

# World Religions: An Experiential Approach

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# Outcomes



Teachers will:

- Identify the knowledge, skills and dispositions that students can gain through interfaith *experiences*
- **Have new ideas and resources** for the integration of interfaith experiences into their classrooms
- Be motivated to integrate interfaith experiences into their classrooms

## Our Plan

### Why?

- Why we are each here
- Why this is important

### How?

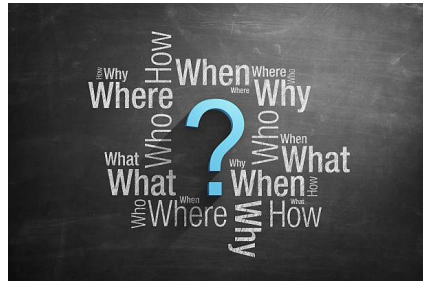
- A model
- Promising practices

### What if?

- Some challenges

### Where?

- Resources to take with you



# Why are you here?

Why are you interested in the subject?

What experiences have you had with this topic?

What challenges have you encountered?

## Why are Trish and Mary here?

- *Our interest and experiences*
- *Our goals*
- *Our non-goals*

Turn to the person on your left (end of rows chat with each other):

- Introduce yourself, your interest in this subject, your experience with it, and the challenges you find or think you might find addressing it in your work. (3 mins)

Whole group:

- We'd like to get a sense of who is here:
  - Education level: elementary, middle school, high school;
  - Roles: administrators, campus ministers, counselors; faculty -- social studies, religion, anything else?
- Let's get a sense of why people are here:
  - From your conversation: (1) already doing it and looking for new tools; (2) haven't done it, but want to; (3) area of interest for students; (4) personal interest. Invite other answers.
- Anything you want to share that came up in your brief conversations? (5 mins)

Introduce ourselves:

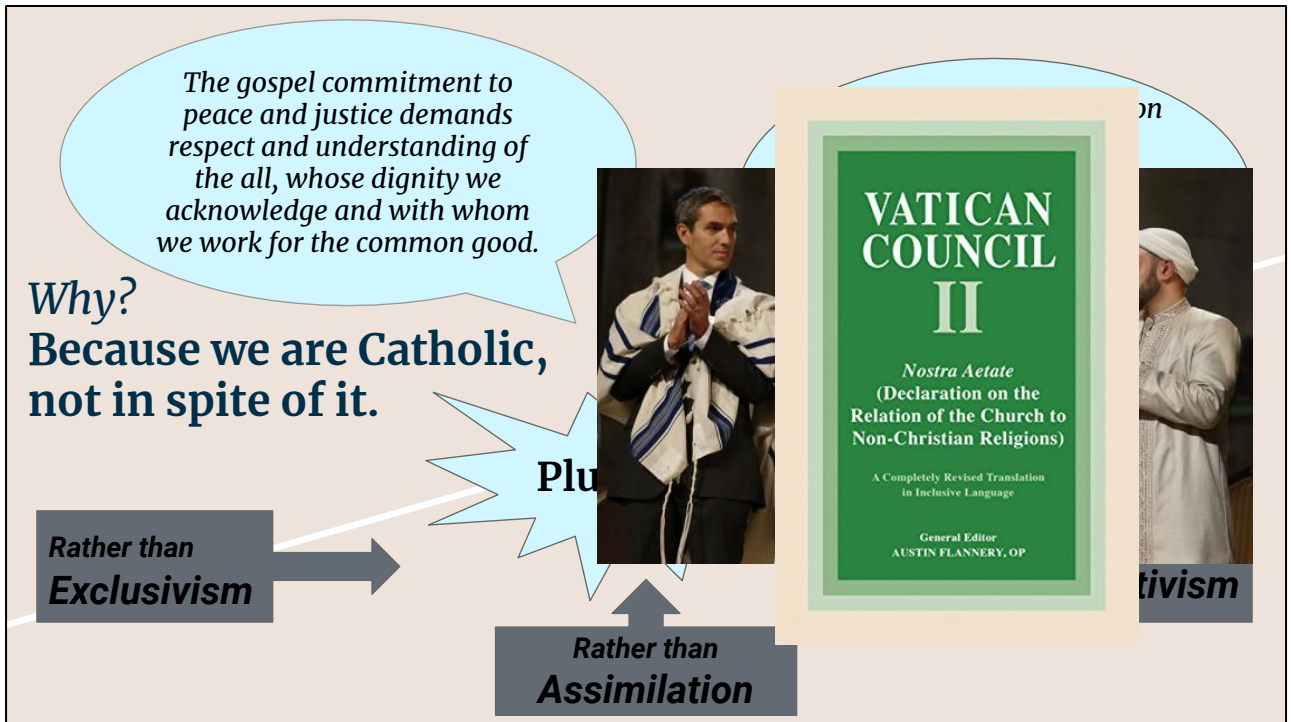
- Mary
- Trish
  - Assoc. Professor of Religious Studies at Alverno
  - Educated throughout (except for undergrad) in Catholic Schools -- came to Milwaukee for grad school at Marquette where I earned my MA in Theology and my Ph.D. in Religious Studies
  - Teaching at Alverno came to be connected with the Interfaith Youth Core through campus activities and kept up with the movement to

- develop interfaith studies in higher education; catholic colleges are leading the charge on this
  - Higher ed perspective.
- Started to see the need my students had to not only learn about religions, but also learn how to engage with people who were different from them religiously - in personal and professional settings
- Change a course we had called “religion in America” and started teaching it from an interfaith, somewhat experiential approach

Goals and Non-Goals:

- Session Description:
  - *The study of World Religions is essential for being a good citizen, as well as an informed witness to our own faith. Teachers of social sciences, humanities and religion will develop new methods for encountering these religions as lived experiences, rather than as isolated systems of thought and belief. These methods will help students cultivate a more authentic and respectful understanding of our diverse world, and will provide them with opportunities for a deeper development their own faith.*
- Not about being experts on religion
- teaching you how to help students engage with people who are different from them in a way that recognizes that religions are lived experiences -- lived by individuals
  - At Alverno, we teach this across the curriculum: nurses, educators, business people, all students see the value of it (nurses with patients; as persons able to better connect with people around them -- student in the bank)
  - My own experience with this and the helpfulness of this.
    - Space for students to understand the diversity within religions; the individual reality of religions; the how and, more importantly, why people practice their religions
    - It invites them to think about their own values and their own spiritual foundations -- asks them about their own traditions as well as those of others

The study of World Religions is essential for being a good citizen, as well as an informed witness to our own faith. Teachers of social sciences, humanities, and religion will develop new methods for encountering these religions as lived experiences, rather than as isolated systems of thought and belief. These methods will help students cultivate a more authentic and respectful understanding of our diverse world, and will provide them with opportunities for a deeper development their own faith.



Mary: *Nostra Aetate, Vat II 1965, USCCB statements 1995, Christianity and the World Religions 1997*

Trish: My students learn that we as a nation struggle with diversity, religious diversity included. They explore various responses: exclusivism; assimilation; and the hope of pluralism.

# Diversity vs. Pluralism

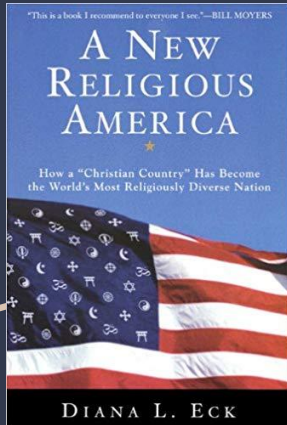
**DIVERSITY IS A  
FACT**

**PLURALISM IS A  
COMMITMENT**

Before animation ask a question about our personal experiences with religious diversity:

- What is your first conscious memory of people who had different beliefs?
  - Trish answer: next door neighbors were Lutheran...no idea what that meant; just not Catholic
  - Answers from the audience.

# PLURALISM



≠ Diversity

≠ Tolerance

≠ Relativism

≠ Complete

Diana Eck (put in her name and book - picture of book)

- Pluralism is not diversity
  - Active engagement; must be created; participation
  - Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that diversity.
- Pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance to active attempt to understand the other
  - Constructive understanding
- Pluralism is not simply relativism
  - Encounter of commitments not the elimination of commitments
  - Goal is not agreement; goal is relationship
  - Making our religious commitment our own through engagement with others
- Process of pluralism never complete
  - ongoing work of each generation
  - “out of many, one” is dynamic ideal to be claimed anew in context of new civic and social challenges
  - *Why I think we need to teach young people how to*



- *be agents of pluralism!*



Video of Balpreet Kaur -- good things that came out of this. -- share on this--

Reflections on video: *how engaging with religious identities (own and others) can help young people*

- Powerful way for students to think about responses to difference
  - They might think, “why doesn’t she just remove the hair?” -- this is assimilation -- be normal and same
  - The acceptance she found and the apology from the poster -- this is pluralism -- engagement, learning, change of thinking
- Personal benefit for our students: just like she did, middle and high school students can learn to embrace their unique identity rather than just “keeping their heads down”
- Societal benefit:
  - Much of the foundational work for interfaith studies was to help young people embrace their power to bring about a better world
    - In light of recognition that many of our great spiritual leaders were also great social leaders and they did their work in an interfaith manner: MLK; Nelson Mandela; Dorothy Day; Gandhi; Jane Addams
  - We all benefit from our young people reaching out to each other.
  - This is what education is: preparing our students to meet the needs of the world -- we have a great need to overcome divisions.

Mary - personal story

# Benefits of Interfaith Experiences

- Increased ability to discern false, biased, misleading information
- Greater confidence in developing relationships with people of diverse backgrounds
- Deepened sense of one's own faith and identity

1. Increased ability to discern false, biased, and misleading information
  - a. Principle of interfaith studies - spreading religious literacy is an important key to fostering interfaith cooperation.
  - b. Pew study: the more one knows about a religion, the more likely he or she is to have a positive view of that religion.
  - c. Religious *misinformation* seems to be particularly difficult to counter with correct information -- we want them to get this right early on.
    - i. Erik Nisbet and Kelly Garrett: *Belief in rumors hard to dispel*
    - ii. Also, positive experiences influence whether true information is believed
2. Greater Confidence in developing relationships with people of diverse backgrounds
  - a. Experiences with people transform negative attitudes and go a long way in building social cohesion
  - b. We said, just knowledge about a religious tradition has the power to shift perceptions from more negative to more positive
  - c. Actually knowing someone of a particular faith positively impacts one's attitudes toward that religion
    - i. Personal relationships break down stereotypes and distrust
    - ii. Strongest when there are common activities that build social capital
  - d. "Pal Al" phenomenon
    - i. R. Putnam and D. Campbell in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*

- i. If you have a relationship with someone from a particular religion then your attitude toward everyone in that religion is more positive
    - ii. It also increases your positivity toward people in other religions that are different from your own
- 2. Deepened sense of one's own faith and identity
  - a. How does this happen?
    - i. Students start to ask themselves questions out of their learning about their own identity.
  - b. Examples:
    - i. Service: If a Sikh says, I do this because of my values formed through my Sikh tradition of hospitality and justice. Student may ask what their own religion says about these values.
    - ii. Presentations: If a Jewish visitor is explaining Shabbat, a student might reflect on how their religious tradition invites them to take time in their daily and family lives to remember God, celebrate their communities, and give thanks for their blessings.

# How? Some ways are better than others.

	Judaism	Christianity	Islam	Hinduism	Buddhism
<b>Symbols</b>	★	✝	☾	ॐ	☸
<b>Key texts or books</b>	Torah, Talmud	Bible	Qur'an, Hadith	Vedas	Sutras
<b>Founders</b>	Moses	Jesus Christ	Muhammad	Unknown	Siddhārtha Gautama (aka 'The Buddha')
<b>Major practices</b>	613 mitzvot Sabbath Kashrut Prayer Tithing Fasting Pilgrimage	Prayer Baptism Eucharist Confession Fasting Pilgrimage	Prayer Fasting Pilgrimage Zakat Hajj	Prayer Fasting Pilgrimage Dharma Yoga Meditation	Four Noble Truths Eightfold Path Nirvana
<b>Scriptural leaders</b>	Moses Jesus Paul	Jesus Paul Peter	Muhammad Ali	Brahmins Rishis	Buddhas

**Before Common Era**  
3000 1800 483 0 632 1469

**B.C.E. Common Era**

**Demonstrations**

**KNOWLEDGE**

**UNDERSTANDING**

**SKILLS**

**RELATIONSHIPS**

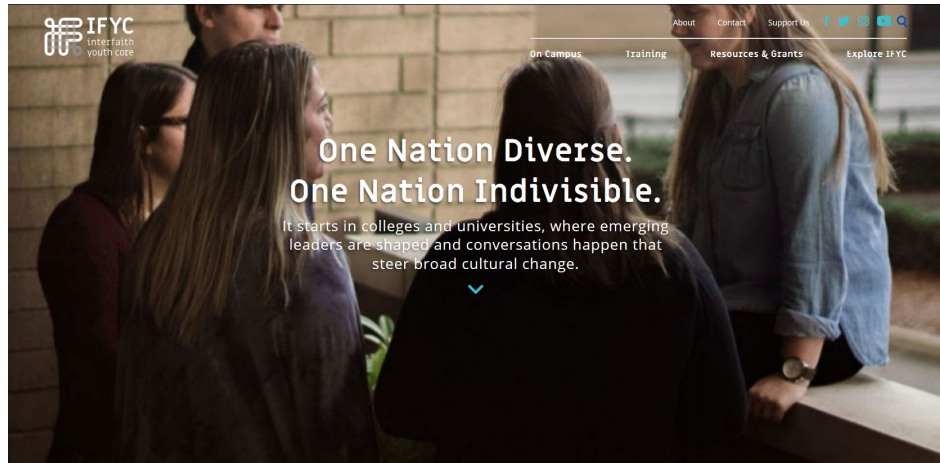
**DISPOSITIONS**  
**DESIRE TO CONNECT**

- In a sense, before we address the specific of hows, I want to explain the why to the how...
- First, revisit the primary goal of pluralism... review the way we set up desired outcomes in any topic area: KNOWLEDGE,SKILLS, DISPOSITION
- ...knowledge of world religions is going to be limited, basics yes, but acknowledging limits here is important...there are other intellectual outcomes that we are after, such as understanding and awareness and critical thinking skills to identify bs
  - Information is necessary but not sufficient. It might give us facts and an entry point to discussion, but other than prepping for a possible jeopardy category, the facts alone are not useful.
- ...skills that can be developed are primarily related to relationships... important job skills and competencies...refer to ifyc's document on this
  - Experiential methods give students opportunities to prepare, practice and develop real life skills rather than esoteric knowledge (sometimes the textbook information isn't even fully understood by average adherents)
- ...dispositions - this topic gives students an opportunity to look at religion, in general, in a distinctive way. it always results in deep reflection and consideration of faith, and it allows them to see the role it plays for others in positive ways. They can't be fearful, or mistrustful, or inconsiderate if they have authentic encounters with them.
  - That is why the method is so important. We cannot just give them stale facts of beliefs, practices, founders, histories, geographies. We also have to give them experiences of real people... and opportunities to practice sharing their

- own stories of faith.

these methods make it much easier to avoid some of the pitfalls and overcome limits that we will talk about later.

It might be good to mention here, or at the end that these methodologies are applicable and valuable in the study of other topics/content too.



<https://www.ifyc.org>

Introduce IFYC as leaders in the field and a wealth of resources:

- My introduction to this field and teaching in this way was through IFYC: Interfaith Youth Core
  - We participated in trainings about their “Better Together” campaign and having shared interfaith service learning experiences on college campuses. It was built on this model.
  - I continued to participated in activities and talks they did as well as engaging with resources they have on their website.
- I started to see this methodology they used for their “Better Together” campaign as a great model for my “Religion in America” course.

Their website is an amazing resource. They have everything from readings, podcasts, to applications of interfaith studies to different fields, to actual modules that can be used in classrooms.

It seems to me that they are trying to reach out and do more with middle school and high school teachers; although their focus remains on higher education. There is an opportunity to go hear Eboo Patel, their President and Founder, speak in Green Bay Wisconsin

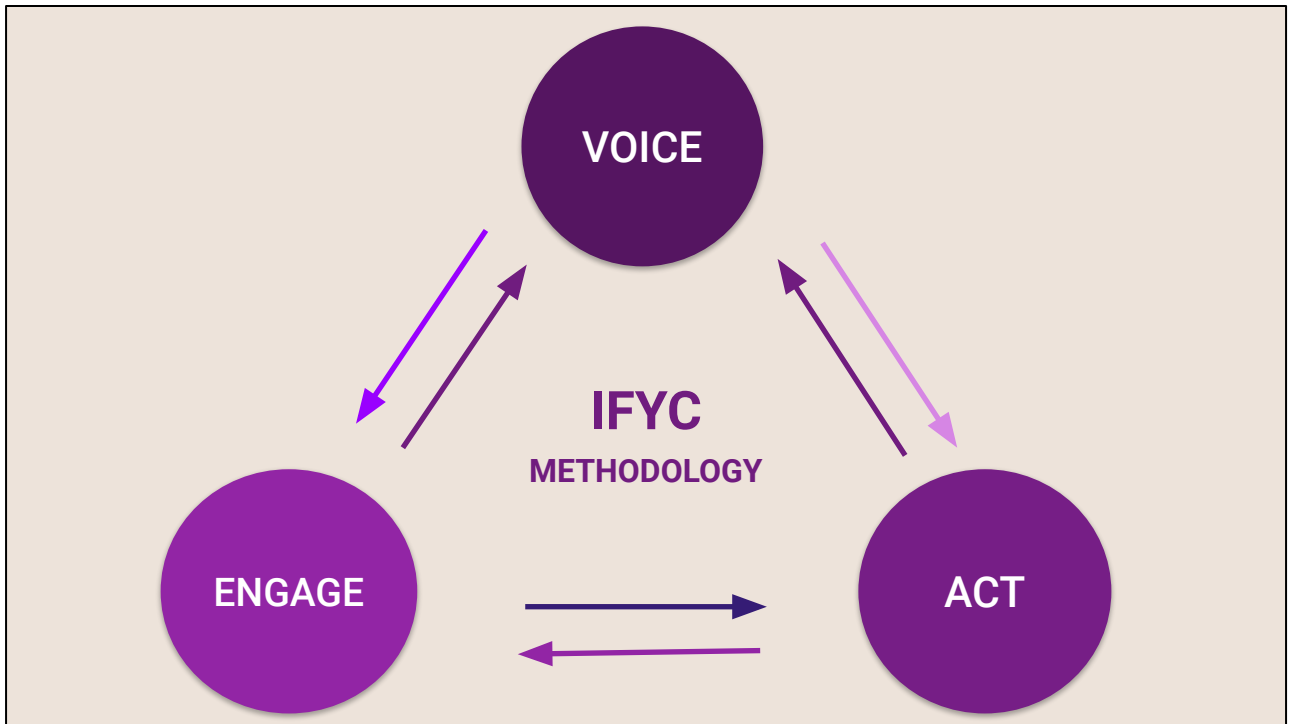


**October 23 at 10am at Lake Forest Country Day School**  
Eboo Patel

"Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and What it Means for  
Our Children"

The lecture will address how exposure to other religions  
enhance our own experience and helps children build  
relationships across religious divides.





#### Methodology:

- VOICE: creating opportunities for students to hear the stories of people who “orient around religion differently” and opportunities for them to share their own religious, spiritual, and ethical stories.
- ENGAGE: helping students build their religious literacy, or interfaith literacy, and creating opportunities for them to engage with other religious traditions through experiences and not just books (although reading is one way they engage).
- ACT: provide opportunities for them to work with people who are different from them; or to learn how people from different religions have worked together to build a better world (because of their religious beliefs and values, not in spite of them).

Before I move on to sharing how I do this in my class in ways I think could be helpful to thinking of younger students as well, it is important to know that this methodology is not a step-by-step approach. These are all pieces.

- Might start with sharing stories -- leading to learning more about that religion -- and understanding how they act with others for justice issues.
- OR learning about a religion from someone who practices it -- sharing stories about how you engage with some of the same values in your own religion or reading the personal story of someone else who practices it -- that then leads to a service project that is built on those shared values
- OR it might start with a service project that includes reflection that -- invites

- students to tell their stories of values and beliefs that led them to do this thing  
-- that then has them learning about each others' religions in more depth

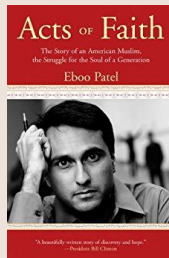
# VOICE

## Stories

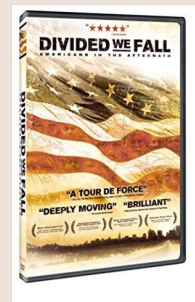
Personal

In-Class Visits

Spiritual Autobiographies



Films



### VOICE: Stories

- For me stories are at the heart of religion and the religious experience. All religions begin with a story of an extraordinary experience that changed someone's or a group of someones' worldview.
- Stories are also key to how we know other people.
  - Stories make the other a person who we can relate to and know.
  - Stories break down barriers.
  - Stories bind us together. Religions are groups of people with shared stories.
  - Stories help us reflect on who we are and what we believe. Sharing these help us know these things about other people as well.
- In my class, I incorporate stories in a variety of ways:
  - People from our community (Alverno and somewhat beyond) come into class and tell their stories. They teach the students about their religions, but mostly they share how they come to their religion, how they practice their religion, what it means to them, and why they tell their story.
  - Students practice telling their own stories: to each other; through writing assignments; in discussions; etc.
  - We watch films that help them enter into religions through the stories of particular individuals.
  - We read Eboo Patel's spiritual autobiography *Acts of Faith*
  - For their final projects, they need to present a religion we have not yet

- explored using our methodology. I want them to talk with someone or find the story of someone who practices this religion.
- Stories are also important to avoid a pitfall of teaching Religions:
  - Religions and those who practice them are not monolithic. This is an important reality to teach young people. It helps them avoid stereotypes and generalizations.
  -



# Interfaith Literacy

Appreciative Knowledge

**Shared Values**

History of Interfaith Cooperation

Personal Ethic

We have a religious literacy crisis in America

- In the [2010 Pew survey of religious knowledge](#), a battery of questions about the Bible and Christianity, world religions, and religion in public life, scores were appallingly low across the board, with respondents averaging around 50 percent.
- Only half, for instance, knew that the Quran is the holy book of Islam, or that the Golden Rule isn't one of the Ten Commandments. Fewer than a third knew that most Indonesians are Muslim

Interfaith Studies is more than just literacy, however.

- Not just about knowing dogma, history, etc.
- About Interfaith Literacy.
  - How is this different?

Four principles of Interfaith Literacy:

1. appreciative knowledge = what you find beautiful or admirable about this religion
2. shared values = ability to define values shared by religious and secular traditions
3. understanding of the history of interfaith cooperation

- a. How people have come together across religious divides in the past
  - b. How your own religion teaches you about the value of interfaith engagement
2. development of a personal theology or ethic of interfaith cooperation
- a. Why I should engage not in spite of tradition but because of it.

How I do this in the classroom:

- Classroom visits:
  - Hearing stories, but also learning about the religion
  - They are able to hear what is beautiful and meaningful about this religion to the person who practices it. This helps them approach it with a more positive perspective.
- Students keep an interfaith literacy journal:
  - What did they know and why did they know or not know anything about this religion?
  - What did they learn...more importantly what did they find beautiful, admirable, or memorable (in a good way) from the stories we heard or texts we read about this religion?
  - What values do they think they share with the person who practices this religion (because of their religions)?
  - What would they continue to ask someone from this religion? What do they still want to know?
- Shared Values:
  - IFYC has great handouts that help the students see and learn about some shared values across religions.
    - Hospitality, Service, Conservationism
    - Lists quotes from teachings or sacred texts that illustrate how this religion approaches and teaches this value.
    - Not about shared beliefs; about shared values.
  - Golden Rule is another great way for them to see connections.
- Final project:
  - Not just telling us everything about this religion...use this methodology.
    - Helps them practice how to enter into dialogue and literacy of this religion.
  - Don't start with difference...hard to move away from this.
    - Start with beauty, admiration, shared values...start with connection.
  - Site visits to places of worship.



# Interfaith Cooperation Service

Agents of Pluralism

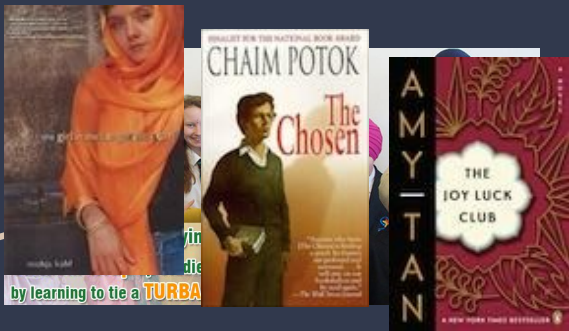
Shared Action for the Common Good

Interfaith Movements

## ACT

- Interfaith Cooperation
  - How we work together in shared action for the common good and a better world
- Service Opportunities with people from different religions is ideal
  - Not always able to do that
- How I do it in my classroom:
  - Create interfaith aspects that could be incorporated on campus or in their clubs/student organizations
  - How movements for the common good have and are interfaith movements:
    - Civil Rights Movement as an interfaith movement
    - fighting malaria in Africa is an interfaith project
  - Help them be agents of religious pluralism:
    - teach their parents and families about other religious traditions
    - Think about it could help them professionally -- learn about religions from their interests
- Interfaith studies can be part of larger curriculum
  - This is the goal of it

# Specific techniques and strategies for experiential teaching:



Site Visits

Classroom Visitors

Interview Assignments

Stories, Literature, Film

Case Studies

Role-Playing

Service Learning

Design Thinking / Student-led Projects

Again, IFYC has some great info about how to successfully incorporate any of these methods. For case studies and role-playing, see Harvard's Pluralism Project. For Design thinking, Begin with student concerns and questions and design lessons based on that.

Use questions to prompt inquiry into the aspects of religion that might be most meaningful/important to explore, such as:

- Besides basic beliefs and practices, **what might give us a fuller, more multi-dimensional picture of these religions?**
- Other than the "official teachings" of these faiths, about what they believe, or what they are "required" to do, **what are you curious about?**
- **What are some of the people, experiences, places, things or ideas related to religion really make these traditions most intriguing?**
- **If you are Christian and you were sharing the things (people, experiences, places, ideas) about our Christian tradition that are most important, or meaningful to you, what would you share? Are there things in these other traditions that might be similar?**
- **Ask them to consider what problems arise from cultural and religious illiteracy... share some of the problems through news stories or case studies. Then ask them to design a solution...**
- Keep the triangle and the outcomes in mind as a beacon: we are increasing understanding, awareness and openness, we are tooling them up with relationship building skills and we are forming (or reforming) positive attitudes



# Challenges...



**Unintended consequences to be aware of / be careful not to perpetuate: 1) all practitioners of each religion are the same, 2) religious ideas of other faith traditions have not changed over time**

**Ask them: What are some challenges you might expect to encounter?**

Students can stereotype in good ways as well:

- Making Assumptions
- Student studying hinduism thinks all Hindus live their beliefs and ideals perfectly
- OR they think all Hindus do X,Y, or Z
- ***This is why we must teach that religions are not monolithic; they are practiced by individual people.***

Faith / Religion “competitions”

Parental objections

Students should recognize that how people practice religions is also influenced by their cultures. How people practice a religion in a country whose culture is aligned with it might be different than how they practice it in America.

- The same for historical shifts.
  - Example: Judaism -- we can't talk about biblical Judaism that was

- Temple focused as the same as Judaism in America today
- Not all sects of religions are the same.
  - They know this about Christianity; but they might not know it about Islam.

Be aware of our own biases and experiences that affect our learning. Telling our own STORY can help us uncover/identify these

# Questions

Or Comments