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Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Sacred City: Mapping the Shared Religious Homes of New York

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Abstract

This project is a thematic sequence designed to be integrated throughout a year-long 10th grade level world religions curriculum in an all-girls Catholic school in New York City. It explores and reconceptualizes the five boroughs of New York as a *shared religious space* imbued with interlocking sets of meaning, community, and sacred worlds.

Through mapping various religious sites—defined in both traditionally ‘sacred’ and mundane ways—the students will see their neighborhoods and surrounding areas in more nuanced ways. The sequence will begin with a mapping activity at the end of the introductory unit, during which students will create brief blurbs on assigned religious sites and pin them to a shared virtual map. We will continue to revisit and add to the inter-religious map that students have created during each unit. Students will thus see in real time and space the internal diversity and dynamism of religions in the city and use these examples as windows into the varied experiences in the religions we study academically.

Ideally, through the construction of a collaborative virtual map, student additions will accumulate year by year, to the effect that each world religions course unit will feature significant and perennially growing content contributions written by older peers and eventually alums of the school.

Description and Implementation

The starter lesson for this thematic sequence will follow three introductory lessons on approaches to interreligious dialogue, defining religion (and the difficulties therein), and the Catholic Church's history in interreligious relations. Before beginning the indigenous traditions unit, students will be put into pairs and tasked with adding a short entry on a pre-selected religious site to a shared interactive map, using [Padlet](#) or another mapping app.

See **Appendix A** below for the students' instructions and provisional site listings. The list of religious sites may change each year, but I have made sure to include multiple sites from many religious traditions to begin to give students a sense of religious diversity in the city.

After the creation of this interactive map, students will explore the other entries created by their peers and discuss how interacting with the map has changed their understanding of the religious landscape and history of New York City (see **Appendix B**).

At the beginning of each religious unit, we will spend a lesson exploring the various sites associated with that religion on the map, and students will reflect on pre-assigned questions that will help me gauge their understanding, observations, and curiosity (see **Appendix C** for the questions).

These questions and reflections will help me to add clarifications, details that pique students' interest, and new and relevant information about these sites into my pre-planned curriculum. At the end of each unit, I will ask students to engage with the sites and what we have learned about them in their assessments, asking them questions on tests and in writing that localize their knowledge of content to particular places, faces, or stories in New York City (see **Appendix D** for examples).

As students complete site visits throughout the year, they will add follow-up entries on sites that appear on the map, and add entire entries for sites not yet pinned on the shared map. In this way, we will add complexity, detail, and multiple stories and perspectives to our collective understanding of the religious worlds of New York (see **Appendix E**).

By integrating this mapping activity in subtle but consistent ways throughout the school year, I hope to help the students understand the varied and interlocking nature of religions in this city. The map will help them to conceptualize and complexify their understanding of the communities, belief structures, worldviews, rituals, and sacred spaces that New York houses, changes, and helps to form.

Appendix A:

At the beginning of the year, at the end of the introductory unit, students will be instructed to complete the following in-class activity.

In pairs, sign up for one of the following religious sites in New York City. Read the article attached about it, and then briefly (in 100-200 words or so), explain:

1. What the site is
2. Who is important to it, either historically or now
3. Why it is important in the history of New York or in the lived experience of people in that religious tradition today
4. A miscellaneous interesting fact that you learned about the site

When you have finished, copy and paste what you've written into our shared interactive map on Padlet, titled, "Sacred City: The Shared Religious Homes of New York." Search the address of your site, pin your entry there, and attach a photo of your site.

Suggested Sites – Definitely not an Exhaustive List

Muslim Sites

[Masjid Khalifah](#) and [second source](#)
[17 Rector Street](#)
[Sunset Park](#)
[Masjid Malcolm Shabazz](#)
[Little Bangladesh, New Jersey](#)
[Islamic Cultural Center of New York](#)
[Nation of Gods and Earths Cultural Center](#)
[Park 51](#)

Jewish Sites:

[Congregation Shearith Israel](#)
[Temple Emmanu-El](#)
[Jewish Theological Seminary](#)
[Williamsburg, Brooklyn](#)
[Yeshivat Maharat](#)
[B'Nai Jeshurun](#)
[Romemu](#)
[Manhattan Eruv](#)
[Russ and Daughters](#)
[Yeshiva University](#)

Hindu Sites:

[Ganesh Temple](#)
[Hare Krishna Tree](#)
[Divya's Kitchen](#)
[The Bhakti Center NYC](#)
[Sree Ram Mandir](#)
[United Madrassi Association](#)

Sikh Sites

[Sikh Center of NY](#)
[Sikh Coalition](#)

Afro-Caribbean Sites

[Rudy's Botanica](#)
[Justo Botanica](#)

Indigenous Sites

[Lenape Center](#)

[Shorakkopoch Rock](#)

[Astor Place](#)

[Park Avenue Armory](#)

Buddhist Sites

[Mahayana Temple](#)

[The Village Zendo](#)

[Brooklyn Zen Center](#)

[Brooklyn Buddhist Church](#)

[True Buddha Diamond Temple](#)

Appendix B:

Class-wide Discussion Questions Once the Map is (Provisionally) Completed

- Which sites had you heard of before this activity? How did you know about them?
- Which sites had you not heard of before this activity?
- Which sites were you surprised to see on the map? How do these sites change your understanding of how religion operates in the city, or of what religion *is*?
- Which sites spark curiosity for you? How so?
- Having done this activity, how do you see your home—New York City—differently now?

Appendix C:

Class-wide Discussion Questions About Specific Religious Sites at the Beginning of Each Unit

After spending the first lesson of a unit on a particular religion looking in depth at sites specific to that unit, students will then discuss the following questions in class:

- Which sites are surprising to you in this grouping? Why?
- What are some specific facts you have learned about different sites that make you curious? What questions do they bring up for you about the religion we are about to study?
- Are there any sites you know about that should be added?
- What hints did these sources give you as to how sacredness might be defined in unique and special ways for some or many people in this particular religion?
- What hints did you get about how this religion might be internally diverse, embedded in the culture of New York City, and/or dynamic? (Source: [Core Principles | Religion and Public Life at Harvard Divinity School](#))

Appendix D:

Sample Assessment Questions *These questions, and others like them, will integrate students' knowledge of the religion in question overall with their attention to the local, lived experience of the religion in New York City.*

- Hinduism Unit short reflection question: How is Holi celebrated in New York City? Use your knowledge both of the holiday overall and of the religious sites we have discussed and learned about on the map in 75-100 words.
- Judaism Unit short reflection question: What are some signs that Shabbat is important to many Jewish people in New York City? Name and explain at least two reasons using your knowledge of our shared interactive map.

Appendix E:

Instructions for Site Visits *As students complete individually scheduled site visits to religious sites throughout the year, I will ask them to add to the interactive map with the following instructions.*

- After you have completed your site visit reflection, add something about your experience to the interactive map. If your site already has an entry on the map, *add to it* with a personal story or anecdote or more factual details that you have learned about the site. Make sure to provide detail but still keep it brief, in the order of about 150-200 words. If your site does *not* have an entry yet, add one—as you did at the beginning of the year (see instructions above)—plus a short personal statement of one or two sentences with something noteworthy about your experience.

***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.***