculate even if you aren't sure.
- What's the difference between reading a poem in translation and in the original language?
- How does the experience of translation parallel the experience of reading from within and from outside a religious tradition?

***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.***

Speech Class (for Joe)

by Jim Daniels

We were outcasts—
you with your stutters,
me with my slurring—
and that was plenty for a friendship.

When we left class to go to the therapist
we hoped they wouldn't laugh—
took turns reminding the teacher:
"Me and Joe have to go to shpeesh clash now,"
or "M-m-me and J-Jim ha-have to go to
s-s-speech now."

Mrs. Clark, therapist, was also god, friend, mother.
Once she took us to the zoo on a field trip:
"Aw, ya gonna go look at the monkeys?"
"Maybe they'll teach you how to talk."
We clenched teeth and went
and felt the sun and fed the animals
and we were a family of broken words.

For years we both tried so hard
and I finally learned
where to put my tongue and how to make the sounds
and graduated,

but the first time you left class without me
I felt that punch in the gut—
I felt like a deserter
and wanted you
to have my voice.

[from *The Place My Words Are Looking For*, poems selected by Paul Janeczko (Bradbury Press, 1990)]

Those Winter Sundays

BY ROBERT HAYDEN

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays" from *Collected Poems of Robert Hayden*, edited by Frederick Glaysher. Copyright ©1966 by Robert Hayden. Reprinted with the permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Source: *Collected Poems of Robert Hayden* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1985)

Oranges

BY GARY SOTO

The first time I walked
With a girl, I was twelve,
Cold, and weighted down
With two oranges in my jacket.
December. Frost cracking
Beneath my steps, my breath
Before me, then gone.
As I walked toward
Her house, the one whose
Porch light burned yellow
Night and day, in any weather.
A dog barked at me, until
She came out pulling
At her gloves, face bright
With rouge. I smiled,
Touched her shoulder, and led
Her down the street, across
A used car lot and a line
Of newly planted trees,
Until we were breathing
Before a drugstore. We
Entered, the tiny bell
Bringing a saleslady
Down a narrow aisle of goods.
I turned to the candies
Tiered like bleachers,
And asked what she wanted—
Light in her eyes, a smile

Starting at the corners
Of her mouth. I fingered
A nickel in my pocket,
And when she lifted a chocolate
That cost a dime,
I didn't say anything.
I took the nickel from
My pocket, then an orange,
And set them quietly on
The counter. When I looked up,
The lady's eyes met mine,
And held them, knowing
Very well what it was all
About.

Outside

A few cars hissing past,
Fog hanging like old
Coats between the trees.
I took my girl's hand
In mine for two blocks,
Then released it to let
Her unwrap the chocolate.
I peeled my orange
That was so bright against
The gray of December
That, from a distance,
Someone might have thought
I was making a fire in my hands.

Kneeling

BY R. S. THOMAS

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great rôle. And the audiences
Still; all that close throug
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.

Prompt me, God;

But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

R. S. Thomas, "Kneeling" from *The Collected Later Poems: 1988-2000*. Copyright © 2004 by R. S. Thomas. Reprinted by permission of Bloodaxe Books Ltd.

Source: *The Collected Later Poems: 1988-2000* (Bloodaxe Books, 2004)

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church – (236)

BY EMILY DICKINSON

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
I keep it, staying at Home –
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
I, just wear my Wings –
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I'm going, all along.

Emily Dickinson, "Some keep the Sabbath going to church" from (02138: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,)

Source: *The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by R. W. Franklin* (Harvard University Press, 1999)

Different Ways to Pray

BY NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

There was the method of kneeling,
a fine method, if you lived in a country
where stones were smooth.
The women dreamed wistfully of bleached courtyards,
hidden corners where knee fit rock.
Their prayers were weathered rib bones,
small calcium words uttered in sequence,
as if this shedding of syllables could somehow
fuse them to the sky.

There were the men who had been shepherds so long
they walked like sheep.
Under the olive trees, they raised their arms—
Hear us! We have pain on earth!
We have so much pain there is no place to store it!
But the olives bobbed peacefully
in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.
At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese,
and were happy in spite of the pain,
because there was also happiness.

Some prized the pilgrimage,
wrapping themselves in new white linen
to ride buses across miles of vacant sand.
When they arrived at Mecca
they would circle the holy places,
on foot, many times,
they would bend to kiss the earth
and return, their lean faces housing mystery.

While for certain cousins and grandmothers
the pilgrimage occurred daily,
lugging water from the spring
or balancing the baskets of grapes.

These were the ones present at births,
humming quietly to perspiring mothers.
The ones stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses,
forgetting how easily children soil clothes.

There were those who didn't care about praying.
The young ones. The ones who had been to America.
They told the old ones, you are wasting your time.

Time?—The old ones prayed for the young ones.
They prayed for Allah to mend their brains,
for the twig, the round moon,
to speak suddenly in a commanding tone.

And occasionally there would be one
who did none of this,
the old man Fowzi, for example, Fowzi the fool,
who beat everyone at dominoes,
insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats,
and was famous for his laugh.

Naomi Shihab Nye, "Different Ways to Pray" from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems*
(Portland, Oregon: Far Corner Books, 1995). Copyright © 1995 by Naomi Shihab Nye. Reprinted
with the permission of the author.

Source: *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Far Corner Books, 1995)

Autobiography

BY KAZIM ALI

we didn't really speak
my summer wants to answer

the architecture doesn't matter
this is not my real life

when I am here I want to know
why do I believe what I was taught

a storm is on the way
close all the windows

begin at the earliest hour
is there a self

Kazim Ali, "Autobiography" from *The Fortieth Day*. Copyright © 2008 by Kazim Ali. Reprinted by permission of BOA Editions, Ltd.

Source: *The Fortieth Day* (BOA Editions Ltd., 2008)

Monastery Nights

BY CHASE TWICHELL

I like to think about the monastery
as I'm falling asleep, so that it comes
and goes in my mind like a screen saver.

I conjure the lake of the zendo,
rows of dark boats still unless
someone coughs or otherwise
ripples the calm.

I can hear the four AM slipperiness
of sleeping bags as people turn over
in their bunks. The ancient bells.

When I was first falling in love with Zen,
I burned incense called *Kyonishiki*,
"Kyoto Autumn Leaves,"
made by the Shoyeido Incense Company,
Kyoto, Japan. To me it smelled like
earnestness and ether, and I tried to imagine
a consciousness ignorant of me.

I just now lit a stick of it. I had to run downstairs
for some rice to hold it upright in its bowl,
which had been empty for a while,
a raku bowl with two fingerprints
in the clay. It calls up the monastery gate,
the massive door demanding I recommit myself
in the moments of both its opening
and its closing, its weight now mine,
I wanted to know what I was,
and thought I could find the truth
where the floor hurts the knee.

I understand no one I consider to be religious.
I have no idea what's meant when someone says
they've been intimate with a higher power.
I seem to have been born without a god receptor.

I have fervor but seem to lack
even the basic instincts of the many seekers,
mostly men, I knew in the monastery,
sitting zazen all night,
wearing their robes to near-rags
boy-stitched back together with unmatched thread,
smoothed over their laps and tucked under,
unmoving in the long silence,
the field of grain ripening, heavy tasseled,
field of sentient beings turned toward candles,
flowers, the Buddha gleaming
like a vivid little sports car from his niche.

What is the mind that precedes
any sense we could possibly have
of ourselves, the mind of self-ignorance?
I thought that the divestiture of self
could be likened to the divestiture
of words, but I was wrong.
It's not the same work.
One's a transparency
and one's an emptiness.

Kyonishiki.... Today I'm painting what Mom
calls no-colors, grays and browns,
evergreens: what's left of the woods
when autumn's come and gone.
And though he died, Dad's here,
still forgetting he's no longer
married to Annie,
that his own mother is dead,
that he no longer owns a car.
I told them not to make any trouble
or I'd send them both home.
Surprise half inch of snow.
What good are words?

And what about birches in moonlight,
Russell handing me the year's
first chanterelle—
Shouldn't God feel like that?

I aspire to "a self-forgetful,
perfectly useless concentration,"
as Elizabeth Bishop put it.
So who shall I say I am?
I'm a prism, an expressive temporary
sentience, a pinecone falling.
I can hear my teacher saying, *No.*
That misses it.
Buddha goes on sitting through the century,
leaving me alone in the front hall,
which has just been cleaned and smells of pine.

Chase Twichell, "Monastery Nights" from *Dog Language*. Copyright © 2005 by Chase Twichell.
Used by permission of Copper Canyon Press, www.coppercanyonpress.org.
Source: *Dog Language* (Copper Canyon Press, 2005)

The Legend

BY GARRETT HONGO

In Chicago, it is snowing softly
and a man has just done his wash for the week.
He steps into the twilight of early evening,
carrying a wrinkled shopping bag
full of neatly folded clothes,
and, for a moment, enjoys
the feel of warm laundry and crinkled paper,
flannellike against his gloveless hands.
There's a Rembrandt glow on his face,
a triangle of orange in the hollow of his cheek
as a last flash of sunset
blazes the storefronts and lit windows of the street.

He is Asian, Thai or Vietnamese,
and very skinny, dressed as one of the poor
in rumpled suit pants and a plaid mackinaw,
dingy and too large.
He negotiates the slick of ice
on the sidewalk by his car,
opens the Fairlane's back door,
leans to place the laundry in,
and turns, for an instant,
toward the flurry of footsteps
and cries of pedestrians
as a boy—that's all he was—
backs from the corner package store
shooting a pistol, firing it,
once, at the dumbfounded man
who falls forward,
grabbing at his chest.

A few sounds escape from his mouth,
a babbling no one understands
as people surround him
bewildered at his speech.
The noises he makes are nothing to them.
The boy has gone, lost

in the light array of foot traffic
dappling the snow with fresh prints.
Tonight, I read about Descartes'
grand courage to doubt everything
except his own miraculous existence
and I feel so distinct
from the wounded man lying on the concrete
I am ashamed.

Let the night sky cover him as he dies.
Let the weaver girl cross the bridge of heaven
and take up his cold hands.

Garret Hongo, "The Legend" from *The River of Heaven* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).
Copyright © 1988 by Garret Hongo. Used by permission of the Darhansoff Verrill Feldman
Literary Agents.

Source: *The River of Heaven* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1988)

"In "The Legend," Hongo poises the Christian skepticism of Descartes against a Chinese folktale, which turns into a myth of the afterlife. He does all this by narrating, from a journalistic distance, an incident in which an Asian immigrant is killed accidentally in a holdup on a wintry Chicago street. Hongo's story-telling gift gives us first the pathos of the Asian man's death: Just out of a laundromat with a bag of warm clothes, he is shot by a young man holding up a liquor store. Then, the poet turns on himself; he has been reading Descartes and now realizes that the detachment with which he has narrated this incident is shameful. He wishes for the Weaver Girl of the Chinese story to come for the dead man and guide him back across the river of heaven. The poem teaches Western readers the story of the Weaver Girl and her mortal lover, and why they were separated. It also reminds us that a desire for redemption and restoration to wholeness underlies all religious feeling."

-Mark Jarman

"Descartes begins the argument by making the controversial claim that we all have an idea of God as an infinite being. (He believes that we cannot fail to have this idea because he thinks it is innate.) Because our idea of God is of an infinite being, it must have infinite objective reality. Next, Descartes appeals to an innate logical principle: something cannot come from nothing. Reasoning from this principle he arrives at two other causal principles: (1) There must be as much reality in a cause as in an effect, and so, (2) there must be as much formal reality in a cause of an idea as there is objective reality in an idea. Since we have an idea with infinite objective reality (namely, the idea of God), Descartes is able to conclude that there is a being with infinite formal reality who caused this idea. In other words, God exists."

-Summary of Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy"

<https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/principles/section4/>

Baal Teshuvah at the Mikvah

BY YEHOASHUA NOVEMBER

Sometimes you see them
in the dressing area
of the ritual bath,
young bearded men unbuttoning
their white shirts,
slipping out of their black trousers,
until, standing entirely naked,
they are betrayed by the tattoos
of their past life:
a ring of fire climbing up a leg,
an eagle whose feathery wing span
spreads the width of the chest,
or worse, the scripted name of a woman
other than one's wife.

Then, holding only a towel,
they begin, once more, the walk
past the others in the dressing room:
the rabbi they will soon sit before
in Talmud class,
men with the last names
of the first Chasidic families
almost everyone,
devout since birth.

And with each step,
they curse the poverty
that keeps the dark ink
etched in their skin,

until, finally, they descend the stairs
of the purifying water,
and, beneath the translucent liquid,
appear, once again,
like the next man,

who, in all these days,
has probably never made a sacrifice
as endearing to God.

Poem Without an End

BY YEHUDA AMICHAÏ

TRANSLATED BY CHANA BLOCH

Inside the brand-new museum
there's an old synagogue.
Inside the synagogue
is me.
Inside me
my heart.
Inside my heart
a museum.
Inside the museum
a synagogue,
inside it
me,
inside me
my heart,
inside my heart
a museum

בתוך מוזיאון חדיש
בית כנסת ישן
בתוך בית הכנסת
אני,
בתוכי
לבי,
בתוך לבי
מוזיאון,
בתוך המוזיאון
בית כנסת,
בתוכו אני
בתוכי
לבי,
בתוך לבי
מוזיאון

Yehuda Amichai, "Poem Without an End" from *The Selected Poetry Of Yehuda Amichai*.

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Source: *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (The University of California Press, 1996)